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Consultants for Leadership Selection

How To Get The Best From A Recruiter

By Bruce Dingman

1-Choose the right recruiter for your need.

To get the desired results one must first select the right type of recruiter. Some don't understand the differences between the different types of recruiters and tend to think of them only in terms of the experiences they've had. That's natural. Let's start with the basics.

Contingency Recruiters:

This type of search firm is more apt to produce the desired outcome when fast results are desired, for positions where the matching of candidates to the job are mostly focused on the experience needed.

By definition contingency recruiters only get paid when someone is hired. The reality is that balancing the risk of not getting paid means the recruiter may limit how much effort they will put forth. And depending on what other assignments they are working on at the time, they will put priority on those they think they are most likely to complete. Their commitment to fill a position can be limited.

Retained Recruiters:

The right occasions to use retained search firms are when the need goes beyond candidates having the right experience, but also having the right values, management style, values and at least medium-term fit with the firm. But the employer must realize it takes time, typically 2-4 or more months from start to the time someone is hired, and a close working relationship between the supervisor and the recruiter.

Knowing they are going to get paid no matter what happens, retained recruiters usually are committed to stay "on task" until the position is filled.

The better search firms will stay on the assignment as long as they think they can find what the client is working for, even after that particular search may no longer be financially profitable. After all, such recruiters know their reputations will suffer if they are not successful. This is where the integrity and professionalism of the recruiter and his or her firm enters in.

So....how can the senior leader increase the chance that the recruiter will complete the search? Do your homework by checking their track record. Talk with two or three prior clients of the recruiter.

2-Do you need a recruiter who specializes in your field or is a generalist fine?

There are advantages and disadvantages for each type. The specialist immediately knows many of the players in your industry. They may move faster, perhaps saving a couple weeks on the speed of the search. And maybe they can get the attention of people who otherwise might not have any interest. However, the tendency is for the recruiter to just "work their rolodex", rather than doing fresh searching to find all the best candidates. An industry or functional specialist might also be willing to discount their fee.

A disadvantage to using a specialist is that if ethics are important to them, they may have numerous clients, who they cannot recruit from, thus limiting where they can go searching for you. The industry standard for reputable recruiters is that former clients are out-of-bounds for two years since last serving them. Large search firms will often define the client as being just a unit of a corporation rather than the whole firm.

Why use a generalist? First and foremost is because you have confidence in the competency and integrity of the recruiter. Remember that when doing leadership search, candidates with the right experience are easy to identify. Why so? Industry directories will typically identify who is the VP-Engineering for your prime competitor. The real value of a good recruiter isn't primarily in the finding, it's everything else that goes into the process. It's having the committed resources to spend a lot of time on the search, knowing the research methods to find the people, having a fast learning curve to come to understand your industry (1-2 days max needed), expertise in understanding how organizations function, coming to understand your company's culture and your personality, interviewing and reference checking skills, preparing compensation offers, extending the offer and "proofing" the candidate who's just accepted the offer so they won't back out.

Another reason to use a generalist is why you want a unique candidate. A generalist is used to approaching with out-of-the-box thinking. They have fresh ideas. In fact, they typically find the variety of their assignments invigorating. How stimulated or dynamic do you think the recruiter is who only finds leaders who only work in the same type of culture? This person is going to be representing your firm. They should have some genuine enthusiasm, rather than just some slick salesmanship.

Another suggestion is when making their "pitch" see if the recruiters have done their homework on your firm and your industry. If they don't come in somewhat prepared, be concerned.

3-Work with the recruiter on a confidential basis.

Be very open with the recruiter, much like you would with your attorney or physician helps them to do their best work. For example in a business model, if you are a pre-IPO firm seeking a CFO, the recruiter can help you assemble a senior management team that will be effective when doing the "dog and pony" show to Wall Street analysts or V.C. investors. The recruiter may also as a by-product of getting to know your existing senior management team show you shortcomings or strengths in the rest of the team that will affect your future organizational structure. A good recruiter is not just a recruiter...the term is really a poor descriptor for the role...but is also an advisor to the senior leader on the best use of team members skills and organizational structure. And there is usually no extra charge for such insights if done when a search is under way.

4-Don't delegate the client-recruiter relationship.

Ideally whoever is going to be the superior of the person should be whom the recruiter works with on the search. While the relationship is often delegated to the a Director of Recruiting often some of the value the recruiter can give the client can get lost if there isn't a close relationship with the hiring officer.

5-Be prompt in responding.

The search is a give and take process. If a candidate senses, due to a lack of timely response, the employer must not have this as much of a priority, it quickly dampens one's interest. And from another perspective, the recruiter is striving to keep the search process moving forward with proper speed. If it takes a week or two, instead of a day or two, to get feedback from the client, it can delay the whole process.

Candidates are often looking at other opportunities, too. To delay can mean losing a great candidate. As the recruiter is trying to maintain credibility with the candidate in the attractiveness of working for the client, that can become hard to do if the employer is not timely in responding. Use of e-mail and cellular phones makes communication highly efficient. Help your agent to be successful...by being responsive.

6-Trust your recruiter.

The recruiter is your agent and has your best interest at heart. If he or she doesn't work exclusively for your best interests then there will be no further assignments or referrals to friends and that is the future of the recruiter's business. So both by professionalism and integrity, and because it makes good business sense, the recruiter should want to serve only your best interests.

So tell the recruiter what you have in mind for the compensation range. What other enticements beyond salary might be possible if needed to land the right person. Stock options, signing bonus, company paid courses towards an MBA, etc. The recruiter should not offer these needlessly but know what might be possible if needed.

7-Be candid with negative news

About 10% of the time searches are cancelled for corporate decisions. Reorganizations, downsizing, internal transfers, promotions, mergers, divestitures...all sorts of reasons. So if you cancel the search the recruiter should understand. Be upfront as much as you can.

Bear in mind, though the company may not get any value for the money spent if the search is cancelled.

8-Use the recruiter's expertise of how to "court".

While senior leaders spend their time running organizations the recruiter is busy involved in courtships and marriages. That's the area of their expertise so lean on their guidance.

Try not to look at the recruiting process only through the employer's eyes. The process is a courtship, so don't hesitate to make the candidate...and spouse...feel special, desired, valued. It makes a terrific impression if you and your spouse have dinner with the candidate and the spouse. Give the job offer in person if possible. Think about how you would like to be treated if you were the candidate. Do whatever is possible to make the start of the person's relationship with you and your firm a positive experience.

Things to avoid...a calendar so busy that the candidate feels like an imposition on your busy schedule; during negotiations contact is always through your secretary or the HR person rather than through you; little consideration of the time and expense of relocation a family and household to the new city; or requiring an immediate response to the job offer. These can be insensitive, even off-putting occasions, so make a point of doing the reverse.

9-Use the recruiter's counsel even when there is no ongoing search.

Having gotten to know your senior management team well, and having the objective perspective of an outsider, there may be valuable insights the recruiter can give but won't unless asked. One client hired me to find a CFO for his firm, then two months later asked me to confidentially find a new COO. If he'd earlier asked me for input in what I saw in the COO's management style, personality and effectiveness he would have made the decision to replace him more quickly. But it was not my place to volunteer such information; I had to be asked.

Unless the senior leader has an organizational development consultant that stays current with the makeup of the senior management team, the next best observer of the dynamics between the team members or the effectiveness of individuals may be the recruiter who recently did a search. Don't hesitate to get valuable insight the recruiter may be able to offer.

10-Only use a recruiter who you like and have confidence in.

The relationship between the employer and the recruiter is quite personal. Only use someone you feel comfortable with, someone you are willing to show your true colors, quirks and all. Someone who will be committed to you and will tell you what you need to know rather than just what you want to hear.

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