

How to Work with Headhunters

Always ask the right questions before you appoint a company to help you recruit your senior positions. David Fielding, Director at attenti talks about how to get the best out of a recruitment consultant.

All that is gold does not glitter' is apposite when thinking about engaging the services of an executive search firm. Automatically choosing a well known or reassuringly expensive firm does not guarantee success. Working with a search firm can often make the difference between success and failure when appointing to a senior role but standards and approaches vary dramatically. In an increasingly competitive market place, what you think you are buying is not always what you get.

So, take time to choose a firm to work with. You should invite a number of firms to submit a detailed proposal setting out their relevance, what they offer and their understanding of your organisation and the role. You must meet with the team and discuss the details of every stage. If firms don't have the time to engage with you at this stage, then they certainly won't have the time to deliver once you have chosen them.

Firms will often display a list of the most relevant and high profile assignments to impress you. Establish who within the team actually worked on the specific assignments. It still makes me chuckle when I see consultants 'claiming' work as their own when their actual role in the process was negligible.

Meet the team and test their market knowledge and what they know about your organisation. If they are weak on these two fronts, don't hire them. Some firms will send along a team of very polished, high profile 'names', who will talk a great game and persuade you that this is the most important piece of work they have ever had the opportunity to pitch for. Don't be fooled. The reality is that they will have very little to do with the assignment once it's won. So establish who is actually going to be doing the work.

Within a recession and with increased competition you simply don't have to pay the



fees that used to be charged (33% of the salary), you can always negotiate. Insist on fixed fees: it will stop unscrupulous firms trying to push the starting salary higher.

Most senior roles can be filled through search alone, but there are often strong reasons why you would want to place an advert and create a bespoke microsite. Advertising is expensive and care should be taken when thinking about using more than one print media. You should always make sure that there is an on-line option and when it comes to branding, your organisation should have prominence.

Some search firms put very little energy into the search, hoping that candidates will see the advert and apply. Don't use them; you are wasting your money! The ratio of researchers to consultants within a firm is very important; ideally it should be 1:2. Firms that rely on consultants to do the search

themselves will often be managing a number of assignments concurrently and therefore become too busy to pick up the phone. Good quality research is really important. Some firms delegate calls to the most junior person in the team. There is nothing more irritating than taking a call from a junior headhunter who knows very little about the role, the context or about you.

Headhunters will often interview a longlist of candidates for you. Be clear who is conducting them and what format the reports will be. As well as 'reportage' a good headhunter should be offering opinion, insight and views. Due diligence of candidates is also crucial. Insist on seeing verbal references in advance of panel interviews.

In summary, headhunters can add some real value, but you need to be explicit in what you are getting for your money. I recall one of my earliest IPM lectures (a lifetime ago) about selection decision validity, in that it increases proportionally with the amount and quality of data you consider. This still stands, so don't be bamboozled and insist on rigour.

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He is a trustee for Equinox Care and a special advisor to ACEVO and for the past decade has contributed to the debates around service delivery, governance, funding and trust.

He is an Independent Assessor and advises on wide range of high profile Ministerial Public Appointments.

David is an ex-World Record Holder and four time Aikido World Champion. Prior to becoming a head-hunter, David was a successful HR Director.