

Getting Best Value From Executive Search Firms: A Client's Charter When Recruiting Top Executives

Recruiting a senior executive is a critical project that can have serious cost, morale and success implications for any organization. It requires careful preparation, briefing and articulation. Working with an executive search firm can help you to achieve a successful outcome. But the search firm will need your full participation and collaboration if it is to play its part.

Preparing to work with a search firm

Analyse the key challenges of the role and define what success will look like. Translate these into critical features of the personal profile.

Identify the decision/selection makers for this recruitment project and educate them about the search process. Clarify their roles.

Articulate the business strategy, organizational and reporting structure, career path, prevalent culture, and recent history of the position so that you can brief the search firm. This is crucial to the success of the search.

Put the role in context of its importance to current plans.

Establish an optimal time frame.

Select a Search Firm Carefully

Focus on integrity, track record, ability to discuss and "consult" on your project

Understand who will conduct your search - ensure accountability

Retain the consultant under contract and be prepared to treat him/her as a partner

Don't select just on price - it's too important

Briefing the Search Firm

Introduce the search firm to key decision makers, and if relevant the CEO and board members.

Educate - the more information that you can give your search consultant the more effective and committed they will be. Don't hold anything back.

Advise the search firm of what must be kept strictly confidential.

Establish an agreed time-line for the search and how progress will be reported - confirm it in writing.

Get all relevant parties to sign off on the specification prepared by the search firm. This is a critical document and must be comprehensive and accurate.

Refer internal candidates to the search firm for evaluation. Do not compete with the search firm – they are your partners!

Agree with the search firm who will be responsible for detailed background checking of short-listed candidate's qualifications, employment history and civil/criminal records. You may employ third parties for this specialized function.

During the search

Evaluate candidates against the agreed specification – it's the cornerstone of the search. Be prepared to refine if advised by the search firm.

Respond quickly concerning your level of interest in presented candidates. An inefficient or strung out selection process reflects badly on you. Schedule interviews promptly.

Remember that short-listed executives are not applicants but candidates. Treat them courteously and respect their own tight schedules. They may have reservations about the job and your organization - don't confirm those reservations! Candidates kept waiting or who are unexpected by the receptionist start off with a bad first impression!

Facilitate direct dialogue about candidates between the search firm and hiring manager/decision makers, and deepen their sense of partnership.

Expect that the search firm's evaluation reports should describe the candidate's strengths and weaknesses. You are paying for consultancy – demand it.

Communicate clearly the key challenges of the job and ensure that the interviewing team are in agreement. Treat the interviews like a client presentation. Just as much may be at stake.

Balance buying and selling. Use candidate interviews to initiate two-way conversations. Don't forget that both parties need to be happy for the fit to work. Unhappy is the candidate who finds that critical information was withheld during the interview.

Provide timely, meaningful, and comprehensive feedback to the search firm so that they know how to proceed.

Run the recruitment process like a project with a beginning, middle and end and a team of essential players. Make sure everyone pulls their weight.

Agree with the search firm who will check which performance references. Hiring managers should always take selective references.

Final Stages

Use the search consultant to test ideas, establish limits, reinforce messages, and serve as an "honest broker" when negotiating the final package.

Don't delay – time is of the essence in securing a favored candidate. Don't engage in bureaucracy that could kill the deal.

Draft the offer letter for approval by the candidate (and search firm) before sending the final copy for signature. The last hurdle is as crucial as the first.

Follow Up

Once an offer is accepted, work closely with the search firm to ensure transition to the new position. Agree a mutually beneficial schedule of follow up and feedback.

Don't forget that the consultant is very interested to know how the candidate is faring and can be a useful source of advice and guidance for both sides during the first months of a new appointment.