

Working with Headhunters

- a guide for candidates

Introduction

"So you're a headhunter, are you? Can I send you my CV?" is what many people ask me at parties. Of course I reply politely, and when I receive the CV I respond courteously, but the question reflects uncertainty about how headhunters really work. What we do is not a state secret, but the recruitment industry is large and varied, and different parts of it work in different ways. The purpose of this note is to paint a picture of how we work, in order to get the best from us when looking for a move. I should stress that it is no more than the personal views of one practitioner; each of my colleagues would have written this note differently, but there is a lot of common ground.

Different recruitment models

A good starting point is to understand the difference between retained and contingent recruitment. Typically, a secretarial agency operates on a *contingent* recruitment model. The fee is contingent on a successful appointment. It is a "no win, no fee" model. And it is non-exclusive. In other words, if I need to recruit a new secretary, I am likely to give the job specification to two or three secretarial agencies, and see what they come up with. When I make an appointment, a fee will be payable to the agency which supplied the successful candidate, but not to the others.

The contingent model is almost invariably based on a database of candidates. If you are looking for a job in the function handled by a particular agency, you register with them, and they enter your details onto their database. Your details are then matched against enquiries received from clients. Database driven recruitment has to be specific and limited in the areas it covers. It would be impossible to have a database which covers all jobs in the UK. So agencies or consultancies are likely to specialise in, for example, secretarial, junior accountancy, IT professionals, nursing staff, engineers for the nuclear industry, sales appointments, or whatever.

For the fields it traditionally covers, contingent is generally the most effective way of recruiting. If you need to recruit a SAP engineer, a food area sales manager, a cost accountant, or a secretary, it does not make sense to run a Sunday Times advertisement or use a headhunter. The contingent recruiter will be faster, cheaper, and probably better.

But there is a level of seniority, sometimes difficult to define, at which the contingent model starts to become ineffective. At this level a more targeted



approach, specific to the individual appointment, is more likely to bring success. Since this more targeted approach requires a lot of work from the recruiter, the consultancy will not be willing to undertake the work on a speculative basis. The model used is therefore *retained* recruitment.

Retained recruitment also operates on an exclusive basis. Since the client is committed to pay at least a significant portion of a recruiter's fees before the appointment is made, it makes no sense to work with more than one recruitment consultancy. The trick is to work with a single consultancy that can be relied upon to deliver the required results.

What is "Search & Selection"?

So we have contingent vs. retained, non-exclusive vs. exclusive; and that brings us on to "Search & Selection". Many mid level and senior level recruitment companies brand themselves "Jo Bloggs Search & Selection", but what does "Search & Selection" actually mean? Selection is basically advertising, but Search is more difficult to define. From a purist perspective, Search is another name for Headhunting, but far too often all the client actually receives under this heading is a trawl of the consultancy's database, together with a trawl of a few recruitment websites.

And where does headhunting fit in?

Where then does proper headhunting fit in? Headhunting is the preferred methodology at the most senior levels, for Chairs, Non-Executive Directors, CEOs, MDs and Executive Directors. Here the requirement is very specific, and the ideal candidates are unlikely to be reading the appointments columns or have registered their CVs on recruitment websites or with recruitment consultancies. Some will have done, but many will not; indeed, most are not actively looking for a job. Headhunting by its nature focuses on who is best for a particular appointment; it is not constrained by who happens to be available. The right people generally have to be approached directly.

And it is about much more than simply matching CVs to a job spec. Identifying the right people for a board role requires the recruitment consultant to have fully understood the client company's strategic goals and culture, and to have a very clear picture of the skills, experience and leadership style required to deliver success in that environment. The headhunter is very much the confidential and trusted partner of the client company, and may well challenge the client to consider alternative approaches to meet the strategic need.

And what is headhunting anyway?

So that's where headhunting fits in: but what exactly is it? How does it work? Again, this is not a state secret. The starting point has to be comprehensive briefing with the client. There is more than one way of skinning a cat, so we have to start by understanding what our client is trying to achieve with a given appointment, what the issues and challenges are, understand the external drivers and the competitive environment, and have a clear picture of corporate culture and values, both claimed and real.



We have to be able to define clearly the required background experience of candidates, and from this we can work out which sector or sectors they are likely to come from. I sometimes make the point that a search assignment is unlikely to be successful unless at the end of the briefing I (1) have a clear picture of where the right candidates are sitting now, and (2) am convinced that there are sound reasons for them to move to my client. Time skimmed or issues fudged at the briefing stage are likely to bite the headhunter's ankles a few weeks later.

The best headhunters employ highly skilled in-house research teams, whereas others may sub-contract this function. The research associate will generally have accompanied the consultant throughout the briefing process, and will therefore have a very clear understanding of the requirement. He or she now takes up the baton, and is responsible for producing candidates which match the need. The first stage is to produce a target list of organisations likely to contain people with the required experience of the sector, and of an appropriate size and culture. This is then developed into a candidate list of people within those organisations who have the required seniority, experience and functional expertise.

At the same time the research associate, working with the consultant, will produce what is known in the trade as a "source list". This is a list of people who are probably not right for the role themselves, but who will know people who are. He or she then talks to these sources, which should add to the list of target candidates, and begins to identify a few people who are clearly star performers within the sector.

It is then time for the research associate to directly approach the people on the target list. During this process he or she is trying to do two things simultaneously, (1) establish the target's potential level of interest in the appointment, and (2) assess his or her fit against the brief. If all goes well, appropriately qualified candidates will register their interest and provide us with a CV.

The consultant will then double-check the suitability of candidates identified before arranging to interview them and subsequently shortlisting. Usually a consultant will interview 8 – 10 candidates for a role, and short-list 3 or 4 for interview by the client.

Do headhunters use databases?

Yes. We obviously have extensive databases, but we use them in very different ways to contingent recruitment consultancies. In the first instance, we use our databases to identify potential sources, people who know the sector in question; but we try to be lateral thinkers, and sources are just as likely to be identified by consultants and research associates having a brainstorming meeting.

Secondly, we obviously check our databases to see whether we already know people who match what we are looking for. Often we do, but nevertheless we always start each search from a clean sheet of paper to make sure we have covered the ground fully. If some of our candidates come from the database, that is fine, but we don't rely on it. Too much reliance on databases can lead to shortlists of "the usual suspects".



Once you are on our database, we will only contact you when we are handling a suitable role which matches your skills and experience. Since we are client led, it may therefore be some time before we contact you; silence from our end does not mean that we have "lost" you.

How do I get onto the radar of the right headhunters?

If you are in employment, and you are right for the appointment we are handling, then we will probably find you. That is, after all, what we are paid to do. If you are not in employment, however, it follows that you need to be on the right databases. You therefore need to send your CV to appropriate headhunters, asking them to put you on the database. If you are not in employment, and not on the database, the only way we will find you is through sourcing, which in turn means that you have to be on the radar of someone we are talking to. These days we also search online databases, so we may be able to identify you through that route.

Who are "the right headhunters"? That depends very much on you, your background, and what roles you are looking for. There are specialist senior level recruiters who handle, for example, senior city appointments, senior IT appointments, or who confine themselves to non-executive appointments. For many senior-level people, however, there are only half a dozen major London-based international players, and a very small handful of smaller, high quality UK headhunters who are not headquartered in London.

The key point is that you don't need to spread your CV like grape-shot across a large number of consultancies; indeed, to do so would probably be counterproductive. You do need to be on the radar of a small number of the right consultancies. A few enquiries will tell you who are the right consultancies for you.

Are there any rules about CV format?

I am very hesitant to give too much guidance on this. When I was searching for my next job 13 years ago, and met a number of headhunters, one experience was consistent. Most of them (1) gave me unsolicited advice on my CV, and (2) that advice invariably contradicted the advice I had been given by the previous headhunter. So please treat these guidelines with extreme caution. They are only the views of one practitioner:-

1. Give clear identity and contact information, at the front, and at the top. Yes, we do get the odd CV which provides no contact information at all. More commonly, we receive CVs with wrong mobile numbers. Do double check. And be contactable. If you are looking for a new job, you should be checking email and voicemail very regularly, and responding to calls promptly.
2. Profile. Many CVs include a carefully honed and crafted profile at the beginning. I never read them. They don't tell me anything, and they all sound the same.
3. Start with your current or most recent role, and work backwards. For each role we need dates, job title, and a summary of the business and the scope of your accountability. What does the company do or make?



And what were the dimensions of your role – turnover, headcount, capital budget, etc.

4. Achievements. Under each job, give bullet points of major achievements, quantified where possible, and put in context. We are generally not interested in your responsibilities. Everyone has responsibilities, and the job title gives us a pretty good idea of what they are. The differentiator is achievements. Whether a Sales Director's achievement of 15% sales growth is impressive depends on what was happening in the market at the time, and on what happened to margin!
5. Provide more detail for more recent roles, less detail for ones in the distant past.
6. Academic Qualifications. Include the most substantive, preferably at the end of your CV. If you have a first from Imperial in Mech. Eng., we don't need to know your GCSE grades. But if you are a graduate, include your degree class, or we're likely to assume it's a third!
7. Length. The 2-page guideline isn't a bad one, but there are no hard and fast rules. If you are 55 years old you will obviously have more to put on your CV than if you are 25. The key is to judge the relevant level of detail. Remember that we're not assessing CVs on technical excellence or artistic impression. We are looking for solutions to a recruitment problem, and as such we need to be able to pick out the data which suggests you may provide that solution.
8. Remuneration. Some people are cagey about providing package details, presumably because they are hoping for a bigger pay-hike than they should reasonably expect. But it really helps us to have the information. When searching the database, our research teams look at sector, function, geography and salary band. It is a waste of everyone's time for us to contact you for a role which is either too small for you or too big for you. Remember that all the information you share with a reputable headhunter enjoys a higher level of confidentiality than the confessional box.
9. Key Words. A good quality headhunter will ensure that your CV is comprehensively "coded" on the database, so that we can readily identify you for an appropriate role. But full coding is time-consuming and therefore expensive. So some recruitment companies simply add CVs to the database and then use word search to identify candidates. In the light of this, it is wise to review your CV, to ensure it contains the key words by which you would want to be identified, e.g. lean, 6 sigma, etc.
10. Other information. Make sure we know, maybe in the covering letter or email, any other information which will help us to match your expectations, e.g. constraints on geographic mobility.

Should I give details of my package?

See 8 above



Do I need to meet headhunters face to face?

Particularly if you are working with a careers consultancy, you are likely to be advised “to get yourself in front of as many headhunters as possible”. Whilst I have enormous respect for the careers consultancy profession, I disagree strongly with the advice on two counts. As I have made clear above, you don't need to contact “as many as possible”; you just need to be known to the right ones.

Secondly, you need to be on the databases; you don't need to meet the consultants. I obviously meet quite a few candidates each month, and have a high level of recall of those who I shortlist, but the others tend to fade. My ability to make the right mental connections even a couple of months later is very poor. But that is not a problem, because I don't have to rely on my memory; I rely on my research team to make the right connections from the database, a much more reliable process.

A note of caution: be just a little wary of headhunters who are too ready to see you on a speculative basis. Firstly, they're obviously not handling enough work. Secondly, it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that they are only seeing you in order to market themselves for the day when you land a job and have recruitment needs of your own. It is much more important to be on the databases of the people who are so busy that they don't have time to see you until they have a real job to talk to you about.

This is a particular hazard for HR Directors! The enthusiasm of recruiters to meet you on a speculative basis, and to be as helpful as possible, is possibly not driven solely by a concern for your welfare!

Should I keep reminding them?

“Maintain regular contact with headhunters” is another piece of mis-placed advice. It can in practice translate as “make a confounded nuisance of yourself”. If you are on a headhunter's database, if the company invests in coding CVs professionally, and if they have a good research team, they will find you when the time is right. Routine nagging makes you memorable only as a nuisance!

But do let us know when you've changed jobs or contact details.

And be nice – to everyone, especially research associates and PAs. Good manners cost nothing. A candidate who displays pomposity in dealings with everyone but the consultant is likely to be remembered for all the wrong reasons. And never forget that the match with the job of your dreams is much more likely to be identified by a research associate than anyone else!

And finally,

I hope this paper will help to dispel some misnomers about how we work, and what you can sensibly expect from us. The key is to remember that we find people for jobs, not jobs for people. Try to make it easier for us to help you!

John Marsh
April 2009