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Route to:

Search's secret ingredient

WHY SOME EMPLOYERS CONSISTENTLY GET BETTER END RESULTS

EVEN IF BOOMERS WEREN'T RETIRING and new generations of managers weren't in short supply, hiring star performers would remain a formidable task. The best and the brightest are generally happy in their jobs and not actively looking for new employment. Finding that needle in a haystack who *is* available, affordable and just the person you need only becomes more difficult in a competitive job market.

That's a large part of the reason why employers use executive search firms. (Another is the lack of time and resources to conduct the search internally.) Yet over and over again, some companies seem to catch all the big fish, while others end up with the scraps. What's the secret?

Consider for a moment the variety of professional services firms that organizations engage in addition to executive search – accounting, advertising, architecture, engineering, law, management consulting and public relations, to name the most typical. All do their best work when they are trusted business partners. No advertising agency, for example, creates memorable ad campaigns in a vacuum. No law firm wins a high-stakes case based on limited information and access. No structure can capture a corporation's unique identity without the shared vision of architect and client; it would be like telling the architect, "Go design us a new headquarters and we'll let you know if we like it."

In a classic *Peanuts* strip, Lucy sees a classmate with a library card. "What in the world is so great about having a library card?" she asks. The boy responds, "It's what it stands for! They trust me! They're honoring my desire for knowledge with their trust! In return, I'm showing my faith in their

library by reading their books ... it's a common bond of trust." To which Lucy comments, "You haven't got a library card ... you've got a *treaty!*"

That treaty – that common bond of trust between client and service provider – is precisely what search firms (like all professional services firms) are seeking. And when they find it, their search activity goes into high gear. And when they don't, a search goes to the bottom of the pile. As one highly successful practitioner always told prospective new clients, "I have only two things to offer – my time and my expertise – so I must use both wisely."

The "Three C's" of Great Collaborations

WHAT SHOULD CLIENT and search professional expect of one another?

Sanford Rose Associates recruiters refer to the underpinnings of a trusted collaboration as the "Three C's" – candor, cooperation and commitment. Each helps forge the bond that leads to uncommon candidates for critical job openings.

Candor means the mutual promise that client and search professional will share all information that might affect the search. From the client's perspective, that means advising the recruiter if any changes in search parameters occur (such as job description, responsibilities, title, compensation, etc.), if any internal candidates for the position emerge, if filling the position has decreased in urgency, if the employer is announcing any news (such as an acquisition or divestiture) that could

influence a candidate's decision, and so forth. From the recruiter's perspective, candor means advising the client of any roadblocks to successful completion of the search (such as a disparity between responsibilities and pay), of any unexpected problems in identifying qualified candidates, of any issues candidates are raising about the client company or its position, etc. No one likes surprises, and mutual candor helps prevent them.

Cooperation means that both parties agree to facilitate the prompt completion of the search and remove any obstacles along the way. They should settle, for example, on a preferred method of communication (land line, cell phone or e-mail) and promise to respond to messages promptly. The client contact, if he or she is not the hiring manager, should agree to provide full access to that individual, who likely can provide in-depth information about the open position not found in any job description. At the same time, the search consultant should recognize the many demands that may be placed upon the client contact and seek to make his or her job easier – for example, by providing frequent status reports or by calling at specified times.

Last but not least, the commitment shown by client and search consultant to the search process becomes the true measure of the search's importance and urgency. Commitment by the client means agreeing to see serious candidates before they lose interest, ensuring that interviews aren't needlessly postponed, making "go or no-go" decisions on finalists for the position, and authorizing the recruiter to extend a prompt offer. Likewise, search professionals should fully describe their commitment to a successful outcome in terms of the priority they have assigned the search, the desired timeline for its completion, the sources to be used for candidate identification, the number of candidates to be presented, and so on.

Doing It Right the First Time

THE MORE TIME that client and search consultant spend up-front, the less time will be wasted locating, interviewing and rejecting candidates who lack the skills, relevant job experience or cultural fit to be right for the position at hand.

In developing what came to be called *Dimensional Search*[®], Sanford Rose Associates realized that typical job descriptions specify the skills required but are generally lacking in clues about the other

two factors – experience and fit. (Yes, they may say, "ten years' experience required" – but experience at precisely what?) That is why access and communication are so important.

Those hiring managers and human resources professionals accustomed to asking multiple recruiters to work on a search often make the argument that the benefits of seeing many candidates outweigh the risks of having little time to spend with individual recruiters. That may be true if one is trying to hire a bevy of computer programmers or software engineers with specific and easily identified skill sets, but the argument makes less sense when success on the job depends on more qualitative factors such as proven leadership or negotiating abilities acquired in specialized work environments. Moreover, recruiters whose fees depend on being "first to market" with a ballpark candidate will not dig very deep to find that true needle in a haystack; they cannot afford to spend the time.

As we said in this newsletter several years ago, employers who expect too little of their recruiters will not be disappointed: there is always a firm or individual willing to provide poor service for a substandard fee.

In very large companies, it might be argued that a few bad hires will not make the bottom line noticeably worse. But in smaller organizations, the cost of any bad hire – in terms of poor performance, lost profits and reduced productivity – can be astronomical. And that doesn't include the costs of replacing the poor performer. Good recruiters, by contrast, can help get it right the first time.

Therefore, the real challenge is to find a top-notch search professional who expects as much from his or her clients as they expect in return. Such professionals depend for their livelihood on building long-lasting relationships, as opposed to taking hit-and-run assignments, and their goal quite simply is to deliver superior total value time after time.

To paraphrase Lucy, it's not just a search assignment ... it's a treaty based on trust.

—George Snider

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