

How to Work With an Executive Recruiter

Contingency search firms can help, if you know what to expect

By GEORGE W. HAYES

Bloodsucker. Flashpeddler. Executive pimp.

As a professional recruiter, I've been called all of these things and worse. More often, I've been labeled a headhunter, a handle that I accept gladly, not only for its descriptive accuracy, but because few people merit the title.

Despite our negative reputation, recruiters do perform an important service. By helping to allocate human resources, the recruiting industry contributes, in its own way, to improved productivity for organizations and on-the-job satisfaction for individuals.

Yet, both candidates and companies commonly express disappointment in their dealings with recruiters. Employers balk at paying huge fees and cite wasted hours in interviews with poorly screened applicants. Job seekers often point to inaction, misinformation, misrepresentation or an obnoxious demeanor on the part of the recruiter.

All true. But part of the let-down stems from an unrealistic view of what recruiters really are and what they can or cannot do. Understanding how recruiters work can improve the odds of using them effectively. In the end, informed candidates with modest expectations make the headhunter's life easier, too.

The Industry

Recent research clearly shows that only 10% to 15% of all positions are filled by headhunters. This is a key statistic in developing a sound job-search strategy. Playing the odds intelligently means investing a like percentage of time, energy and emotion into headhunters as potential resources. While recruiters will be included as part of any well-balanced campaign, they should be viewed as supplemental to more important networking efforts.

Still, 15% isn't bad. The right recruiter can be very helpful in identifying openings, facilitating meetings, acting as a source of information and handling sensitive issues as an outside third party. The trick is finding the right recruiter.

The recruiting industry is organized much like a pyramid. At the top is a handful of firms represent-

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ing the creme-de-la-creme of the profession. Recruiters in these firms usually work to fill upper-level openings (above \$100,000) and, importantly, are retained by employers for their services. That is, all or a large portion of their fee is guaranteed whether they fill the position or not.

This fee arrangement allows the so-called executive recruiter to function as a consultant or agent of his client company. Since he gets paid anyway, the headhunter isn't under pressure to "sell" candidates on fantasy, once-in-a-lifetime job opportunities. Rather, he can focus on screening and qualifying candidates for specific positions. Most job seekers

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report positive experiences in dealing with retained executive recruiters, who often are former senior managers from more conventional professions.

Many recruiters work on a contingency basis. That is, they are paid *only* if they place candidates with their client companies. Obviously, this fee arrangement favors the relationship between recruiter and candidate. Since contingency recruiters are compensated on a commission-only basis, they effectively become salespeople who must induce candidates to accept their clients' offers.

This isn't to suggest that contingency recruiters are inherently mean, unethical or unscrupulous. However, with fees of 25% to 30% of an applicant's first-year salary, many headhunters exhibit limited sensitivity for the applicant's career objectives or comfort level. As commissioned salespeople, their task is to close the deal.

Last and not least are applicant-paid fee or APP agencies. Years ago, firms that charged applicants

fees for placing them were much more common. Today, such agencies are reserved primarily for entry-level and some clerical positions.

In general, job seekers shouldn't be too concerned with the name, appearance, location or size of a given search firm. As in many industries, the agency itself is far less important than the individual with whom you are dealing. We know a recruiter with an office in a grain elevator who, by anyone's standards, is one of the best. The Babe Ruth of contingency headhunters operates out of Green Bay, Wis.

There are plenty of mom-and-pops, one-man shows and national franchise organizations from which to choose. It's wise to ignore the sign on the door and listen to what the recruiter says before judging him or her as a potential resource.

Care and Handling

The effective use of any tool requires some instruction. By following a few recommendations, you can increase the likelihood of utilizing agencies as part of your job campaign. Our advice primarily pertains to contingency (commission-based) recruiters, since they represent the bulk of the industry.

Select three to five recruiters in any geographic area. Frankly, this is no easy task. To identify three to five headhunters whom you judge to be capable, you will probably have to talk with 10 to 15. The recruiting industry is easy to enter and the turnover among would-be headhunters is extraordinarily high.

Nonetheless, it's worth the effort to find a handful of good ones. Working closely with a few should give good geographic coverage without much overlap. Keep in mind, however, that this is a dynamic group. You will need to replace a recruiter periodically when she seems to have lost interest in you or disappeared. Eventually, you might end up talking with every recruiter in town.

Never give a recruiter an exclusive. Once in a while, a headhunter might suggest that you turn over your job campaign to him and visit no other agencies. No one recruiter is so good as to be trusted exclusively with your campaign. Smile politely, say that you appreciate the attention, then keep your

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Recruiters

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appointment with the recruiter's nearest rival.

Screen the recruiter. First, ask how long she has been in the business. With some exceptions, if the recruiter hasn't been a full-time professional for at least six months, she probably isn't connected well enough to do you much good.

Next, determine if the recruiter specializes. If you are an engineer and the person has placed only accountants during the past two years, you're probably wasting your time.

Get face-to-face. Only after meeting a person in the flesh do you have a real relationship. Basic human nature will incline the headhunter to work harder for you after eyeball-to-eyeball contact. Interestingly, however, this is difficult to arrange. Many recruiters will respond to a request for a meeting with, "Why don't you just send me a resume? I'll keep an eye open for you."

Use the recruiter's own trick in setting up interviews. Suggest that you will be in his neighborhood anyway, and ask if you could simply drop the resume off and, maybe, shake his hand. If the recruiter is experienced, he should get a chuckle out of your aggressiveness and agree to a meeting.

Bug him. As a contingency recruiter years ago, I would occasionally get a candidate who would call me every few days. "George, what do you have going for me?" "George, what's going on?" "George, when do I start?"

At the time, I probably found the calls slightly irritating, although I can't remember ever becoming angry. And, looking back, I was certainly more successful in placing the people who kept bugging me than those who drifted away expecting me to follow up.

Recruiters see a variety of openings. By keeping your name on the recruiter's mind, you improve the chances that he will view one of the positions as a match for you. Besides, the people who called often seemed to be counting on me. In some small way, I felt obligated to help them out. I tried harder for them.

Understand the send out. A "send out" is when the recruiter arranges an interview for you with one of his client companies. Unfortunately, send outs vary in quality. A common complaint among job seekers is that they were sent out on job openings in which they had no interest, that paid substantially less than they were led to believe, or for which they were clearly unqualified. Why does this happen?

Every business is a volume business. Want more sales? Make more cold calls. Want more hits? Go to the place more often. Want more placements? Arrange more send outs!

Most recruiters adamantly deny working this way. "We don't run a meat market," says one. "We don't throw it against the wall like that," says another. Right. After a slow week with few send outs and little hope for a near-term placement, contingency recruiters can get a little imaginative in envisioning employment matches.

On good send outs, recruiters will want to arm you with information about the position, the interviewer and the company. They know that the better prepared you are, the more likely you are to return with an offer. Some recruiting firms will formally coach you on your presentation before the interview

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occurs. Take advantage of these sessions whenever possible.

Sign nothing obligating you to a fee. Rarely will you encounter a situation involving a fee obligation on the part of the candidate. Nonetheless, always find out who's paying the freight.

Don't be surprised, however, if an employer, still reeling from a gargantuan agency fee, asks you to sign a fee-related document upon joining the company. This insidious piece of paper could obligate you to reimburse the employer for the agency fee if you leave within a specified time period, typically one year.

Think about what could happen in a year. You get assigned to latrine duty. Your boss is replaced by Frankenstein. There is a 20% across-the-board pay cut. Needless to say, don't sign it.

Some agencies ask that you sign a release statement giving them permission to check your references, credit history and criminal background. This

is neither uncommon nor cause for alarm. Of course, always read the fine print.
Watch the close. Good contingency headhunters are good closers. Their mission is to get you to accept an offer of employment. That, in essence, is the job.

In the last few years, most recruiters have discovered that candidates don't respond appropriately to intimidation. Consequently, there are very few "beat 'em up" closers left among good headhunters. We have other ways of getting what we want.

For example, a technique called pre-closing is popular. With this approach, the recruiter gets the job seeker to state clearly, in their first meeting, the three or four major things desired in a new position. In subsequent conversations, the recruiter gently reminds the candidate of the job she has committed to accept if these criteria are met. Finally, in reviewing an offer of employment, the recruiter makes it clear that it meets the candidate's requirements using her own words.

Don't be alarmed or offended when the recruiter begins to close. It probably means you're dealing with a pro. Nonetheless, don't be reluctant to back out, even if you can't articulate your reasons for declining the offer. Don't worry about the recruiter's feelings—mind your own career, not his.

Will they market you? Don't count on it. Many candidates believe that headhunters try to find jobs for people. They don't. Headhunters find people for jobs.

Some recruiters will spend a good portion of each day making telephone cold calls with the ostensible purpose of peddling the incredible skills of one person. This smiling-and-dialing routine rarely results in an interview for the person being marketed. Instead, the recruiter will uncover other openings, usually inappropriate for the candidate in question.

Still, if you have impressed a headhunter with your presentation and credentials, she could make some phone calls to likely organizations on your behalf. If no interest is generated immediately, your resume will go into the active file in the event that an appropriate opening turns up.

Don't rely on recruiters to conduct your job search for you. If there are specific organizations you would like to explore, use your own creativity and networking contacts to get a foot in the door.

The odds of finding a new position using a headhunter are approximately one in eight. Keeping recruiters in perspective and understanding their methods will allow you to work with them most effectively in your job campaign. ●