

A practical guide to hiring and getting hired

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Today's sluggish job market has sharply narrowed the pickings available for headhunter firms. Not only are new openings drying up, but fewer high-value candidates are willing to change careers.

In the wake of the global financial crisis and the intense competition for jobs it has created, the lines have been blurred between contract recruiters and executive search agencies, otherwise known as headhunters.

Contract recruiters are receiving growing numbers of enquiries from executive-caliber candidates. At the same time, many headhunters have started operating at lower rungs of the job ladder.

In the face of such a fiercely competitive market, executive search firms must ensure that they consistently find as close a match as possible to the executive profiles sought by their clients.

For their part, job-seeking executives must learn to navigate the various stages of the selection process if they want to make the most of the slim pickings currently available on the job market.

A [technical note](#) by IESE Prof. [Guido Stein](#), Miguel Bolaños and Eduardo Rábago outlines the key factors that headhunters and job candidates need to bear in mind for the selection process to succeed.

The ideal candidate

Generally speaking, there are three kinds of executive candidate: those who are searching actively, those who are in passive search mode, and those who do not show up on any executive search firm's radar.

The first are usually keen to hear about any kind of job offers and proactively chase opportunities. While their enthusiasm may be their strongest asset, it also serves to strengthen the negotiating hand of the company looking to hire.

Those in the second category often feature on search firms' databases, but are more inclined to wait to be contacted by the firms they are registered with. These passive candidates enjoy a much stronger negotiating position.

Finally, executives who are not represented on executive search firms' databases must make a concerted effort to court the firms so that they, too, can be considered for positions that arise.

A five-stage process

The average timeframe for filling an executive position is about five weeks, although it can take quite a bit longer in the case of senior executive positions.

Here's a breakdown of the most typical phases of the process.

1. *A Position Is Posted.* Although many job openings are confidential, there are many ways to advertise them. The Internet has supplanted traditional print media in many areas.

Besides the executive search firm's own website, there are other sites that aggregate job offers, such as those of professional associations and private companies.

However, companies should take special care with the wording of the ads, so as to attract the right caliber of candidates.

2. *Résumés Are Received.* This phase tends to last a week, a period during which headhunters scour their own databases and do direct searches in the market.

A good résumé should be possible to scan and filter in as little as 10 seconds. To this end, it should be no more than two pages long, with information ordered from current to past.

Despite the importance of the résumé, headhunters tend to resort to direct searches when the post to be filled is extremely important or demands a highly specific skill set.

This kind of selection is much more costly, and companies can expect to pay above the odds in terms of salary and benefits to attract the ideal candidate.

3. *Preselection*. Coming from the same sector and boasting hands-on experience are crucial in the filtering process. Candidates should, therefore, make sure that the most relevant data appear prominently on their résumés.

Doing your homework can also pay enormous dividends. The more you know about the sector, company and the job advertised, the better prepared you will be to navigate the twists and turns of the selection process.

4. *Personal Interviews With Headhunter*. These should start two or three weeks after the launch of the process. Through successive meetings, the executive search firm assesses the candidate's knowledge, skills and cultural fit.

From the very first interview, the candidate must show what he or she will bring to the job, and come across as enthusiastic, available and flexible.

During this process, it is normal for non-work and family issues to come up, and candidates may be ruled out for various reasons.

5. *Interview With Company*. No more than a week or two should transpire between the final interview with the executive search firm and the first interview with the company seeking to hire.

There tend to be various meetings at different levels of the company hierarchy, so as to garner as broad a set of opinions as possible before the final selection is made.

In this phase, it is vital that the information provided by the candidate be consistent with that given by the headhunter.

Once the whole process is over, some weeks may go by until a formal job offer or rejection is made.

To further help executives navigate the demanding selection process, the authors of this note also include a list of essential do's and don'ts.

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