

How to get the best from a head-hunter (Abridged BIR version)

Backdrop

The challenges facing businesses today are not made any easier by the increasing difficulty many are having in attracting and retaining the right calibre of intellectual capital. The situation certainly isn't helped by the shift in corporate strategy that is putting ever greater emphasis on customer focus and the empowerment of staff at all levels. The result is the creation of need for fully rounded individuals, with the relevant 'soft' skills to compliment their technical and management ability. The pen portrait of a senior manager or executive today is likely to be quite different to that of 10 or even five years ago.

This situation is pretty much common in all sectors. Blue chip multi-nationals are searching for the best solution just as much as the small niche organisations. Advances in technology, rapid changes in market conditions, blurring of boundaries between traditionally disparate industries, long-term economic success (eg maturing markets) and insufficient population growth are all contributing factors. With salaries of senior staff now sufficient to sustain a comfortable lifestyle, many are demanding a reasonable work/life balance. This is partly a reaction to the inevitable increase in stress associated with having to achieve the ever-greater financial performance and efficiency necessary to fund the relatively high remuneration levels.

The shortage of talent has had a profound impact on the recruitment industry. With many companies recognising that attracting people with transferable skills is the best (or only) solution, organisations are having to compete with others beyond their sector. So the need to recruit is ultimately impacting on organisations' marketing strategies, business models, brand definition and culture, among other things. Growth, change and differentiation are key aspects in the world of senior-level recruitment. So bespoke has the contemporary definition of leaders and managers become, particularly with corporate governance requirements, that internal promotion and advertising are increasingly less likely to produce the right candidates for the job. Headhunting, therefore, has become the preferred recruitment choice for an increasing number of businesses.

Although headhunting has been the means of finding and placing executive-level staff for many years it is now used in other situations. This may be the finding of a replacement for an incumbent not aware they are about to be replaced or where there is a very limited supply of highly specialised individuals. In this last situation, the target candidate may not be at executive level eg a highly specialised design engineer. What all these sources of headhunting commissions have in common is a very particular need and an imperative to put the right person in post. This makes the headhunt service critical to corporate development and sustainability. Underpinned by discretion, success depends on the headhunter's ability to research, as well as a natural empathy for the cultural/business fit and skills of persuasion/communication.

There is usually at least a second aspect to the agenda of a competent headhunter. Generally appointed by companies that are serious about their cultural reinforcement and brand, the headhunter is looking for talent that will not only support its employer today but also grow with it as it reacts to changing trading conditions in the future. On many an occasion, the headhunter is contributing to the creation of “super groups” of intellectual capital, capability and experience.

How it works

If you receive a call from a headhunter, it means that you’ve been identified as someone who is a possible “fit”. Some people never get such a call during their entire career, which is not necessarily a reflection of a lack of talent. Others are approached on a regular basis. The key to becoming sought after, if that’s what you want, is to be excellent at what you do, visible within your industry/profession and have a wide, diverse network of contacts that you remain in regular contact with. Headhunters have numerous ways of unearthing their goal. Some rely on the “old boys’ network”, which can get a result but is falling from favour with an increasing number of clients due to its tendency to produce restricted short-lists of candidates. More progressive headhunters use a blend of means of finding their quarry eg:

- Networking with contacts who can be relied on to recognise talent and are happy to give an informal reference
- Keeping their finger on the pulse of the industries in which they operate: knowing what of importance is happening on a daily basis; key individuals involved in making a difference; tracking developing best practice and who is at its forefront; maintaining an awareness of changes in the market and who responds to it first; noting who is speaking at events and; watching the press and journals (learned papers, articles etc)
- Maintaining an up-to-date database of all high-performers they come into contact with or become aware of
- Having the ability to carry out bespoke research on markets/industries from first principles eg: building comprehensive pictures of their structure; key organisations (and where their talent resides); where specialist organisations reside and; who is up and coming
- Tracking: job advertisements (noting who is recruiting for interesting posts); announcements (promotions, new starts); award winners
- Aware of trade associations and professional bodies
- The web; useful for finding companies with fitting core values, culture, brand etc and where their talent resides

But you do not have to wait for a headhunter to contact you. Switched-on people can use contact with a headhunter to their own advantage. Although having a headhunter’s call is one of the best ways of finding a better job while you are employed, needing little effort from you, it does not preclude you from taking the initiative and contacting the headhunter first. In fact, by doing this, you have little to lose and potentially a lot to gain. As the whole process is extremely confidential, your current position will not be at risk.

Even if you're happy in your current role, being approached by a headhunter is a great opportunity to check just how marketable you are in the current climate. Because a headhunter has to keep up to date with both current and likely future industry trends, use that initial approach as a benchmarking exercise to see if there is greater opportunity out there for you.

Responding to the first call

So your professional endeavours have put you on a headhunter's radar. The initial discussion is all important. Candidates' reactions can vary considerably. Some are suspicious, a few can be angry ('do they think I can be bought?') but most are naturally inquisitive, wondering how they were found and wanting to know which particular skill, action or trait got them noticed. At that first call ask a few basic questions to establish the validity of the headhunt, (eg what is the job description? where is the position located? what is the level of responsibility/authority?), and confirm all discussions will be in strict confidence. Get the name and contact of the headhunter, together with their web address. Do not be surprised if the headhunter cannot release the name of their client and resist the temptation to ask about the salary level. The headhunter will be looking for a committed, professional individual who will ultimately accept a job offer and not use it as a means of negotiating a pay rise with their existing employer. However, to avoid wasting time, especially if you are well paid, it can be useful to give the headhunter details of your remuneration. If the headhunter continues the contact it can safely be assumed that the anonymous job carries a better level of reward.

How to deal with a headhunter

At all times answer questions honestly. If you do not feel comfortable answering questions just say so. Take the approach seriously, it could prove to be the step change in your career that you have been looking for. Based on that initial contact both you and the headhunter will decide on whether to continue the discussion. Either party is perfectly entitled to stop things now, which, if it happens, should be done in a professional way. However, if both parties continue then everything said should be considered as forming the basis on which the other party will act.

Competent headhunters will care as much about getting the right job for you as they will in filling the position. In this way the headhunter can be best assured of repeat business when you come to appoint your successor due to your promotion. It is vital that the headhunter gets a detailed picture of not just your professional ambitions and desires but also your personal drivers and circumstance. Armed with this knowledge at this formative stage in the process, there is the maximum opportunity for the headhunter to shape the expectation of their client and highlight any items that could become showstoppers later in the process when they inevitably surface.

It is most likely that if you have said the right things so far the headhunter will want to have a face-to-face meeting. To maintain confidentiality, you might want this to be held at a discreet venue eg hotel lounge. Do not be put off if you are asked to complete a short personal profile questionnaire – it should only take a few minutes. Ask for a copy of the results if you want to know what they say about you.

If you are not successful in getting the job some aspects of the results may form a useful basis for adjusting your development/training programme with your current employer.

When talking to the headhunter about your job and how you do it, avoid using jargon and describing what you do in excessive functional detail. Focus on the bigger perspective, giving the headhunter the maximum opportunity to pick up on your key behaviours as well as your technical skill. And remember, the headhunter will be looking for skills you have, hard and soft, that are transferable. Discussion points that usually generate a meaningful flow of information include:

- Your role eg who are your customers/stakeholders, how do you define the need of each, what you do for each, how you communicate
- The problems you have either avoided or solved; the benefits you created
- Original thought you have had
- How you create and assess options
- Your decision making processes
- How do you contribute to your employer's business, especially the bottom line
- How you meet deadlines and quality standards
- How you relate to customers/stakeholders
- How you identify and manage threats, strengths, weaknesses and opportunities
- Your management style and how you motivate
- Your current duties and responsibilities

It is usually beneficial to talk about your ability to think and act strategically, as well as tactically. In all aspects be prepared to pepper your discussion with specific examples of achievements and actual situations. Make sure you have articulated clearly what you are looking for in any potential new job; include anything that is important in your private life as well eg wanting to work from home for a minimum number of days a week.

Ask whatever questions you need to ensure you have a full picture of the opportunity. Confirm the programme of events and when you can expect to meet the headhunter's client – your potential new employer. Give the headhunter a copy of your CV, ensuring it is up to date and written in an appropriately imaginative form. Establish the name of the headhunter's client as soon as possible.

Assuming your profile fits the headhunter's Brief, you can expect to be recommended for an interview with their client. This is not the end of the headhunter's involvement; keep them updated on progress and use them to give your feedback of the situation and to sort out any issues or questions that arise. It is usual for there to be more than a single interview with the potential new employer before they decide on the appointment. Expect to be up against a couple of other people on the short-list; ask the headhunter to confirm the number.

At a reasonably advanced stage in the client interviews the topic of your remuneration will need to be raised. Ensure you get answers to all your questions, enabling you to draw this aspect of the discussion to a swift (hopefully satisfactory) conclusion and the rest of it to progress.

From the first contact to having a meeting with the headhunter is usually about one week. Expect a further week or so of no apparent action while the headhunter reports back to their client and probably interviews a limited number of other potential candidates. You should hear if you will be invited to have a meeting with their client not more than three weeks after the initial approach. The timing of the interview process with the client can vary considerably, reflecting how close the candidates are to the Brief and how many candidates are on the short-list.

Determining how marketable you are

As the majority of people approached by a headhunter are not expecting the contact, it usually catches them by surprise. For this reason it is good practice to listen to what is being said and then buy time to gather your thoughts, think about the opportunity and consider the important things you want to know before deciding what to do next. Before going back to the headhunter find out all you can about the type of opportunity being discussed. Talk to people you know and trust in that market sector and at that level. Quickly research other opportunities by looking on the web, trade journals, the press and perhaps talking to another headhunter that specialises in that industry (being careful not to breach the confidentiality of the initial headhunter). This will give you an up-to-date view of what is going on in the market and, if you are considering a move, whether the position you were approached about is the best out there.

Those people regularly contacted by headhunters will be more familiar with the process. They may be known to be on the market for a new job and are holding back accepting offers in the hope of getting a salary or other conditions that they believe they are worth. Others may not be on the job market and not therefore considering a move. They will not be considering how marketable they are and a headhunter may be forced to tempt them with an apparently irresistible offer.

The 'intangibles' the headhunter is looking for

These will vary with every assignment. Increasingly, however, the characteristics employers tend to be looking for when headhunting new members of staff relate to their 'soft' skills. These are the non-technical abilities of an individual's ability and their behavioural characteristics. They relate to:

- Management style
- Motivational ability
- Leadership capability
- Strength of personal drivers/commitment
- Flexibility of approach
- Integrity
- Team working

- Behaviour under pressure
- Communication style and ability
- Preparedness to learn
- Keeness to disseminate knowledge
- Ability to market/cross-sell
- Personality (to blend with corporate culture)
- Networking capability
- Desire to evolve, change
- Ability to think radically (when necessary)
- Courage
- Energy
- Charm
- Diplomacy, consensus building

Bear in mind that no one candidate will be a perfect fit with the Brief. Different employers will put these characteristics, and the other 'hard' skills, in unique priority. Even the same employer may vary the emphasis with alternative positions. The blend will also vary with time and changing market conditions. A balanced score card is often used when assessing these characteristics.

What to look for in a good headhunter

Every headhunting organisation should be ethical, discreet and friendly. Judge them on how diplomatically and professionally they dealt with you at the first contact. If you do not know the headhunter ask questions to establish:

- What industries it operates in
- If it places candidates on an agency/contingency basis (ie from their database; candidates offered to numerous clients)
- How long it has been established
- The levels it operate at ie director, senior manager
- Its culture
- Where it operates eg nationally or internationally
- Their headhunting methodology
- Their pedigree
- Client base; percentage of repeat business
- Typical length of their short-lists of headhunted candidates
- Their non-recruitment policy ie whether or not they will approach candidates they have placed to re-headhunt them
- How they avoid conflicts of interest arising

The headhunter will be pleased to answer these questions and may be prepared to provide references. Although charging a fee based on a percentage of the successful candidate's first year's remuneration package, the headhunter must avoid the temptation to place the highest paid candidate quickly (to maximise profit). Look for a high degree of care in the headhunter, together with genuine concern about placing the best candidate (irrespective of speed or salary level). You should expect to be treated professionally at all times. If at any time you feel that this is not the case, sever the relationship.

Your first meeting will be to discuss your suitability for the position in mind. The relationship might go no further for that particular job as the headhunter will not put you forward to their client unless they really think that you offer the necessary skills and ability. The headhunter will not want to waste your time or their clients (risking their own reputation with both parties) and should certainly not put you under any pressure to take the new position.

From the onset the headhunter will be trying to build a comprehensive picture of you in both professional and personal terms. With trust established at an early stage in the headhunter/candidate relationship, the discussions can be open and frank. Endeavour to answer all questions honestly. Respecting the confidentiality of your current employer, be as precise as possible with your responses. Avoid unnecessary embellishment and the tendency to say what you think the headhunter wants to hear. It is vital that the headhunter sees you 'warts and all'; they know that no-one is perfect and understanding where you are strong and where you need to develop will give them a much clearer view of how you would fit in to their client's organisation. Ensure that you supplement answers on your competencies and achievements with real examples. The selection criteria for the job will most likely include a minimum or particular level of knowledge, skill and experience as well as the cultural fit.

Finding out about the job

Use that initial meeting to find out as much as possible about the headhunter's client. The headhunter will be able to give you a substantial insight, as well as the general state of the market they are in. Questions will typically relate to:

- The client's name. Do not be surprised if this is kept confidential at the early stages of contact, this is quite normal. However, establish when it will be released and how much information you are prepared to impart before it is.
- The markets the client organisation is in
- Size eg staff numbers, turnover, profitability
- Locations including country of origin, HQ location
- Financial eg turnover, profitability
- Sustainability eg growth over past five years, projected growth in next three years
- Ownership (is there an opportunity for equity participation)
- Culture
- Training/development philosophy

- Details of the owners/board members eg ages, qualifications, backgrounds, management style
- Definition of the client's brand
- Details of the job eg responsibilities, objectives, authority, location

Be prepared for a probing conversation and do not be concerned about making it two way. Try not to be put off by what may sound like unnecessary or irrelevant questions and do not refrain from asking any question on topics that is important to you – no matter how trivial (these can often become show stoppers during your final decision making process).

Once you know the name of the headhunter's client it is important to research the organisation comprehensively. Your reputation will be related to theirs if you join them and you will want to ensure that you take every precaution to protect your image and ensure that the opportunity under discussion is really there and that you are going to enjoy life in the new company. The sources of research you will want to use will include:

- Word of mouth. What do trusted friends say about the company; ask people you meet casually what they perceive the company's reputation/market standing to be
- The web. Do a 'Google' on the company's name; it can throw up some interesting background information eg newspaper articles. Do the same for the names of the directors
- Website. Spend some time drilling into it eg are core values mentioned, what is the vision/mission/objectives, client/project list, CVs of key staff
- The press. Look up articles that have been published and see where the company stands in recognised league tables eg The Times Top 100 Employers
- Companies House. For a <£5 you can get a copy of the accounts
- Company brochures
- Trade associations/publications. Is the company active in promoting its industry?
- Competitors. What do they think of the company?
- Try hoovers.co.uk or lexisnexus.co.uk (there is a charge)

Keeping an open mind is important. Headhunters are usually charged with creating intellectual 'super groups' and they are good at finding talent that could flourish if put into a more appropriate environment. This is not necessarily a bad reflection on your current employer but more a consequence of the rapidly changing times in which we live and work. Also, as your personal life changes (eg arrival of children) and your experience grows, what was appropriate in a job yesterday may not be tomorrow. With your appetite whetted for a career move by the headhunter it may be that the job relating to the original approach is not the one for you. However, subsequent discussion with them might result in something else more interesting and relevant coming to light.

This may not happen immediately but by being patient with the headhunter the right opportunity inevitably comes along. Look at your relationship with the headhunter as being career-long, with them giving you free advice that keeps you abreast of developments in the market, transferable skills and evolving best practice. Furthermore, it makes them useful when you get promotion and have to appoint your successor.

And finally

In these days of talent scarcity it's more and more likely that high performers will get approached by head-hunters. When the initial flattery subsides, those approached could well find that the world could quickly become a more interesting and challenging place to work. However, existing employers are unlikely to let their talent disappear without a fight. For those offered golden handcuffs, instant promotion or a large salary increase, think twice. It shouldn't take a threat to leave to get the recognition you have probably been talking about for a long time. And although you didn't ask the headhunter to approach you, don't be tempted to go through the interview process with the intent of using the new offer to negotiate with your existing employer. What goes around comes around – it's a rapidly shrinking world. By being professional and above board at all times your reputation will not be harmed, whatever you decide to do with the job offer you get.

Jim Kay is a director of Trojan Management Search Ltd,

020 7841 1600 jim.kay@trojan.co.uk www.trojan.co.uk

Trojan specialises in supporting organisations by headhunting high performers (individuals, teams, companies) and growing incumbent management/leadership talent.