How to Run a Seamless Executive Search

Best Practices & Pitfalls of Leadership Recruiting

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Summary: The following brief summarizes the lessons learned in more than twenty years of executive recruiting, highlighting the best practices that can yield successful outcomes and the missteps that can too easily lead to a failed search. From designing the search to sourcing the best candidates and managing a seamless interview process, this paper details how to run an effective and successful executive search.

Step 1: Designing a Successful Search

When an executive search begins, the goal is clear: to find the very best person for the role. However, the search for a senior leader can be a challenging and complex process. How you set the search up from the start can determine whether it succeeds or fails.

Three critical decisions underlie the design step:

1. Defining the role
2. Choosing the right executive recruiter
3. Developing the blueprint of the ideal candidate

The first decision the organization and its leadership needs to make is about the role itself. Whether an opening has been created by a departure, lackluster business results, or restructuring, every vacancy offers the opportunity to assess the business requirements of the role and the type of candidate who will be able to achieve its mandate. Even if an internal candidate is in the wings, hiring managers may want to benchmark their abilities against the market. It's easy to let the status quo bias of a legacy management structure determine the scope of the role, but taking the opportunity to assess the business and its needs is key to positioning the entire organization for the evolving demands of the future. Seeking advice from relevant stakeholders who will interact with this placement is a logical step in shaping the role.

The next decision a hiring manager faces is whether to give the search to the internal Talent Acquisition team or invest in an outside search firm. Four factors can help guide this choice.

- Does the internal team have the capacity?
- Do they have the knowledge of the functional area?
- Do they have the confidence of the C-Suite?
- Can they ensure confidentiality, if relevant?

Many top corporations have outstanding internal search functions that understand the culture and can navigate internal relationships with HR, compensation, finance, and legal. Conversely, if an internal candidate will be considered, a third-party agency can provide critical objectivity.

When hiring for specialized roles, for example in legal, AI, or data management, an external recruiter with experience in that domain would likely have a broader network and will be able to recruit a better candidate. If the internal team is overburdened with existing searches, an outside firm can help alleviate the load. If the search has C-suite or board level visibility, or could potentially generate public interest, an outside firm can help anonymize the search. Choosing the right search firm to run the search is another important question. Big name brand firms provide reputational cover, whereas boutique firms often offer a higher level of service at a similar price point, with senior level recruiters being actively engaged in the day-to-day process of the search.

Once the internal team or agency has been assigned the role, it's time to dig deeper into defining the ideal candidate for the job. The process should begin with a robust and thorough search strategy meeting during which the hiring manager and relevant stakeholders, (e.g. HR Business Partners) can clearly define what the business is seeking in their candidate.

A strong hiring manager will arrange a pre-search, kickoff meeting to share his or her vision of the ideal candidate with the interview team. A savvy recruiter will encourage this meeting because if the team has varying opinions of the right candidate and there is no alignment, it will cause confusion during the assessment phase, and worst of all, the candidates will pick up on the chaos.

Years of experience, exposure to organizational decision-makers and board committees, background stability, profit and loss responsibility, culture scores, and accomplishments in their past roles can all be determining factors. The corporate culture they are accustomed to and their professional growth ambitions may play a role. At this stage, the hiring manager should consider whether they are open to a high-potential candidate with less management experience but more career growth runway, or whether the position requires a veteran with many years of experience in a similar role.

The recruiter also needs to clearly understand why the position is open: is market volatility or business performance negatively affecting the function? Or are there internal political dynamics that might be difficult for some candidates to navigate? Taking the time to establish trust and open dialogue with the hiring manager and HR early in the process can help ensure everyone involved in the search is on the same page. A clear understanding of the kind of person who will most likely succeed in managing both the structural and cultural elements of the position will help the recruiter set out to find the best candidate for the job.

A few questions can help set the search on the right track from the start: Why is the position open? What are the biggest challenges the candidate will have to deal with? What are the characteristics of the ideal candidate? (Are we looking for a change agent or is this a maintenance role?) What are the knock-out must-haves? And where can you be flexible? How will you know you've chosen the right candidate? Have you exhausted all potential internal talent? Answering these questions early can ensure alignment between the hiring manager and the recruitment team that will help yield a successful outcome.

Fail factors that can derail a search from the start:

- Failure to (re)scope the position properly
- Failure to make time for a thorough search strategy session
- Failure to reach internal consensus on the ideal candidate
- Failure to design a compelling story to attract passive candidates
- Search firm partners delegate execution to junior staff
- Changing priorities mid-assignment

Step 2: Sourcing, Recruiting & Evaluating the Candidates

Sourcing Strategies

As soon as the need for the search is known, the firm should solicit in-depth talent research to map the market of possible candidates, ideally after the business has evaluated and, if needed, redefined the requirements of the position. High-quality research is essential to understanding the scope of individuals currently in the role at other firms. But only considering individuals who currently fill the same role can dramatically limit the diversity of candidates under consideration. It's vital to look deeper into the market to discover candidates who have the necessary training, skills, and experience but who might not yet have landed in the role with the exact title.

Centers of influence within the target function can help source new, previously unseen candidates. Beyond Boolean searches and LinkedIn, membership in diverse associations can be a great source of high-potential candidates. Senior management consultants in relevant practice areas, and leaders in adjacent roles can refer both former and current colleagues.

While in-depth research and market mapping can generate a high-quality candidate list, the best candidates often come from candidate referrals. A potential candidate who may not be interested in the role often knows others who might be. Great recruiters will make up the most ground with direct conversations and advice-seeking sessions with centers of influence. Too often, recruiters bypass this question during the screening conversation and miss adding new, high-quality candidates to their prospect list.

Working the Shortlist

A search-status report will show the hiring manager the active and interested candidates, as well as a comprehensive list of who has been engaged and whether they've been excluded from the search. The status report should summarize each candidate's accomplishments, motivations, recruitability, compensation history (if known), and relocation considerations. The recruiter should offer a clear reason why each candidate has been selected, and articulate what they will bring to the role.

One item that is often missed, but is crucial information for the hiring manager, is the market feedback generated by initial outreach. What are people saying about the role, the company culture, or the business strategy? And why might strong candidates be passing on the role?

The hiring manager's reactions to the initial list of candidates will help shape the recruiting strategy in real time. After the first round of shortlisted individuals has been presented during the first update meeting, the recruiter should continue sourcing new candidates, using the information from that session to ensure whether their candidate list is on target. Together, these strategies can help the recruiting team find the best candidate for the job.

Fail factors:

- Failure to leverage centers of influence
- Failure to consider candidates in similar but adjacent roles
- Passing on overqualified candidates
- Failure to follow up and ask candidates for referrals
- Relying too much on the interview
- Failure to understand a candidate's true motivations
- Ruling out candidates for lacking specific qualifications
- Waiting for the perfect candidate
- Thinking culture fit is more important than culture add

Step 3: Managing the Interview Process

Process and Protocol

Once the hiring manager has approved the shortlist of candidates for first-round interviews, it's the recruiting team's responsibility to streamline the process to make it as efficient and effective as possible. Once a candidate accepts consideration in an active search, they may begin to investigate other opportunities, creating some pressure to move them through the process. Four strategies can help streamline the process and deliver a successful outcome:

1) Be selective about how many interviewers are involved

Limiting the number of interviews can improve the candidate experience and help control the timeline. A grueling interview process is a major turnoff for most candidates. If this cannot be avoided, pair up interviewers to save time.

2) Designate responsibility to each interviewer

Rather than generally evaluating each candidate, ask each interviewer to focus on a specific aspect of the candidate's profile and competencies. One, for example, might focus on culture fit, while another assesses their management style and a third evaluates the hard skills and experience the candidate would bring to the role. This approach ensures the candidate doesn't repeat the same conversation, and generates better information by which to assess how they will function in the role. It's also critical to have a diverse interview panel. This encourages the interviewers to think more broadly, with different perspectives, in order to look past any shared, unconscious bias. Equally important is that it gives the candidate comfort that the organization is practicing diversity in all of its forms. As a candidate, engaging with a panel of interviewers who include others with perspectives and experiences they can relate to will bring out the best in them and create better recruiting outcomes for the company.

3) Use an interview guide and scorecard

Creating a structured tool like an interview guide and scorecard for the interviewers can help reduce implicit bias and create a quantitative score by which to measure each candidate's performance. Tailoring the scorecard to the role's requirements will help make evaluation more consistent and all the more valuable. Scorecards provide hiring decision documentation that can be valuable in the event of legal action.

Even though a scorecard can help keep an interview on track, it can also be inflexible, constraining the interviewer's questioning. Therefore, a blended approach is the preferred model. Keep in mind that a scorecard is not the final decision on its own. When it comes time to stack rank and develop a recommendation for hire, they are used to compare against other candidates' performance.

4) Consider the candidate

It's easy to focus on the business when designing the interview process, but it's important to keep the candidate's experience in mind. Prioritizing executive interviewer availability, for example, to accommodate the candidate's schedule will make the interview process more efficient. The hiring manager and recruiting team need to stay in regular communication, while the recruiter stays in contact with the candidate, so that the recruiter can ensure the candidate receives prompt feedback after each interview. A painfully slow recruitment process is a turn off for any passive candidate, suggesting the organization is indecisive or overly bureaucratic.

The recruiter is responsible for staying abreast of the candidate's feelings and concerns to ensure the hiring manager has full visibility into how a potential offer will be received. A skilled recruiter will also prepare candidates for each meeting during the interview process, ensuring that they cover the relevant competencies, ask appropriate questions, and maximize their time with each interviewer.

Fail factors that can derail the interview process:

- Failure to consider the candidate's schedule
- Overscheduling with too many interviewers
- Failure to prep the candidate for their interactions
- Failure to designate responsibility and objectively measure interview performance
- Poor communication with candidates throughout the process
- Failure to give the candidates prompt feedback

Step 4: Managing the Offer & Securing the Start

Once the shortlist of candidates has been evaluated, and a finalist is identified, it's time to make the offer. In over a dozen states, pay non-disclosure laws make it illegal to ask about current compensation, so it's the recruiter's responsibility to comply with the law and keep the company compliant, all while structuring an offer that is competitive and fair to both sides.

Some hiring managers believe compensation surveys should benchmark salaries, but compensation surveys are often outdated, lagging current market conditions. Moreover, in many cases, the compensation expectations of high-caliber talent from top companies will undoubtedly exceed posted averages. Top talent is not moving for a 10% bump. In rare instances, hiring managers would prefer to make the offer themselves, but this is a mistake. Just as real estate transactions benefit from having a realtor broker the transaction, executive compensation negotiation always benefits from a recruiter's involvement. The recruiter will have developed a relationship with the candidate that will allow them to foresee potential sticking points and other decision factors. Do they have family considerations with relocation? What other compensation elements beyond base salary will affect whether or not they accept the role? A skilled recruiter will subtly begin shaping the offer from their very first interaction with the candidate.

When making the offer, the recruiter also has an opportunity to coach the candidate through two important aspects of the next stage of the process. The first, is the resignation. In this period of transition, emotions are running high on both sides, which can lead to unexpected turbulence. Candidates can often be surprised by the ripple effects their resignation will cause. The recruiter should help prepare them for the response a company will have upon learning of their planned departure.

The second is the counteroffer. The recruiter should prepare the candidate for a counteroffer, even if it's not a common practice of the organization. Some people will see a counteroffer as a win, but fail to recognize the ways it can damage their reputation within the organization and their career trajectory. Several studies suggest that more than half of candidates who accept a counteroffer have left their role within 12 months. Preparing the candidate for the fire drill of activity that may follow their resignation, and helping them stay clear-eyed about the opportunity ahead, can help head off a counteroffer early.

Once the candidate has accepted the offer and has made a plan to resign, the recruiter should check references with the candidate's consent, an important but often overlooked step. The interview team can also help ensure the candidate starts. Ideally, the hiring manager will call the candidate soon after their resignation to reassure and support them through any turbulence they may be experiencing. Other interviewers might follow up to let the candidate know how excited they are for the individual to join the team. The recruiter must remain in regular communication with the candidate, providing advice on how to navigate any negative or guilty feelings that may have resulted from their resignation, and begin to lay the groundwork for their first day of work.

Fail factors:

- Failure to check references
- Failure to follow up post-resignation
- Failure to prepare the candidate for a counteroffer

Conclusion:

From defining the role to be filled, to sourcing a diverse pool of candidates, to managing a seamless interview experience, every step of the executive search process requires careful attention and planning. By following these best practices and avoiding common pitfalls, organizations can position themselves for success in attracting top talent and driving business growth.

It's crucial for organizations to provide a positive and engaging candidate experience, from the first interaction to the final offer. This includes keeping every candidate informed throughout the process, providing prompt and honest feedback, and demonstrating a strong commitment to diversity and inclusion. Running a successful executive search demands a strategic and collaborative approach. By working with an experienced recruiter and following the best practices outlined in this article, organizations can ensure that they are attracting and securing the right talent to lead their businesses into the future.