

Anatomy of A Search

By David G. Jensen (Originally appearing in *BioPharm* magazine)

Headhunting sounds like an easy business. Just pick up a phone, make a few calls to business acquaintances, arrange the interviews, and then mail the invoice. Simple enough, right?

Unfortunately, it doesn't work that way. The success rate of Executive Search in the life sciences and bioprocessing is on the order of 65-75%. Along with numbers that clearly indicate it isn't as easy as it sounds, the search industry has a very high turnover of staff. Many consultants are quickly in and then out of the recruiting business. What gives? What happens in one out of four searches that don't make it to completion?

Ask any experienced recruiter what the most important element of their personal success has been, and he or she will tell you that they have prevailed by choosing the right assignments. This sounds very similar to the response you'd get when you ask a VP of Human Resources how to successfully work with headhunters: "Choose your recruiter carefully," she might say. But does this mean that successful recruiting lies only in the personal chemistry developed between headhunter and company?

Not at all--there are four basic ingredients for success in recruitment, illustrated by the true stories which follow. As always, the names and places have been changed to protect the innocent.

Rule #1 - Set Your Sails

Good assignments start with a thorough analysis of the need, and all parties involved gain consensus on the parameters to be used for the search. Projects that don't begin with this shared viewpoint end up limping through the process as a result:

The company's Director of Administration met with Mark to give him all the details of the search for the Director Technology Development. Mark had no experience with this particular firm, a 2-yr. old startup company, but had more than a decade of successful executive and scientific searches for other biotech clients. This company had a different view of how the process should proceed, which concerned him. The CEO and VP R&D were "not going to be regularly accessible"--details and discussion about candidates needed to be routed through his H/R contact. While this in itself wasn't a problem, it raised a potential red flag. It left a gap for communication problems to develop. Mark decided to take the job description as gospel but to listen very closely to feedback after the first candidate was presented.

Unfortunately, it took a month of hard work before getting to that first candidate. When the details on this scientist were passed on to H/R for review, an odd thing happened. While all the requirements of the agreed-upon job description were present in this fellow's background, suddenly the emphasis had shifted. It appeared to the headhunter that H/R had found very little common ground among the decision makers. Mark lost a month on the search as a result. Even more importantly to his client, he lost enthusiasm.

Rule # 2 - Make It A Team Effort

The recruiter who is brought on to assist you in filling a key position is an important consultant and team member. He or she can become your project champion for the search--working with all parties involved to make the hiring process successful. This recruiter is integral to this project, and should not be seen as an "outsider" who is given only limited information and kept in the dark:

During an evening conversation with a prospective candidate for the job, Mark learned that the company this fellow worked for was discussing a possible merger with his client. Evidently it was common knowledge among the senior staff at this larger biotech firm that they had been reviewing the technology and product candidates at his client company. While the fellow was still potentially interested, he was going to be a very reluctant recruit until the "merger question" was resolved to his satisfaction. Mark decided to contact the client CEO to see how to handle this situation.

The H/R contact was initially very reluctant, but eventually got the two together by phone for a brief few moments. After asking the CEO about this information he had turned up, the response was very direct and spoke volumes about the perceived role of the recruiter: "Mark, our business decisions and your search are two different matters. You need to focus on getting your job done, and I need to focus on ways to make this company successful. I can't see how a discussion of what direction we are headed would make any difference in your candidate identification."

Rule # 3 - Have A Sense of Urgency

Would you undertake an important project without a sense of urgency--the intense desire to get it done, and done right? When you think about the importance of the people in any organization, the process of recruitment should rank right up there with the company's most important projects. In the best companies, it does. In many, however, this isn't the case:

Three candidates emerged in Mark's search for the Director of Technology Development. Each of them had significant experience that was relevant for this

search, and Mark's references proved that any of these three could take the client where they wanted to go. He called his H/R contact and was shocked to hear that things would not be moving quickly into the interviewing process. "We'll need to see their college transcripts first," she said. This put the interviews at least another 2-3 weeks off, Mark thought. His first candidate had already been waiting now for more than two months without action on the part of the client company. It had been their option to wait until all candidates were identified to begin the interviewing process. And now transcripts!

Embarrassed, he called the three candidates and asked for their permission to write their Universities. All three of them mentioned that it was the first time in ten or twenty years of work experience that they had been asked to provide their college transcripts.

Rule # 4 - Remember, It's A Romance

Some companies sell so hard that candidates back away, uneasy with the process. Others feel that their name alone should make the best candidates anxious for the opportunity. These larger firms are always surprised when they lose out on someone who could have been a truly important hire.

Recruiting is a process that consists of many small, seemingly unimportant pieces. Whether it is a candidate's first impression of the company while filling out H/R forms in the lobby, or a dinner spent alone in the hotel room the night before, there are many individual elements which can negatively affect the romance of the recruiting process:

Dr. Yang, Mark's hot candidate for the search, was expected to get an offer from his client company next week. Mark had heard that the interview had gone very well, and that each decision maker at the company had finally found someone whom they could live with. That's why Mark was really taken aback when he spoke to Yang and found that the company had left the candidate on his own during two days of that crucial second interview trip.

"They had me stay overnight on Saturday so they could save some money on the airfare," Dr. Yang said. "But when I was in that airport hotel on the weekend I had a chance to walk around a bit, and I even rented a car and took a look at the city. I didn't see anything that made me think we could be happy there, so I'd like to pass on taking this further. That location just wouldn't work for my family." Mark felt a sinking feeling as he realized they didn't have backup candidates. When would this client company realize that it was their job to take responsibility for candidates, who are actually guests while they are in town on interview trips?

In Conclusion

Luckily for the search industry, there are many more tales of successful recruitment than there are stories of woe as in Mark's stories. But the seeds of potential problems lay dormant in any recruitment effort. I've found that as soon as you take your attention off an important project, uncertainties can arise--there are too many variables, and one has to look through a very critical lens at each step of the process.

If you are conducting a search now, whether through an outside resource or internally, make sure that the four rules discussed in this article are reviewed regularly. People are an incredibly important resource--think what can happen for you, your department, and your company if you can improve your "batting average" by just a few points!

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