



How to Sneak Around, Double Your Pay, and Have A Blast Being Headhunted

A Primer on Being an Attractive Candidate

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STRANGE AS IT MAY SOUND, headhunters occasionally get headhunted. I took a call last week from the president of one of the country's most prestigious search firms, ostensibly to ask my advice about adding a new partner. It wasn't until I got off the phone that I realized he was asking me if I wanted that job.

I was flabbergasted. I make these same calls all day long, and I couldn't see this one coming. (This guy was good—real good). But did I play my hand correctly? Did I come across as the kind of person that this company would want to go all out and recruit? I'll never really know because I am a happy camper. And yet, the experience did inspire me to research this subject for my *Managing Your Career* column this month!

How is it that recruiting firms determine who is a "prime candidate" and who isn't? Are there some ways to optimize your situation in this scenario? And why is it, exactly, that companies like the one who called me are so darn vague about what it is they want? Why not just call and ask, "Are you looking?"

Hiding Behind the Potted Palms

Things in the recruitment industry have changed. Some industry old-timers still believe that there are recruiters hanging around the fringes of scientific meetings, looking to ensnare their best people with stories of increased salaries and promotions. Sure, these things are all a part of the job-changing process, but headhunters are really much more out in the open now. These firms have to operate as valued consultants to their biotech and pharmaceutical client companies. You'll find them on committees and right in the midst of technical meetings, as opposed to hiding behind the potted palms. In other words, these folks are easy to find and approach.

Your goal should be to make acquaintances that will benefit you either today or down the road. Many people forget that the best recruiters are in the business for the long haul. They want to know all about you today, even without a current assignment that "fits," because their long-term success depends upon their ability to build and maintain a database of contacts that they can tap tomorrow.

Many people contact recruiters in short bursts, separated by years and only when they have a need for a job. Perhaps this may be a three-month period of intense headhunter activity followed by five years of employment and little or no con-

tact with these recruiters, until going through the same cycle once again.

This is a big mistake because a few good recruiting firms who know about you can open windows of opportunity when you least expect it. My personal experience, and many others will agree with me, is that the best career moves come from out of the blue. That's why you need to stay in touch with your headhunter contacts. Let them know that you are available to help them when they need to network in your field of expertise.

Your Initial Approach to a Recruiting Firm

If you don't have a rolodex of recruiter contacts, and you need to start "from scratch," there is a strange paradox about approaching headhunters that you need to take into consideration. Recruiters tend to trust most what they discover themselves, as opposed to those resumés and CV's that unceremoniously land on their desk. In other words, if they have three candidates whom they earned through hard work and lots of networking, they will tend to value those candidates more than the person who happened to e-mail over a resumé with an announcement of availability. (Even lower on that scale is the candidate whose resumé was discovered posted on some Internet site).

Because of this prejudice, it is always best to be "discovered" by a headhunter, or to be referred to a recruiter via a third person. When I think about all the ways that I have met candidates, there is nothing to compare with the excitement I feel when contacting a person who has come to me with a glowing recommendation by someone I know. Take a few of your acquaintances into your trust, perhaps your advisors and mentors from grad school or earlier jobs. Let them know that you'd be receptive to the right new opportunity. Sure enough, the word will filter back out to the recruiting firms who regularly contact these individuals. And when the headhunter's call comes, it is from a person who has already heard about your skills and abilities.

Traits of Highly Desirable Candidates

When thinking about how to optimize your contacts with recruiters, it is important to look at the five factors that deter-

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mine how “desirable” you may be to that firm. Obviously, the most important determining factor has to do with your job-related skills, but once it is clear that you fit a client assignment,

recruiters choose whom they are going to recommend by looking at candidates through these five filters:

References—Impeccable and checkable: Everyone has a

Tips for Working with Headhunters

- ❑ **The best recruiter recommendations:** Get a list of recruiter contacts from your friends and workmates. If someone is good, you’ll hear about her from a colleague. Ask your friend for permission to use his name as a referral source.
- ❑ **After taking a headhunter call:** Leave one of your referrals for a later e-mail, in which you provide some additional information after the caller hangs up. Your recruiter friend will value your professional follow-up and put you into the “A-list.”
- ❑ **Easiest way to spot a “rookie” recruiter:** Listen for someone rattling off a job description, and when you hear “Must have excellent communication skills,” break off the conversation and get back to work. Good recruiters know that you don’t want to be read a job advertisement.
- ❑ **Offer a home number:** If the conversation goes more than a few minutes and you are distracted by the requirements of your job, don’t hesitate to offer a home phone number. Recruiters are very active in the evenings on calls like these.
- ❑ **Remember the “Law of Reciprocity”:** If you provide some help to a recruiter on an assignment, the unwritten rule is that the recruiter now owes you a favor.
- ❑ **Your association memberships:** If you are involved with a scientific or trade association, get into those committees in which headhunters are active. (Become the chair of the membership committee, and be every recruiter’s best friend).

list of references. But did you know that when recruiters check references they go beyond those few stated names on the bottom of your resumé? How is your industry reputation? In addition, their clients may ask that your references be checked from your current employer. This means that you must make a colleague or previous boss aware of your plans.

Mutual respect: One of the lessons that recruiters learn in "Recruiting 101" is that they need to show professional respect for their candidates, and that this must be reciprocated. If a candidate doesn't follow-up after an interview or return a call when promised, that person takes a backseat to other candidates in the process who do those things. Of course, recruiters must earn your respect as well by their actions.

An open line of communication: Openness is very much appreciated by your headhunter contacts. How does your spouse feel about a potential location change? What kind of impact will your move have on the family? Candidates who open themselves up and allow the recruiter full access to their situation are always given consideration with client assignments. Anytime a recruiter suspects that certain issues are not on the table, that candidate is put on the back burner.

A willingness to admit to areas of weakness: Recruiters hear chest-thumping all the time about how strong a person's

skills are. What is refreshing, and appreciated, is the ability to admit to an area that needs some work.

Realistic thinking: A person who is currently a research scientist shouldn't realistically expect that they would be offered a job as director of R&D. That may sound like common sense, but you would be surprised at the number of people who have overblown expectations of how the job market will treat them.

I don't want to make headhunters sound like some kind of miracle cure to a job search. In actuality, anyone who has an urgent need to find new employment needs to tap a wide variety of resources in order to make progress. Recruiters are just one part of a process that includes ads, job fairs and, above all, *networking*. The best part about developing relationships with headhunters is that they can bring you career opportunities at times when you aren't necessarily thinking about the job market.

That's what happened to me when I got that call from the big recruiting firm. Even though I wasn't open for the new scenario, it wasn't a bad feeling at all to know that someone was thinking about me in a positive way, and that the call came because of my own hard work. That's a feeling that we can all use now and again. ■