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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides an overview of the role and responsibilities of a recruiter or headhunter, and specifically how those responsibilities differ from those of career counselors, coaches, resume writers, or unemployment office workers. The mentalities of both the recruiter and employee are also explored. The benefits of using a headhunter for job placement are outlined and tips for choosing a recruiter to work with are suggested. (GCP)

Making the Most of Recruiters

by

Darrell W. Gurney

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Making the Most of Recruiters

Darrell W. Gurney

What Color is Your Parachute, by Richard Nelson Bolles, lists “Going to private employment agencies or search firms for help” as the best of “The Five Worst Ways to Try to Find a Job.” He estimates that only 5-24% of all job seekers utilizing recruiters will succeed in finding work. Not the best odds! But let’s take a closer look: on average, between 5-24 of every 100 clients you see, students you work with, transitioning military you counsel, etc., *will* find a job using recruiters. The message is clear: although recruiters may not land *everyone* a job, they can definitely help some.

Despite the claims made by some monstrous job boards during the net-bold '90s, recruiters will always be around. High-tech can never circumvent the human, high-*touch* element necessary in connecting people with jobs. Technological changes have pressed recruiters to adapt different methods and, as happens in recessions, half the profession may leave during particularly “challenging and uncertain times.” But they will return, and the clientele you serve will always want to know how best to work with them. Let’s explore “Making the Most of Recruiters.”

De-Myth-tifying the Search Industry

We will start with what you already know, or have heard, about recruiters. For the purpose of this paper, by “recruiters” I mean only those individuals working as independent staffing service providers, not “in-house” corporate recruiters. This includes everyone from the small, temporary agency to the kingpin organizations of retained executive search. The philosophy is the same, whether the candidate being placed is a receptionist or a CFO. Think back for a moment to any personal experiences you have had with these “headhunters”—not a *bad* word, by the way...my interpretation being “a messenger of opportunity.” Also recall any stories you have heard from clients or friends. Take a moment to do this before continuing.

I can’t crawl into your mind, but I’ll say that whatever you’re pondering is probably a one-sided story. You never hear the other side because recruiters don’t make a living talking about what they do but, rather, by doing it. Explanations are scant because they only focus on the next deal. My favorite quote, from *To Kill a Mockingbird*, has Uncle Atticus telling his young daughter, Scout, that to truly understand anyone, you have to step into their skin and walk around for a while. I intend to allow you to don a headhunter’s hide to learn how your clients can best be served.

To begin re-skinning, let’s first explore a recruiter’s mind and motivation. Here are a few questions to answer for yourself...before sneaking a peak at the “answers” below.

- 1) Have you ever heard of anyone majoring in “executive search” in college?
- 2) What gets people into the recruiting business?
- 3) Should they have a different motivation?
- 4) What’s the primary motivation of a stockbroker? Why? Is that wrong? Should the stockbroker be more focused on caring for people?
- 5) What’s the primary motivation of a clinical psychologist? Why? Is that wrong? Should a psychologist be more focused on making money?

Answers: 1) No 2) Money 3) Varies (e.g., “They should care more about people.”, etc.) 4) Move investments around to get the highest return; Makes more money for clients; No; Only if it forwards the primary motivation 5) Relieve neurosis; Satisfaction of healing/fulfill their calling; No; Only if it forwards the primary motivation.

What’s the point? Many in the careers world entertain various opinions of recruiters because their motivations, and corresponding ways of operating, are simply not understood. We all think it would be better if others operated as we do. One of the main organizers of the annual ICDC Conference, Dick Knowdell of Career Research & Testing, Inc., generally breaks down career-world professionals into the following Myers-Briggs types:

- Contingency Recruiters—ESTJ
- Resume Writers—ISTJ
- Career Coaches/Counselors—INFP

...or, for those familiar with the Personal Style Indicator, types B, A, and I, respectively. It’s no wonder there are clashing interpretations of the “right way” to be or operate!

So, in “Making the Most of Recruiters,” one must suspend judgment to learn, from a new-skin perspective, how headhunters are wired—what they do and don’t do. Hopefully, as a result, your clients will become the 5-24% who actually get placed.

Headhunter Mentality

A recruiter’s business differs from that of a career counselor, coach, resume writer, or unemployment office worker. Each of these individuals is generally paid upfront, or in salary, for services rendered. The average job-seeker deals with a contingency recruiter, however, who is paid only *after* successfully placing a candidate into a position. Another critical difference is that the headhunter’s fee comes from the hiring company, which means their choices and operational modes are pragmatic. There’s very little focus on the emotional aspects of a candidate’s search but, rather, on what fits the bill for the client company’s need. Recruiters “care,” *and* they know on which side their bread is buttered.

Headhunters are not interested in providing career direction: a person not only needs to know what he wants to do, he must have specific marketable background in that field. Hence, the search industry is of no use to career changers. Recruiters want to see an exact, stable, chronological background in whatever their specialty happens to be, ideally with factors distinguishing the candidate as top-rate (e.g., accomplishment figures, rankings, awards, etc.). “Rubber” resumes (showing lots of bouncing around), gaps, and unfocused careers are not marketable to clients—who can find these people on their own, without an expensive recruitment fee.

Quite simply, recruiters look for an XYZ person to fill an XYZ job: round peg for round hole. It’s not brain surgery, but it does take the finesse and relationship skills of any sales job,

because it's a 100% people business. The headhunter is selling on both ends and is best thought of as an information broker and potential long-term career partner.

Therefore, expect recruiters to behave more like stock brokers than clinical psychologists: brief, directed communications; time-is-money attitude; placement-focused goal orientation, with client satisfaction as the #1 goal. Their client is always the *company*. But you might call the candidate a *customer*...a good recruiter realizing that happy, well-placed candidates become tomorrow's hiring managers.

Employee Mentality

For the most part, an "employee" mindset characterizes most of your clients—the idea that their long-term welfare depends on an employer's willingness to hire and keep them. In his book *Job Shift*, William Bridges points out that the traditional permanent job is on the way out. In the future, "job security" will be determined by one's network of potential service recipients—a more free-lance economy.

I advocate a business-owner mentality over the employee mindset. If one chooses to run his or her own business, with certain "employable assets" to be invested in reaping the highest return, then it becomes harder to fall asleep in any particular job. The goal of every business is to obtain the greatest return for a given amount of assets. This "return" might show up for an "investing" employee in the form of compensation, commute, growth opportunity, work schedule, or anything else considered valuable. Shifting into a mode of *always* being awake, aware and "looking" for better investment opportunities (nee "jobs") will leave fewer of your clients unexpectedly out in the cold when inevitable corporate changes occur.

Lifetime Career Management™ prevails over emergency career management: no more waiting to discuss other possibilities until the writing is on the wall or the pink slip is on the desk. Rather than contacting recruiters only when the need for another position is dire, maintaining one's ongoing presence as a "passive" candidate in the systems of a few select recruiters' is a wise move. Recruiters prefer passive candidates to those plastered throughout the Internet and e-blasted to every other search firm. It's a question of providing a client with someone that can't be found just anywhere...so a less "exposed" candidate is more marketable.

Good recruiter management means candidates having a few search professionals in their niche, always updated with their most recent resume and contact information. With the advent of keyword searchable databases, it is imperative that ears-open candidates constantly update their resume with specific words and phrases that will have them found in a search. They may not move every time a recruiter calls, but it *always* helps to know what opportunities are unfolding in one's field.

Benefits for the "Hunted Head"

Of every 100 individuals, perhaps only 5-24 will reap the benefits of being placed. It is still worthwhile to throw one's hat into the ring, especially since it costs the candidate nothing. What do candidates get through a headhunter's efforts that they can't get on their own?

- 1) Noticed: A recruiter presenting them to a client company makes that individual stand out from the crowd of other resumes/e-mails, and ascribes a certain energy of "this person is good enough to have representation for his/her career."

- 2) Presented: Candidates who are heard about, rather than having their information only *seen* by a hiring company, come with many good feelings (from the recruiter) attached.
- 3) Financial Security: Generally, a company paying money for a candidate is financially strong.
- 4) Insurance: A firm paying for a candidate is more committed to his/her success than to someone they get free of charge. It represents an investment on the line.
- 5) Hidden Job Leads: For various reasons in today's wild e-world, positions are still assigned as "confidential" to search firms.
- 6) Interview Preparation: yes, your client may think she knows how to interview, but a recruiter's income depends upon their landing the job. So, recruiters offer not only an inside view of the hiring company but a feel for the people the candidate will meet—much more specific than can be researched on the net.
- 7) Negotiation: headhunters' fees are based on the placed candidate's compensation, so they are looking out for the candidate's (and their own) best result. Few professionals are at ease dealing with this very *personal* area: one's paycheck!
- 8) Buffering: throughout the interview and hiring process, as well as the initial period on the job, a recruiter serves as a useful informational channel between candidate and company—sometimes a critical factor of success (e.g., "What she meant was...;" "Their impression of you was...;" "What we want to emphasize more on the next interview is...;" etc.).

The long-term rewards from affiliating with a few recruiters for life are greater than the short-term ones from an *emergency* job search. Just as the Hollywood and sports types can focus on what they do best by having someone else manage their movement, a few chosen career partners can support your clients' long-term goals and desires.

Choosing a Recruiter

When the job market is candidate-driven, meaning far more good opportunities than good people to fill them, it pays to know how to distinguish the best recruiters to work with. Of course, in these "challenging and uncertain times," *any* recruiter calling a candidate about *any* opportunity might be a good thing. The economic right-sizing of 2000 has been prolonged by tense world events and corporate scandals, but this too shall pass...and we will soon embark on another candidate-driven market.

Fact: more and more baby-boomers moving into retirement (at least those not invested in Enron or Worldcom) will create a huge vacuum throughout the economy. A Bureau of Labor Statistics projection states that by 2006 there will be 141 million workers to fill 151 million

jobs! Therefore, you can look forward to many recruiters pounding on the doors of top talent. With that future focus, here are a few simple pointers for your clients in sorting through the hoards of headhunters chasing them.

- 1) **Retained vs. Contingency:** Really a non-issue. Traditionally, higher-salaried (\$150K+), C-level executives are recruited by retained search firms, that are paid a portion of their fee upfront and work from a very short list of potential candidates—generally those already filling the executive suites of client competitors. You don't "sign up" with a retained search firm—if they want you, they will find you. Most candidates work with contingency recruiters, paid by client companies only after a successful placement. There is no status differential between retained and contingency, just a difference in payment plan. Unlike retained, contingency recruiters rely heavily on their candidate database, so it's smart to get into their systems.
- 2) **WO/WI Factor:** (Pronounced "wow-wee" as in "Wowee, man does that guy talk a lot!") This is the simple rule for measuring how many words come out of a recruiter's mouth versus how many are going in their ears. True, headhunters will always be pushing their available opportunities, but it's important to know that they hear the candidate's needs and desires and, accordingly, only present opportunities that fit those stated needs and desires. No candidate wants to feel like a square peg being shoved into a round hole.
- 3) **Trust & Clout:** These can be measured in traditional and non-traditional ways. First, it's always possible that a recruiter maintains letters of reference from satisfied clients and candidates. Secondly, many search firms are affiliated with others through various network associations. This shows their active participation in the trade and gives the candidate a broader base from which possible opportunities might arise. Lastly, here's a few questions a candidate might ask:
 - "What would your candidates say about you as a recruiter? What would your clients say?"
 - "What is the fee range you charge client companies?"
 - "Will you please tell me the professional and salary levels of your last 4 placements?"

Please note: This demonstration is by a trained professional. Your clients should not practice this at home in a down-market. The above mentioned questions can only be asked by uppermost top-talent during economic boom times, when headhunters are clamoring for their head.

- 4) **Systems Savvy:** It is important that recruiters capitalize on the efficiency and productivity allowed by today's technology, and that they interact with client companies at the level of up-to-date business systems. Keyword searchable databases, e-mail, etc., are all basic tools to search out.
- 5) **Specialty:** It's no use blasting a resume out to hundreds of recruiters at random. (As mentioned earlier, e-blasted resumes aren't attractive to recruiters simply because everyone else got it too!) Recruiters can only help someone marketable within their niche or specialty. Candidates

should consult recruiter directories that outline the various specialty areas in which recruiters focus (e.g., *The Kennedy Directory of Executive Recruiters*, aka “the Red Book”).

Meeting the System

As stated above, to make the most of a recruiter’s talent it is important to position one’s self strategically in their database. You do it by meeting the system right where it is. Gone are the days when search firms kept steel filing cabinets full of candidate resumes. Headhunters no longer thumb through folders when searching for a possible fit. Instead, they put a few key words or phrases into their computer to reveal *exactly* who they should talk to. The advent of keyword searchable databases has allowed for more efficient operations as well as exponentially increased resume storage capacity. The result is that more saved candidates have a chance of hearing from the recruiter.

Candidates should create the lowest “database resistance” possible when submitting their information to a recruiter. This means e-mailing a resume within both the body of the e-mail as well as in an attached Word file. The e-mailed text version can be quickly plopped into the database, while the formatted Word file can be saved for future client presentation. Under no circumstances should a resume be mailed or faxed today, as this creates a huge lag between receipt of information and inclusion in the database. Recruiters just don’t have the time to process/scan a hardcopy, doing their best to simply stay on top of e-mails.

To be poised to pop up on a recruiter’s database/radar screen, candidates should have fully “loaded” resumes—chock full of words and phrases that bespeak their capabilities. Focus on the following:

- 1) **Functions/Skills/Responsibilities:** Every position has activities and duties particular to the job. In Finance, key words could be “SEC” filings, or “10-K/10-Q” reports; in Sales, relevant words could be “cold-calls”, “prospecting,” or “above-quota.” Whatever specific words or phrases capture the main aspects of the work should be included.
- 2) **Job-Specific Terms or Phrases:** Particular fields often have specific buzzwords. For example, in the area of Human Resources Management, the term “cultural change” is used in relation to corporate adaptations to new times; “business-to-business” is a phrase specific to a certain Sales arena.
- 3) **Specific Products or Services:** Resumes often lack specific reference to the goods being dealt with. A company name does not always convey their actual product or service. Therefore, in addition to stating that one’s employer is Gerber Foods, it is important to spell out “baby food.”
- 4) **Industry/Work Environment:** Although someone works for Sony Pictures, “entertainment” may be the word that locates them for a related position. Similarly, someone dealing in “international” business or employed with a “manufacturing” company should specify these environments

As stated earlier, a resume outlining these areas and more (awards, certifications, etc.)

should be updated and resubmitted regularly to one's "career partner" recruiter. Having your client constantly document his/her increased skills and abilities creates an ongoing awareness of their valuable assets, much like a company's balance sheet. By adopting this [YOUR NAME, INC.] perspective, along with using professional recruiters as a tool, your clients ensure that their "stock" continually receives the highest bids from the market...placing them in the winning 5-24%.



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