

Getting Excellent Results from a Search Firm

Gaines & Associates International, a specialized professional search firm for the design and building industries, recently hit a pothole while working with a client. After Gaines had referred a candidate, the client interviewer told Gaines the person did not seem to fit the position. What he did not tell Gaines was that he had sent the person to talk with an internal colleague. That colleague liked the candidate and told him he should expect an offer—without mentioning it to the first interviewer, who had no intention of making an offer. As a result, the candidate was let down, Gaines found itself on the hot seat, and the firm came out looking less than first-rate.

The lesson, according to Gaines, is that working with a professional search firm is a matter of commitment. It's not the same as taking your car to a mechanic—where you pick it up at five and it's fixed, and you have only to pay the mechanic. When you work with a retained executive search firm, you need to stand by and hand the mechanic the tools. This means you must actively participate with the search firm—and you must choose the right search firm in the first place.

✦ Put on your best face

According to Donna Gaines, President/CEO of Gaines & Associates, the most effective thing you can do to acquire the right candidate is to *sell* your firm to that candidate. You want the person to see an opportunity he or she cannot turn down. After all, when you engage a high-level search firm, you're looking for candidates, not applicants. People already have jobs with which they likely are happy. They're not looking to go anywhere—so you have to look good. "It's so important that the client sell, sell, sell," says Gaines. "I don't care if the candidate is the wrong person. If he or she has a bad interview, 20 people will hear about it. With a great interview, the candidate will say, 'I can't wait to work for this company.'" This axiom, Gaines says, applies whether or not you want to make an offer. "It makes a really good impression and puts your brand in a positive light," she says.

5 Things to Look for in a Search Firm

Looking to find a good professional search firm? Gaines & Associates International has five ideas:

- ✦ **Behave like a client seeking a design firm.** Gaines suggests that you interview several firms to see with whom you are most comfortable. You're looking for chemistry—just as a client is doing when seeking an A/E/C firm. You have to ask, "Who can I really work with?" The results will be only as good as your relationship.
- ✦ **Choose a firm that works on retainer—not contingency.** A search firm that works on retainer works for you, not for themselves. They will cover the waterfront. A VP at Gaines says, "We approach every search with a fresh sheet of paper. We talk to everyone doing the job in question." Gaines says she might ask the client for leads to possible recruitment sources, but then she'll find a large selection of equally promising sources—people who used to work at the client's firm, or other clients, for example. "We don't just talk to people in our database—but to people who aren't even looking for a job. They'll do it quickly—but will they do it as effectively? We do primary research."

A contingency firm, on the other hand, gets paid to fill the position.

- ✦ **Find a firm that specializes in A/E/C.** Search firms with inroads into A/E/C can get more reliable referrals. This is because design firms know them and are less fearful of liability problems. Also, because they know your competition, A/E/C specialists can help you best position yourself—salary-wise and otherwise.
- ✦ **Ask about ethics.** Work with an honest, up-front firm. Stay away from those that use ruses—posing, for example, as reporters to find the names of a firm's principals "for a direct mail piece."
- ✦ **Look for a firm whose members work together.** Do they share leads with each other, information about similar searches they have done? In other words, do they work together for you? Says Gaines, "Many firms function like real estate brokers where they truly are independent contractors—every man for himself. In a collaborative environment, the client company gets a full team with a vested interest in the success of the search."

✦ Get organized

The best approach to selling the candidate, Gaines says, is to treat the person as you would a prospective client—as valuable merchandise. That means getting organized. “There are often too many people in the decision process,” says Gaines. “So you need a champion, someone to take on your principals if they misbehave.” She tells stories about top-level candidates waiting two hours for interviews, about secretaries asking prospective senior managers to fill out employment applications. “This is not an interrogation,” says Gaines. “Once you have a candidate, get your best principals into selling that candidate. Decide who at your firm will be the coach or referee who will ensure that you follow up so you can have a win-win.”

✦ Designers—pay attention!

Apparently, architects and engineers can be some of the least reliable clients when it comes to follow through. “Designers are mercurial,” says Gaines. “They talk in colors, talk around things. Their decisions are based more on how they feel. They need to come down to earth.”

She tells of spending three hours at dinner with a candidate, selling him on a design firm from every angle—then getting no response from the firm. “I sold my soul to the candidate,” she says. “Then the client fooled around for six months.” ■

5 Effective Ways to Work with a Search Firm

Once you find a good search firm—your “search” isn’t over. For the best results, Gaines & Associates International suggests these five tactics in working with the firm:

- ✦ **Invite the search firm to visit your office.** This is critical. For the search firm to find the best candidate, they must get their “hands” on your firm culture. They must see and taste how you operate, understand what your values are. So spend time with whoever will be doing your search. The more time they can spend with you, the more they can think like you.
- ✦ **Let the search firm keep everyone in the loop.** When you’re looking for a candidate, the key players at your firm must collaborate in the effort—lest you shoot yourself in the foot. A good search outfit will routinely email all key players in your firm at every turn in the road. Let them. When a candidate is at stake, everyone involved must know the status as of *right now*.
- ✦ **Take your skeletons out of the closet.** Be honest with the search folks. Let them know of any scuttlebutt on your firm. That way, if the candidate hears of it and brings it up, your recruiter can tactfully deal with it.
- ✦ **Let the search firm handle all negotiations.** When it comes time to make an offer, let the search firm do it. That’s their job—to negotiate the most acceptable terms for both parties. Tell them honestly what you want to offer. Let them learn what the candidate would honestly like to receive. Then they can establish a balance that will feel right for everyone.
- ✦ **Respond quickly.** When you have good candidate, *move* on that person. Don’t let your candidate sit wondering. Make the person know you are interested—and that he or she should have reason to be interested in you. If the candidate knows you mean business, he or she will pay attention.