

A “matchmaking” expert describes the advantages of working with an executive search firm and gives pointers on choosing the right one.

Donna Gaines discusses the process of hiring and working with an executive search firm to help fill positions within your company.

To be truly effective and stand apart from your competition in today's marketplace, you must be able to identify and *attract* job candidates who are qualified, experienced, and innovative-exceptional people with leadership potential. Sounds easy, but where do you start?

The easiest, most economical and practical place to begin is with networking. Tell your staff you're looking for new blood and let them help you find good people. Posting openings allows current employees to consider applying themselves. Offering them incentives, such as finders' fees, encourages them to take an active part in your search. Also, making use of professional societies' job listings can target specific audiences.

A college recruitment program ensures a continuing flow of good candidates. Campus recruiting adds a useful marketing dimension to your search because it publicizes your company's name to tomorrow's corporate principals and presidents.

Broad-stroke advertising in help wanted pages of trade publications and newsletters can be effective, depending on current employment levels and the types of positions you're trying to fill.

Search firms can do much of your work for you, especially when you're looking to fill managerial and technical

positions. At first blush you might think search firms are beyond your means.

But can you really afford to hire an individual who won't fit into your company's culture or, even worse, someone who may cost you tens of thousands of dollars by making performance or judgment errors?

Executive search firms produce both direct and added-value results. They can explore and penetrate larger pools of candidates than you could reach alone and can increase your chances of finding the best people by conducting focused and confidential searches. The "matchmaking firm"-a more accurate term than "headhunter"-evaluates candidates objectively, thoroughly investigates references, negotiates compensation packages, and ensures as much as possible the best fit between your company and the candidates you hire.

Search firms probe candidates for reactions, vision, and goals while presenting your company's mission and possibilities. It is their business to analyze and match mutual expectations, helping to turn them into shared advantages.

The easiest way to evaluate a search firm is to ask key questions and compare the firm's responses to your company's needs and ways of doing business.

Here are some of the most important questions to ask:

1. What ethical guidelines do you follow when conducting searches?

2. What other searches have you done? (Names and companies may be confidential, but the match-maker should be able to describe the nature and results of past searches. Whatever the case, ask for references-then check them.)

3. Who will do the work?

4. How soon, how often, and in what form will I receive feedback?

5. What is your fee structure? Do you work on a contingency or retainer basis?

6. What expenses are reimbursed? Do you mark up research and administrative costs? How detailed are your invoices?

7. What guarantees do you provide?

Ask how the search firm conducts assessments and evaluations. How does it determine whom to check as references? How does the matchmaker structure interviews, and what input will you have in presenting questions? If appropriate, how will the search firm conduct testing; license, professional, credential, and other verification; and behavior and character appraisals?

Look for ways to work collaboratively with the search firm you select. Become involved in the search and help the firm understand who and what your company represents. The results will save you time, expense, and frustration, and in the end will benefit your company. ■