

Forming Relationships With Professional Recruiters

Recruiters and candidates have always had a classic love-hate relationship. When both parties cooperate to successfully complete a search, they love each other. But when either side breaks ranks -- a recruiter won't recommend a candidate or the candidate refuses an offer -- animosity and mistrust develop.

At such moments, it's important to remember that neither side can exist without the other. A recruiting firm may have thousands of searches to complete, but can't fill them unless it identifies enough well qualified candidates. Conversely, you may have a great relationship with a search firm, but it won't help unless the firm has been asked to fill an opening that's a perfect fit for you.

Unfortunately, while lots of recent articles and job-hunting manuals clearly explain what recruiters do, many candidates remain in the dark about the staffing or "headhunting" industry. They expect recruiters to find them new jobs.

What's In a Name?

To cultivate a fruitful relationship with recruiters, know the differences between search firms and other placement agencies operating in the employment arena. The primary differences among these firms are usually their fee structures and whom they represent. Traditional executive-search firms usually separate into two categories, with retained firms earning a fee regardless of whether a candidate is located and hired, and contingency firms only earning fees when the candidate they recommend is hired.

Other employment firms help companies find new hires or help candidates become re-employed following a job loss. However, no employment firm can actually get you a job, regardless of what their fast-talking salespeople might tell you. Most recruiters agree that candidates should stay far away from so-called "career- marketing" firms that promise jobs, then demand thousands of dollars in up-front fees.

What Kind of Firm Are You Working With?

Many different types of placement firms have appeared on the employment landscape, but it's rare (and largely illegal) for any of them to charge a fee to candidates. To understand the different types of firms and avoid being taken by unscrupulous marketers, review the following descriptions of the most prevalent companies:

Retained executive-search firm: Firms that specialize in finding top-level candidates exclusively on a retained basis, which means they receive payments regardless of whether a candidate is hired. Firms usually receive one-third of the fee up front, one-third after 30 days and the balance at the end of the assignment.

- **Contingency recruiting firm:** Search firms that place candidates in mid- to senior-level positions. Fees are paid by client companies on a "contingency" basis, or contingent upon the firm finding a candidate who's hired for the position. If asked to find more senior candidates, such firms might charge retainers to conduct the search. Contingency firms tend to specialize in certain industries or functions.
- **Temporary staffing or interim staffing/consulting firm:** Firms that provide staff for temporary project or contract positions. As flexible hiring and staffing evolves, the distinctions between these and traditional recruiting firms are blurring. For example, some full-time recruiting firms will find candidates for temporary assignments, allowing clients to "try before buying" them as permanent hires. Temporary firms usually charge normal search fees if an interim candidate is hired full time.
- **Personnel agency:** This term is less frequently used but refers to companies that place lower-level or staff employees in clerical, skilled or semi-skilled openings. These agencies usually don't specialize by function or industry, and are paid fees by employers on a contingency basis.
- **Applicant paid fee (APF) agency:** firms that only place unskilled laborers, such as drivers, cooks or machinists. This service is largely illegal in Canada.
- **Outplacement firm:** These firms are paid by client companies to provide career guidance and job-search assistance to laid-off or fired employees. Their services usually include resume preparation, search skill training, counseling, secretarial assistance and office support.
- **Executive career-marketing firm:** Job seekers are charged hefty up-front fees by these companies, which promise various types of search assistance, from resume preparation to finding jobs. These firms often are criticized for aggressive sales tactics, inadequate service and exorbitant fees. Over the years this type of firm has become harder to find due to significant regulations against their operations.

How to Build Rapport

When their employment seems at risk, many professionals become desperate and start dialing recruiters in hopes that they'll be placed in terrific jobs. They seem surprised when recruiters don't drop everything to meet with them. These individuals don't understand that creating relationships with recruiters that pay off in times of need is a long process. To help you forge good bonds, heed these tips:

- **Don't wait until you need a recruiter's help.**

Make yourself known and be helpful to recruiters at a limited number of firms long before you need them. Become a resource by offering to provide leads or referrals for positions they're trying to fill. While recruiters value knowing any potential candidate, they're more likely to remember and return phone calls from those who offered help without expecting anything in return.

Becoming known to search firms also increases your chances of being recruited for a good job when you don't actually need one. Indeed, there's no better time to evaluate your career and make changes than when you aren't under pressure. Continue to pursue relationships with recruiters,

even after you're in a new position. Search executives thrive on information and will appreciate anything you can tell them about your industry.

Of course, any good relationship is a two-way street, so make a note of recruiters who didn't return your calls.

- **Conduct research to learn which firms to contact.**

Recruiters specialize by industry and function, and are paid by corporate clients to identify and introduce candidates with specific skills. If your background doesn't resemble what their clients are seeking, recruiters won't consider you.

- **Do some research** to avoid sending your resume to firms that never handle positions in your field, since this wastes everyone's time. Review directories of recruiting firms or call your trade association for names of appropriate firms to contact. Also search for firms on the Internet, review listings in help-wanted ads for suitable positions and ask colleagues for recommendations.

- **Provide search firms with as much information as possible.**

With your resume, send a succinct cover letter that includes your salary requirements, current employment status, type of position you're seeking and a brief summary of qualifications. Don't get bogged down in details or include your entire biography.

Also, don't imply that you're doing the recruiter a favor by writing, says Mr. Nadeau. "It's OK to send a resume and letter, but a recruiter will probably have a negative reaction if you give the impression that you think he needs you," he says.

- **Stay in touch.**

Don't call every day or week, but don't drop out of sight, either. Just call or send a note occasionally updating the recruiter about your status. Remember, if you're right for a position and your resume is on file, the search firm will find you.

- **Don't blame the recruiter if you aren't called for interviews.**

Recruiters are creative, but they can't create jobs. Most recruited candidates leave good jobs for similar positions at companies in related industries. If you're changing careers or your skills aren't needed, there's little a recruiter can do. Also, if you flood the market with your resume, you'll spoil your chances of working with recruiters since they can't refer you to the companies you contacted on your own.

If you believe you're a good fit but a recruiter disagrees, make your case for why and how you're ideal for the position. A recruiter must be able to justify each applicant to a client, and may have overlooked information that could support your candidacy.

- **Learn how the search firms you targeted operate.**

Call to ask how the firm likes to receive information from candidates. Does it prefer faxes, letters or e-mail? Ask to speak briefly with a search professional to discuss your background and the firm's operating procedures. Don't make a pest of yourself. Never fax copies of your resume to every professional you can identify at the firm. Such actions will make you appear desperate and foolish, not admirably persistent, and you'll be lucky to speak to anyone personally.

When researching a firm, ask about its policy concerning confidentiality. Most respectable firms have strict controls and only send resumes to employers upon request and after receiving permission from candidates. Exceptions exist, however, so steer clear of firms that mass-mail resumes to companies, especially if you're employed, since your company may be on the mailing list.

- **Don't be offended if you don't receive a response.**

Like any executive, recruiters only have so many hours in the day to work and can't talk to every job seeker or acknowledge every resume. They'll return phone calls to candidates in this order:

1. Those whose resumes show they fit a current opening.
2. Those who may fit anticipated openings based on information received from employers.
3. Those with backgrounds in the recruiter's specialty who don't fit current or anticipated openings.

It's rare that a candidate who mails an unsolicited resume is suitable for a current opening. Nor are candidates referred by recruiters' friends or networking contacts often good fits.

"I could probably count on one hand the number of times that someone referred to me by a friend was ideal for a position I was working on at that time," says Craig Nadeau, of Partner Staffing, a Calgary Alberta-based recruiter of Engineering, Accounting, Administration and IT professionals.

What to Expect

Not long ago, executive recruiters often were treated rudely by candidates. That's never a good idea because search professionals, like elephants, have long memories. Both sides should treat each other professionally and courteously. Here's what you should expect when working with reputable firms:

- Detailed information about a specific position prior to your resume being sent.

- Detailed information regarding the company, compensation and interview process prior to an interview.
- Feedback -- both good and bad -- following job interviews.
- Assistance and guidance during pay negotiations.

For their part, recruiters expect you to treat them well when making initial inquiries and during actual search assignments. They also expect you to provide detailed, honest information about your experience, background, references and compensation, and feedback after interviews. Help search firms market you effectively and everyone wins.

Myth vs. Reality

Many misconceptions have developed about recruiters, such as their ability to generate jobs or the vast amount of money they make from placing executives. Your relationships with recruiters will suffer if you can't separate fiction from fact, as follows:

Myth: All recruiting firms are alike.

Reality: Differences in operating practices, specialties and individual style mean no two recruiting firms operate the same way.

Myth: Recruiting firms are only interested in closing deals.

Reality: While there may be some truth to this, the goal of most professional recruiters is to provide a valuable service that will lead to successful placements (and repeat business).

Myth: All search-firm employees are has-beens who work on straight commission, which means they'll mass-mail your resume if it produces a fee.

Reality: The recruiting industry is a multibillion-dollar business composed of trained, ethical practitioners. As in any industry, a few bad apples exist, but the marketplace typically weeds them out. Moreover, indiscriminately sending resumes doesn't serve any purpose.

"The companies that send out bushel-baskets of letters, hoping something will stick, are the lowest form of life on the planet," says Mr. Nadeau. Reputable search firms "aren't in the business of marketing people but rather of matching qualified individuals to opportunities," he adds.

Myth: If I accept a position through a recruiting firm, my compensation will be lowered to pay the fee.

Reality: Companies hire search firms for their services and pay a fee that's calculated on a new hire's salary but paid completely separately. If a search firm recommends you, it should have no impact on your final salary negotiations. If anything, a recruiting firm can give you information on current pay levels, which might ensure that you'll receive a competitive offer.