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## Choosing your headhunter

Recent statistics issued by headhunting organisations suggest that executive search activity has been slowing down after a period of strong growth. From the point of view of the consumer it may not be a bad thing that some of the heat has been taken out of the market.

It was probably coincidence but the question of standards arose at two separate meetings last week with search consultants.

One of the consultants complained that many client companies were not discerning enough when engaging their headhunters. "They don't ask the right questions," he said.

"In fact some don't ask questions at all beyond the price."

One problem may be that too few clients know the types of questions they should be asking so I rang around some experienced hands in the search business to make a "hit list" of questions that could be useful to ask a headhunter when evaluating its services.

- Is the firm or the individual headhunter a recognised specialist in their field with knowledge of a particular sector and do they have a reputation in a particular industry or marketplace? This can be important if potential candidates are to take their calls. Alternatively a generalist might be a better bet for a non-executive appointment.
- Can the firm provide detailed information on successful completed assignments for, say, the past 12 months? What is its success rate - the percentage of successful placings among all assignments?
- How long is the search going to take? As a guide it might be pertinent to ask the average time taken for a search from previous successful assignments.
- What is the average length of stay of a chosen candidate? This may be a useful pointer to the quality of past recruits.
- Who is going to do the search? Will it be the smartly dressed partner fronting the deal, the consultant who comes along to the presentation as a sidekick, or the researcher hidden away in a basement? The use of researchers is not necessarily a bad thing but their role is sometimes disguised. The search firm should be able to spell out the role of any individual with a significant involvement in the search.

- How is the candidate short-list sourced and researched? How thorough will the firm be in checking the suitability of short-listed candidates?
- What is the firm's off-limits policy and how is it applied? One of the biggest irritants among the clients of headhunters is to find the firm they engaged to recruit people a year ago returning to poach people for another client. It might be useful to ask the firm if it will list its other clients. If they include all your competitors you might wonder where the firm finds its candidates.
- Can the firm provide references from previous clients?
- What is the fee structure and in what circumstances might the client expect the firm to carry out a second search free of charge? Is it a failed search, for example, if a recruit ups and leaves after six months in the post without any provocation from the employer?

Nancy Garrison Jenn, a consultant on the headhunting business, includes some helpful tips in her book, *The Global 200 Executive Recruiters* (Jossey-Bass). The ownership structure, she points out, can point to the way that consultants work together. Mentions by candidates or recommendations by other customers are other good ways, she says, to get a sense of a firm's competence.