

How to mismanage a search from start to finish

A veteran executive search consultant explains how not to find the right candidate.

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Conducting a life-science recruitment search has never been as challenging as it is today. As science expands into areas like genomics and proteomics, the pool of experienced talent narrows, as many scientists have been trained only recently in these cutting-edge technologies. Experience is at a premium, particularly at the more senior levels. The race to attract the proper candidate is further intensified by an increasing number of companies, all pursuing the same subset of individuals. As novel technologies become “hot” from one quarter to the next, search consultants need to keep abreast of trends and add to the “living database” individuals who can be sources or potential candidates for each and every search.

However, despite these challenges, it is also the best of times for the life-science recruiter. The wealth of information available in print and electronically allows us to track individual companies, scientists, and executives in unprecedented fashion. The Internet alone is an astonishing tool that has empowered us to remain on the threshold of innovation.

The following is a tongue-in-cheek summary of the many things that can go wrong during the recruitment process. It is by no means exhaustive, and there are many variations on each theme. For job seekers or candidates, you may learn something of value for when you receive a call from a headhunter. For clients, hopefully these tips will help move your search process along to a successful conclusion.

Falling in love. This is most common among clients who are convinced that the job opportunity and their skills of persuasion are simply too compelling for any candidate to resist. Behaviorally, this malady is manifested through a lack of urgency to interview any other candidates when the beloved is in sight. No matter how often you caution the client to not rely on one candidate, your warnings fall on deaf ears. Eventually, the process is prolonged and arranging follow-up conversations and interviews becomes more difficult.

In the search business, falling in love often leads to a broken heart—or at least a broken engagement. The recruiter knows that winds of doubt are often expressed through long peri-

ods of silence, but the client remains sanguine that the candidate will ultimately conclude that the offer is too good to pass up. This is nonsense. Much like a long engagement lacking a commitment, such a situation stagnates as the candidate rides the fence, and all signs point to a reluctant but inevitable turn down.

Details, details. Is it too bold to discuss the health of a candidate’s mother-in-law during the first telephone interview? How about the children’s school? Consider how a recent divorce in which one spouse has custody and the other visits the children every other weekend will affect the 1,000-mile relocation for which you are aiming. To the extent that you overlook any issues of this nature early on, the search, or at worst the placement, will end badly. Being inquisitive is not being too nosy; it is the art of being wise and savvy, which is mastered only through experience, if it is ever mastered at all. Cover all bases, pay close attention to waving red flags as they crop up, and still remain ready for surprises. Skirting around these thorny issues will guarantee the failure of any search.

Breadth of a salesman. You pride yourself on your skills of persuasion. You have dinner with a candidate in a first-class restaurant and present the opportunity. You aren’t worried that the candidate is emitting symptoms of doubt as the evening progresses. Instead of a more tactful approach, you try harder to convince the candidate to go for a first interview. You think you can dazzle the worried candidate into thinking that the offer is the opportunity of a lifetime. If your approach is a success, then your candidate will be hooked and eager for an interview by the end of the meal.

Such a means of attack is almost guaranteed to fail. You will waste time, effort, and money, particularly if you fly the candidate from coast to coast and accommodate him/her in a fancy hotel. Rather, the proper response is to back away when you begin to perceive clear signals of doubt. A feigned retreat by the pursuer will heighten the candidate’s interest and the candidate will respond by initiating his or her own approach. Do not resist the negative signals you perceive no matter how eager you are to complete the search. You will regret it.

Just keep drilling. You’ve just received the assignment for a challenging search, demanding much time and effort to identify and interest the optimal candidates. Your client’s sense of urgency translates into frequent phone calls

for more candidate resumes. Do not explain to your client that rather than more resumes, he/she should be seeking a first-rate candidate who is well prepared for the job. Do not explain that there is a small pool of qualified candidates who are prepared to relocate to the area where the company is situated. Rather than offering counsel, just start sending resumes that seem somewhat reasonable for the search. Do not tell your client that you were hired to manage the search project, just yield to the pressure and threat to, “Produce more resumes or else!” Keep drilling!

The emperor has no clothes. Every founder and CEO believes (or pretends to believe) that his or her company can attract the best and the brightest because the company is at the cutting edge of science and technology. The fact that the company is still at the proof-of-principle stage, coupled with its dearth of prominent board members, less-than-distinguished scientific advisory board, and insufficient acquisition of financing should not deter the search consultant from agreeing that the company will attract the most outstanding talent from the top-tier companies. Rather than positioning the search more appropriately or suggesting that waiting until the company reaches some milestones could more aptly attract the top individuals, simply agree that there is no obstacle that cannot be hurdled to find the level of candidate that the client wants. Write up the contract and position profile and start the search. Collect as many retainers as possible until it becomes obvious that the search is heading for a cliff. Since so many companies are without experience in hiring a search firm, there is a good chance you can go on for years without repeat business and make a fair amount of money before changing professions.

Conclusions

There are many ways in which a search can be mismanaged. I hope that this brief guide provides job seekers with a framework to appreciate the search process and some insight into the minds of recruiters in the event that you receive a call offering you a new career in a new company in a new region of the country.

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