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June 24, 2009

Restoring the Trust between Clients, Candidates and Executive Recruiters – *What to Expect from a Quality Executive Search Firm*

Recently, a client asked me; “What is the single biggest competitive challenge Quorum Associates faces?” I thought for a moment and then answered, “It is the pervasive negative perception of executive search and the tarnished reputation of the executive search business.”

Candidates tell us they feel treated like commodities and traded for a fee. Line managers frequently comment that search firms rarely have real knowledge about their business, their industry and/or the commercial issues facing their industry or company. What’s more, the person who sells the assignment is often not the person who does the work. Line managers, HR professionals and candidates all perceive a general unwillingness by search consultants, including those from the big firms, to invest the time and energy necessary to really understand the client’s business. As a result, positions are not really as represented and candidates are not as expected. The relationship of trust between clients, candidates and recruiters is damaged.

The feelings of clients and candidates applies to all types of search firms, retained as well as contingent; and all sizes of firms, large brand names and small boutiques. Many of the metrics typically used to evaluate search firms have little bearing on the quality of future service provided. A long list of prior assignments is no guarantee of future performance. Standard selection processes such as beauty parades, preferred provider lists and placement history may be convenient and easy to use, but they are, at best, poor measures of future service quality or assignment success. What should line managers, their HR partners and candidates expect from executive search firms?

The only way to establish trust is for clients and candidates to experience a quality search process. And that requires time, energy and commitment on the part of everyone involved in the process. So how does one identify a quality search process?

A quality search process begins with knowledge about the client and a commitment to client service. This means line managers and HR professionals need to find executive recruiters willing to commit the time and intellectual capital to get to know and understand the client’s business and company. Specifically, they need to find search consultants who will do fresh research on the industry, the manager’s line of business and competitors.

HR professionals should remember that when a recruiter says, “I know the market,” he or she often means, “I know some people in your business.” It does not necessarily mean, “I know and understand your business and the challenges and issues you are facing.” Nor does it mean the

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consultants are willing and able to obtain the knowledge and understanding required to effectively complete an assignment.

A quality search process requires clarity about what the client really wants and why. In our experience, it takes a number of thoughtful and probing conversations to fully explore the scope of what a client wants from a particular role. This requires both time and effort on the part of the line manager, HR and the search consultant. This is not easy, but it is very important because, to get the search right, you have to get what the client really wants right.

The search consultants must be able to write a document which clearly articulates knowledge of the company, clarity about the position, understanding of the culture of the company and the specific performance expectations of the client. Putting the scope of the role down in writing, allows the line manager and the HR partner to be sure the search firm understands what is needed. It also allows everyone involved in the process to clarify any ambiguity, carefully consider exactly what they expect from a position, and resolve contradictions between the expectations for the role and the specific measures of success. A quality recruiter should be willing and able to do this before the search begins.

HR professionals will know this is done properly when the line manager, as well as everyone else involved in the hiring process, can read the final document and say, “This is exactly what we want and if you bring us someone who fits this document we will hire them.” Potential qualified candidates should react to the document by saying, “I know exactly what they want to do, why they want to do it, what it takes to do the job and how performance will be measured. This document is clear and specific.”

Most clients and candidates experience the process of executive search as bumpy and chaotic, which leaves everyone feeling uncomfortable. Many recruiters stumble from candidate to candidate, working their existing network of contacts or some internal database. When these efforts lead to dead ends, the search grinds to a halt. Both clients and candidates are left to question the value provided by the recruiter.

Quality search consultants understand that a strong search process has structure for the search firm and transparency for the client. It allows the client—both line manager and HR professional—to have timely input, provide valuable guidance, help steer and direct the search, and ensure a successful outcome. It requires a team effort. Any issue, confusion or misunderstanding must quickly surface and be resolved. Lack of commitment and engagement by the client is the best way to ensure poor search results. A well-defined process with clear benchmarks and deliverables at each critical step is the optimal way to keep an assignment on track towards success.

There is a point in a search process where focus shifts from the client to the candidate. Culture and chemistry are why a candidate succeeds in a given position. The candidate with the best cultural fit with the company and ease with the style of management will be most likely to

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succeed. It is always a mistake to place any candidate, who is not a good fit for the company, the manager and the role. And these concerns are just as important for any candidate.

When it comes to candidates, Quorum is in the business of dreams, aspirations and ambitions. If we can match these dimensions with the strategic and tactical objectives of a client, the results are always powerful. Consequently, our focus is on developing a holistic view of candidates, in terms of their lives, not just their professional interests. We also caution candidates, that if for any reason they hear a little voice telling them that something is not right, to tell us. The process stops until that voice is carefully heard.

Fees are probably the most volatile issue. The rage clients feel is profound. They become angry when they have paid an entire fee upfront only to have the search drag on for months with few quality candidates and sometimes no placement. Quality search consultants get paid as they perform. They believe clients should not pay full fees for assignments that are not completed. Honest and fair dealing is important for both the client and the search consultant.

On the other hand, when the circumstances of a position change, clients must be open with the search consultant and the candidates about the change and the reason for the change. Problems and issues with the role or the company need to be disclosed up front as the assignment begins, not once the candidate joins the firm. Many search consultants feel angry when clients and their HR professionals try to hire candidates presented behind the search firm's back, attempt to renegotiate fees and/or reinterpret retainer agreements after candidates have been hired.

Quorum believes that clients should be charged for work performed based on agreed objectives and benchmarks. In return, clients and their HR partners have an obligation to work openly, honestly and diligently with their service provider to facilitate the completion of the assignment.

There are many good professional search firms dedicated to quality service and strong client relationships. Clients should be open with these firms, share issues and concerns, allow these firms to help them and, finally, let them demonstrate the level and quality of service they can provide. Quorum wants relationships with its clients. This means we will do what is right and best for our clients, and we hope and expect that our clients will do the same in return.

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