

How to Work With Headhunters

DeRosa, Anthony; Acosta, Deborah . Wall Street Journal (Online) ; New York, N.Y. [New York, N.Y]08 Jan 2021.

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FULL TEXT

In brief

- * Headhunters work for the company that hired them, not for you.
- * Talk to the people in your network to track down who is recruiting for particular roles.
- * Build a rapport and offer help to headhunters for benefits down the line.
- * Know which headhunters to avoid.

What is a headhunter?

There is a distinction between headhunters and recruiters. Headhunters tend to be more singularly focused on filling a particular role and actively seek out the perfect person for the job, whereas recruiters tend to work on multiple jobs at once and rely more on candidates finding them. "You're going out to find people. You're not waiting for them to come to you," says Matt Clarke, managing director at recruitment firm Blackwood Associates LLC. "There are some people who are more proactive and there are others that are reactive. It's more about the proactive approach."

A headhunter usually tries to convince a high-performing worker to leave a job for a competitor, according to Mr. Clarke. "You're recruiting someone out of their current seat based on a referral or knowing that they're good in their current space." This can be more challenging than trying to find a role for someone who is looking for a new job. "They're happy and you're motivating them to make a move."

Do headhunters focus on people who are mid-level or higher?

Not necessarily. While some headhunting firms specialize in filling C-suite jobs, others fill jobs that require less experience. "It spans where you are in your career. It's really more about your company's focus," says Mr. Clarke. Headhunters don't work for you, they work for an employer.

Headhunters primarily work with companies looking to fill a position. If you aren't getting a call back from a headhunter, you are not alone. A headhunter's focus in most cases is to devote his or her time to the client, not a job seeker who isn't an active target. "Most recruiters work for companies that are paying them to find candidates," says Stacey Staaterman, a leadership and career coach based in New York. "So, what's most important for people on the job-search side is that they need to be sensitive to the fact that they're not the first priority."

Why would a company hire a headhunter?

Companies hire headhunters for a variety of reasons. "It could be that it's a messy situation, so they need a recruiter to sell it," says Roy Cohen, a career coach and author of "The Wall Street Professional's Survival Guide: Success Secrets of a Career Coach." Another reason could be the seniority of the role. Mr. Cohen says that recruiting for a very senior-level position, such as a division president or chief executive, can be a heavy lift and companies may prefer to use a headhunter with the expertise to find the ideal person from a "large universe of potential candidates." If you are contacted by a headhunter, it helps to ask tough questions about why the role is open, because some of those reasons might not be positive for a candidate. "Be careful what you wish for when you do work with a recruiter. It could be they've been hired because the situation is one that has been problematic," says Mr. Cohen. "Maybe there's turnover, maybe the boss is a screamer. There could be all sorts of reasons they've hired this recruiter."

How to find a headhunter to work with.

Since most headhunters are looking at a fairly small pool of people, you may have to get creative to get yourself on their radar. One way is to triangulate the jobs they are trying to fill by speaking to people in your own network in similar roles. "It's about networking with people who work in the field that you're looking for a job, because it's likely that if you're talking to people who are in visible positions in your field, they will have received calls from recruiters," says Mr. Cohen. Find out who the headhunters are that are targeting them. There is often a virtuous cycle of people referring headhunters to their contacts when they themselves are not interested in positions. You may need to tell people you trust in your network that you are open to talking to headhunters. Mr. Cohen says that this strategy is preferable to emailing several recruiters en masse. It is useful to develop a relationship with a headhunter that might pay off later. If you happen to be contacted by one for a position you have no interest in, think about how you might be able to help him or her with a solid reference to someone else in your own network. "I always tell people if they're looking, identify a few headhunters that you can establish a bit of a rapport with so that they kind of know you and stay in touch," says Ms. Staaterman. "Don't be annoying—be helpful. If you're not right for a position, give the headhunter a few names. That always creates goodwill."

What are headhunters looking for and what are their motivations?

Headhunters look for high-quality candidates—who in most cases are already employed—and try to convince them to leave for a better job. Usually, they are trying to meet specific requirements from the company that hired them to fill the job, but sometimes they may look for less obvious candidates who might be an interesting wildcard.

"There is a growing interest in having nontraditional candidates on the candidate list," says Ms. Staaterman. "The term is a 'cultural add.' It's essentially trying to bring something different into the organization," she says. "Thanks to companies like Google, Facebook, Amazon, Apple, we have more awareness [that] having a diversity of thought, for many companies, is a good thing."

How disreputable headhunters can harm you and how to avoid them.

You need to be smart about which headhunters you are willing to work with, says Mr. Clarke. You should make sure they are not trying to hire you for a job that someone else left due to an unresolved problem, such as the work culture or bad management. You also need to avoid working with headhunters who aren't thoughtful about the jobs they submit you for. "If they're just sending your résumé around to different firms—let's use banks, for example—some headhunter gets your résumé, or some recruiter gets your résumé and they're not professional, [or] good at what they do, and they start sending you around to different companies without telling you where your résumé has been sent in, that can absolutely crush your chances of getting jobs at certain places," says Mr. Clarke.

What to read next

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