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Rethink How You Work With Recruiting Firms



by David Carpe CareerJournal.com

Introduction

When you blast off your resume to thousands of search firms, where do you think it goes? Not to the partners it's typically addressed to. Instead, your documents are routed to the firm's research department where they may be coded and filed in an electronic database according to such attributes as industry, function, location and education.

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Search-firm partners, usually people with industry experience and contacts, spend much of their time trying to secure assignments from client companies. They generally don't review over-the-transom inquiries unless they need something to do or you're someone who might hire them down the road.

But job hunters become aggrieved when their letters and phone calls aren't returned. They start to gripe -- "Search-firm partners get a third of someone's salary just for making a few calls" -- instead of finding ways to get on their radar screen.

I've been a search-firm researcher, trained other researchers and managed search-firm operations. The following tips about the inner workings of retained-recruiting firms may help you to improve your chances of speaking directly with influential recruiters.

For starters, it helps to know who does the heavy lifting. After the partner wins an assignment, he or she often won't reappear in the process until it's time to interview a slate of finalists for the job. What kicks into gear when the

search is started is the research team. They start reviewing the firm's internal database of "known quantities" and making a list of organizations where "passive" candidates might be working. These folks are those who hold what employers would consider the "right" job titles at the "right" organizations -- for instance, a client's competitors -- but they typically aren't actively looking for new positions.

Who Does the Research?

Research associates can range from recent liberal-arts grads to librarian types. Many firms have reduced spending in this area because of the recession but may still claim to have phenomenal research abilities. In fact, a cottage industry of outside researchers was born in the 1980s to serve search firms. They're primarily former search-firm employees who earn more as search contractors than being on the payroll.

After candidates are identified, another employee -- perhaps an associate -- starts calling or e-mailing potential candidates to determine if they match the required qualifications and if they are interested in pursuing the role. Top associates are known for their ability to sell reluctant stars "into" an opportunity. The associate's goal is to identify four to seven qualified candidates for the partner to interview in person or by videophone.

Sometimes associates haven't met personally with the client and don't know certain facts about the opening. If you get a call at this point, don't get frustrated. Just ask focused questions related to the job's most essential requirements and try to present yourself as fitting the specifications so you can speak with a partner. Be prepared to customize your resume and rewrite critical descriptions.

Finding candidates is an art, not a science. Some firms emphasize research and execution, others value networks of contacts, and still others offer something in between -- a blend of best-in-class research and global contacts.

Whet Their Appetites

To attract notice, you're better off ditching the meaty resume and offering finger foods.

Provide an executive summary of your experience in your cover e-mail and shortened resume. Make sure the researcher can review your resume without having to open an e-mail attachment. With the incredible volumes of unsolicited inquiries they receive, they simply don't have time to open every attachment.

Remember, research associates who may not understand what you do will read your material. To determine what to include, think about what a search firm might need or want to know. Visualize a position description of your

desired role and highlight aspects of your experience that relate to these specifications. Think about the qualities or accomplishments that got you hired into your most recent role and mention those as well.

For instance, if you're a corporate finance executive with a solid pedigree seeking a top financial job, write a three-sentence summary about your financial reporting, analyst relations, international or transaction experience and staff-management abilities.

Keep it short, with an eye on the imaginary position description ("must have 10-plus years' experience in treasury management, international currency exposure"). Researchers won't understand something like "led integration of derivative transactions into one global position...managed forward curves in four sub-markets for power."

Recruiters don't want to inadvertently eliminate a serious "player," so do brag about your references and drop names whenever possible, but use good judgment. Assume you're a star and never underestimate your desirability.

Back to Basics

When working with recruiters, keep it simple. Work with just a few quality firms. Study their Web sites to learn their industry and functional focus, and read up on their current openings. Make sure you fit the right parameters before e-mailing a resume. Good firms receive new assignments continuously, even when the economy is poor, so learn the name of firm researchers and send them your information regularly so you'll stay on their radar screens. Try not to burden them with phone calls until they reach out to you directly.

Remember, recruiters need you. You have clout because in this industry, regardless of market conditions, the "product" -- you -- can always get up and walk away from the buyer.

-- Mr. Carpe is a principal of [Clew LLC](#) in Boston, which applies competitive-intelligence practices to strategic human resources.

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