

# So you want to be an Executive Recruiter?

## All That Money for Making a Few Phone Calls

By Paul Hawkinson - Published in The Fordyce Letter, 6/98  
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At least once a day I receive a call from someone asking how to get into the executive recruiting business. I can honestly tell 90% of them to look elsewhere for a career just from listening to them. Most have no idea what our business is really about except for having read about some of the major conquests by a few of the profession's trophy hunters. It sounds so romantic, so mysterious.....all that "behind the potted palm" stuff while stalking the right person for that senior level job and a five or even six figure fee for getting them together.

But what are the key ingredients needed for success? First and foremost is the ability to communicate well. It is, after all, a sales job. You have to understand that no employer wants to pay a fee to hire someone. They all think they can find that pearl amongst those many smelly oysters on their own or through the more traditional methods (ads, employee referrals, the internet, etc.)....and very often they can. The executive recruiter is often engaged only after the company has exhausted all other efforts and then they hire a recruiter to present only those oysters that are guaranteed to contain a pearl.

And how does the recruiter find these companies? The old fashioned way. Making endless cold calls in the hope that they'll be lucky enough to stumble across that one desperate person with a critical opening and a willingness to pay a hefty fee to get someone on the job. It's known as smiling and dialing. It's telecommunication at its most basic level. The vast majority of openings handled by executive recruiters are for mid-level managerial and professional jobs. As a percentage, very few work at the boardroom or senior executive suite level.

If you like to spar with corporate gatekeepers to reach someone of substance, and you enjoy hearing "No" 95% of the time, you'll love the recruiting business. Even in today's booming economy when recruiters have more openings than qualified people to fill them, the start-up rookie months can be brutal. That's why 95 out of 100 people who enter this business never make it past the first year. In my 25 years in the business, I hired several hundred people who thought they could make it big in the business. Only thirteen of them stuck around long enough to be called successful.

One who did survive and prosper is Roberta Weller of Las Vegas-based Weller & Associates. Entering the business from a public accounting firm in 1973, she has carved out a unique niche in executive search. She noted, "For those that last past that magic first year, it's an addictive business....and a very rewarding one. There is no sweeter sound than having a candidate for whom you searched long and hard say "Yes" to an offer from an employer/client who has probably changed the job specs a dozen times during the search and turned down super people for frivolous reasons."

Not everyone can aspire to the million dollar annual earnings of the search superstars. They have cultivated their client base for many years and know, probably better than anyone else, who the makers and shakers are in their niche. Beyond the starkly written job descriptions they're asked to fill, they know the nooks and crannies of their client companies as well as their corporate cultures and personalities. They know which ones won't hire a person taller than the boss....or with more hair....or who look exclusively for "pretty" people. They know which schools and degrees are acceptable and how to read between the lines of a job requisition to determine what the employer really wants. Even then, hirers often hire the least qualified because they like them better (the "halo effect") or because they interview better (the "actor factor").

The successful recruiter is one who provides solutions to client problems, not just "filling slots" in an organizational chart. A successful searcher knows the marketplace better than any employer and is able to find people from venues totally unknown to a tunnel-visioned client. That's why they're paid the big bucks. And that's why the process from neophyte to search celebrity is a long and often bumpy journey.

But the ability to communicate means more than being an Elmer Gantry. It is using your expertise to paint persuasive word pictures to both clients and candidates. To understand a company's needs almost requires that you've "been there, done that." To convince a happily employed professional to become a candidate requires persuasion and extraordinary evaluation skills.

Oh, there have been people with the ability to learn enough of an industry's buzzwords or jargon to get them in the front door, but sooner or later they have to pass the final exam and that test comes when you present your finalists for the job.

What appears on the surface to be a relatively simple business can get incredibly complex. While the process itself is basic, the subtle sales skills that separate the superstars from the also-rans boils down to extensive industry-specific training and education as well as that "sixth sense" which only comes from a long indoctrination period in the trenches which is so necessary to turn the rookie recruiter from a technician into an artist.

While executive recruiting is an A-B-C business (actually there are about 30 steps which must be followed), even following the formula can produce unexpected results. The perfect candidate can say goofy things the interview. Or the company can decide in mid-search to dramatically change the job specifications, flushing weeks of search work down the drain. Other catastrophes can abort the effort at any stage of the process.

We're not talking here about an "employment agency" who tries to find a job for an "applicant." We're talking about smiling and dialing around the marketplace to find a company with a critical opening so you can begin the task of finding that happily-employed and upwardly mobile executive who might consider making a move. This requires the ability to conduct a research project that may turn up a hundred or more possibles who must all be called to sift and screen the field down to a few finalists for presentation to the employer.

I once telephone interviewed an Oklahoma-based oil company advertising executive whose qualifications seemed ideal for a Minnesota-based silk-slipper ad agency client. References all extolled his mastery of the advertising art. The client telephone interviewed him and, being equally impressed, decided to fly him to Minneapolis. When he stepped off the plane to be met by two of the ad agency's execs, he was wearing a ten-gallon hat, a buckskin jacket, bright yellow cowboy boots and sported a large handlebar mustache and no teeth. They never made it out of the airport.

So what makes for a successful executive recruiter, aside from the basic knowledge gained through training:

**A glint in the eye** - otherwise known as enthusiasm. Executive recruiters are always "on." They are the ultimate 'spin doctors.' Without being abrasive, the executive recruiter must cheerfully be the conduit between two parties who are each trying to competitively advance their own, often disparate agendas. The ranks of successful executive recruiters are filled with those who always view the glass as half full.

**Patience** - Some searches are no-brainers, but most take twists and turns never imagined. Trying to coordinate the schedules of two or more busy executives to arrange for the interviews involved can take an interminable amount of time. Even if everything goes well for both candidate and hirer, decision time for both can string out the process. For the company: Should we make an offer? To which candidate? For what salary? If it's a committee decision (and most are) it can take even longer. For the candidate: Will they make an acceptable offer? Will this career move really be in my best interests? How will my family

feel about it? As the facilitator, the executive recruiter must have the confidence and trust of both these parties to move the process along without appearing to be self-serving.

**Money motivated** - Executive recruiters should not be confused with social workers. While altruism may be a lofty goal in some pursuits, the point of the exercise for the executive recruiter is to collect a fee. This does not mean that you try to force-fit the wrong person with the client, but this mating game goes far beyond just arranging blind dates. Ultimately, someone must agree to uproot themselves to take the job and a corporate culture may have to be recalibrated to accommodate a new executive with innovative notions not necessarily compatible with the status quo.

**Creative** - Does the job really need a clone of the previous jobholder or might it be better filled with an "out-of-the-box" hire? Does the right hire really need to come from a direct competitor or might the hirer be better served by attracting someone from a peripheral industry? More and more companies are looking outside of their traditionally tapped talent pools for the right person. The ability of the executive recruiter to suggest other possibilities has benefited many clients by introducing candidates with new perspectives.

**Resourceful** - While not every search for a new executive starts from scratch, extensive research is the foundation of every new effort. Knowing where to look, both inside and outside of the traditional or logical spheres of influence, is pivotal. And one must be resourceful in their ability to reach those ultimate decisionmakers who are frequently protected by many levels of naysayers

**Familiarity with the business segment or functional discipline where they plan to work** - A mismatch between an executive recruiter's background and the specialty in which they plan to serve can add months to a successful outcome.

**Empathy** - Hiring is a stressful task for an employer. So is changing jobs. An understanding of these pressures is crucial to mission of facilitating the process whereby both employer and potential new hire come out as long-term winners.

**Observant** - Executive recruiters need the ability to see things as they really are rather than what the employer or candidate would have you believe. Companies often have no clue about the realities of the marketplace from which they seek to hire. Likewise, candidates who have not been on the job market for many years may have 'perception' problems about their true worth and the actual value of their experience. Only someone like an alert and interactive executive recruiter can recognize symptoms and correct problems likely to derail a deal before they go irretrievably off the track.

**True grit** - A high tolerance for rejection is a must, from start to finish. Nothing in the executive recruiting profession can be left to chance. No steps can be short-circuited. Neglect has caused more deals to go sour than any other reason.

**Resilience** - Successful executive recruiters usually handle from 8 to 12 assignments at a time. Like a juggler, there are always balls in the air. It's a high wire act with no net. Deals that have been worked on for weeks can suddenly evaporate into thin air, but there's no time for despair because, for all the time being spent to recruit new candidates and reference check them, there is always the necessity to smile and dial for the next assignment to take its place.

**Ability to negotiate** - From the beginning of the process (convincing an employer who will trust you to fill the job or even letting you initially talk to a hiring authority) until the hopefully happy conclusion, the executive recruiter is the mediator, the go-between and the diplomat who must balance everyone's interests to reach a successful completion.

If you possess these attributes and think you want a crack at the big bucks which can be earned in executive recruiting,, where does one start?

Going into business for yourself is an option but, with no experience in the field, failure is almost inevitable. The landscape is littered with talented salespeople, human resourcers, ex-executives and other wannabes who I have tried to forge a career in executive recruiting without the proper foundation. No college or university offers a degree (or even a class) in executive recruiting. It is a learned skill, and the best place to learn it is by doing it with a mentor in an existing executive recruiting firm.

My recommendation is to call a dozen hiring executives to ask which are the top three recruiting firms they use or respect. You'll find the same firms mentioned many times over. Call these recruiting firms for an appointment. If they see the same attributes in you that you see in yourself, they'll probably offer you a chance to get in on one of the best professions on the planet.

Executive recruiting is a \$6-8 billion dollar business. Nothing to sneeze at. It has grown dramatically since I first entered it in the late 50's. I expect it to continue to grow in good times and bad. Companies have learned that its worth is far more than its cost, especially as the nation's firms re-engineer and restructure their corporate architectures.

Successful executive recruiters are forced to turn away business every day. Second and third-tier hirers with a fee discounting mentality are finding their requests rejected by executive recruiters who are too busy serving the cream of the crop....those well-regarded employers who have come to understand the value of a service that has a proven impact on their corporate wellbeing.

Is there room for new blood? You betcha! But before cavalierly considering executive recruiting as a profession, one must understand the multifaceted skills required for success. Those who do can look forward to a very rewarding career.