

This article continues “Keys to Successful Executive Level Talent Acquisition” and focuses on the process of attracting the very best professional candidates for a role. As discussed in Steps I & II, companies frequently are motivated to find passive candidates because they have an increased likelihood of being high-performers. However, typical avenues such as job postings and social media campaigns addressed to job seekers will not be sufficient. If candidates are active in these arenas then, by their very nature, they are not “passive”. Truly passive candidates are not on job boards. They are not “liking” company employment pages on Facebook and they are not following potential employers on Twitter. Rather, they are gainfully employed, keeping their heads down, and doing great work.

These passive candidates are the ones that are the most highly sought after. The reason is that the best candidates, the majority of time, are already working and they are the people that are adding the most value to their organization. When someone is out of work, the hiring team must ascertain why that individual was let go. This is difficult because a candidate will naturally paint their departure in the best light. They will never admit to being fired for not adding sufficient value, for managing conflict poorly, for not working well in a team setting etc. This is often the true reason for their dismissal. On the other hand, they may have been excellent performers caught-up in a bad corporate situation and let go through no fault of their own. There is simply less cause for doubt when hiring a passive candidate.

With truly passive candidates, the recruiter needs to actively seek that person out and engage them in conversation. This is not a task for the faint of heart or easily discouraged. The process takes hard work, perseverance, patience and outright doggedness. It requires multiple touches that provide quick and valuable information that is worthwhile for the passive candidate to absorb. It involves email, social media (such as LinkedIn) and good old-fashioned cold-calling. It is not unusual for it to take five or more independent instances of outreach before an individual passive candidate comes back to a recruiter ready to engage in dialogue. As with any other sales process, patient and polite persistence often wins the day. A recent Harvard Business Review publication indicates that an individual involved in phone-based sales activity typically averages a 90% contact rate after the 6th reach-out. Therefore, it is important that the recruiter have the flexibility to speak whenever is convenient for the candidates which often translates into conversations early in the morning or later in the evening when the normal workday has finished.

For effective executive talent acquisition, the opportunity needs to be sold over and over and over again. As discussed in Step II, a well-researched database of 150 qualified candidates is required for a typical position. This database most often consists of individuals at direct competitors of the hiring organization as well as people in adjacent businesses. This increases the likelihood that they will have the requisite experience and skills to thrive within the new role.

From the vantage point of the passive professional, the best time to look for a job is when you have a job and are totally happy with your role. When candidates are successful and happy, exploring new and different opportunities presents a win-win-win scenario.

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Step 3: Going to Market

Author: Andrew Wolkstein



The professional feels like a winner if the end choice is to stay in his/her current position. Making the decision to stay in a current role reinforces that this position is appealing, engaging, and worth keeping. It is a “win” decision. Making the decision to move to a new opportunity is also a “win” decision. It reinforces that the passive candidate has skills that might be more highly valued and leveraged elsewhere. It’s also a win for a new employer who knows that they are getting a candidate that is making the decision for all of the right reasons. These candidates would not move for “any” role, just the “right” role. Desperation for a change is not part of this win-win-win scenario. However, as referenced above, it is important to note that there are instances where great candidates are caught in circumstances that lead them to be unemployed. A good recruiter will always talk to the best active candidates as part of the overall process. They simply must employ healthy skepticism in this situation.

All potential candidates must make good decisions based on their professional desire. Is the new role appealing because they will have a bigger title, more responsibility, new areas of focus, an opportunity to have greater influence? Alternately, they may be eager to join a smaller or larger business. No matter the desire, they are bound to have some reservations and objections. To overcome these challenges, the recruiter must provide a compelling narrative describing the position and the company. Exceptional candidates don’t typically aspire to be bricklayers; they want to be cathedral builders; and the recruiter can help them attain this goal.

People *love* to hear the story of interesting companies. In fact, eye-movement studies demonstrate that when candidates are reading a description of a new potential position, the vast majority of their focus goes to the description of the company. Less attention is paid to a position’s requirements and responsibilities. Right away, the candidate begins to mentally try on the new organization. Again, the initial focus is not directed toward the technical components of the position but instead is focused on whether the prospect of being a part of this new company sparks excitement.

The best recruiters effectively harness the story that sparks enthusiasm. They paint the picture with elements including corporate culture, value proposition, company history and inspiring trajectory. And yes, ultimately the recruiter provides an actual job description.

The recruiter must share the story with as many qualified candidates as possible. It is critical to cast a wide net and pull in an array of potential candidates. After all, the task is not just to fill a position with *a* qualified candidate. Rather, the task is to fill the position with *the best* qualified candidate. A full range of technology must be used. In addition to phone calls, a recruiter will use email, social media, and smart phone technology. Video is also a highly effective medium where the hiring company can tell their own story and highlight, in their own words, the value propositions being offered. Potential candidates can often easily view a 90-second video even when on the go during their very busy daily routines. This method has proven to be very beneficial in engaging passive candidates.

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Persistence is needed to make multiple pitches with fresh communications to each individual in the database. When done right, the recruiter will win the opportunity to have an authentic, engaging conversation about the hiring organization. Potential candidates want to be inspired and hear about forward-thinking opportunities.

With all this discussion of selling, it is essential to not get carried away and lose touch with reality. Candidates (whether at the executive level or not) don't want to have anything to do with a slick-sounding salesperson. Honesty and humility in a recruiter's approach can truly be the difference maker as a candidate is determining how far to take a conversation and with which recruiter. Remember that great candidates are often being approached by multiple recruiters simultaneously for different positions. At times it is the recruiter's approach and demeanor that lead a candidate to return their call, as opposed to someone else's. The potential candidate wants and needs to know about any troubles that are likely to be encountered in the position being discussed. What are the potential pain points, challenges and new opportunities? These conversations all need to be non-threatening and authentic. Again, the candidate is just exploring the idea of a new position, mentally trying it on and visualizing a new role. It isn't until solid interest is expressed that the formal vetting portion of recruitment takes place. Here too, the key is authentic and honest conversation. The recruiter has been learning about the potential candidate as the opportunity has been sold. In those communications, has the potential candidate shown professional comportment? Is the candidate prompt and courteous? How do they communicate about the challenges they encounter in their current position?

The actual vetting process involves a higher level of formality. A resume is needed. The candidate's abilities need to be assessed for technical suitability and, even more importantly, their cultural fit needs to be evaluated. To reiterate, the best recruiters find **the best** candidate, not just **a** qualified candidate. An effective search begins with a pool of "approximate" candidates. Of these, the vast majority will either not be interested in making a change or they will not be perfectly aligned with the position. Ultimately, an effective recruitment process should yield 3 to 5 A-level candidates for a hiring company to take through the formal interview process. From this small pool, the successful candidate will be selected.

Now that interest has been generated and candidates are really becoming enthusiastic about investigating and pursuing the opportunity, it's time for the recruiter to switch gears from primarily selling the opportunity to focusing on candidate fit. Fit involves both capability for the role and cultural alignment with the company. Step 4 in this series will discuss the vetting process.

About the Author:

Andy is an Executive Vice President, Search Consultant at Robinson Resource Group. Andy entered the search business as an associate and worked his way up to his current role as EVP, Search Consultant. Andy has an intimate knowledge of every facet of the search process enabling him to successfully fill even the most challenging assignments. In addition to his search experience, he has extensive hands-on experience in market positioning, growth strategy development and execution, and general operations from his years in business.

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From an industry standpoint, Andy has broad and deep expertise in the engineering and construction field. He also has comprehensive experience in information security, diversified industrial/manufacturing, recreational products, hospitality & entertainment, and professional services. Search assignments have included most functions including human resources, sales/business development, marketing, public relations, project/program management, procurement, finance, general management, and C-suite.

Andy is a member of Society of American Military Engineers (SAME) where he has served as the past membership chair. Additionally, he is a member of Vistage, HRMAC, and The Executives' Club of Chicago (ECC).