KEYS TO SUCCESSFUL EXECUTIVE LEVEL TALENT ACQUISITION

Step 4: Vetting Candidates

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This article discusses the transition that a recruiter navigates as they move from "selling" the opportunity as discussed in Step 3: Going to Market, to "vetting" the candidates in order to determine potential fit. To be sure, this is not a wholesale pivot as candidates must continue to receive the message that the opportunity they are entertaining is highly desirable. With this in mind, selling starts to take a back seat to vetting.

Faced with a solid group of more than 100 prospective candidates, how does the recruiter significantly filter the larger group of prospects to those that represent a more appropriate fit for the position? Certainly, tactical and technical requirements are a first filter. For example, if an MBA is required and an MBA is lacking, the candidate can be eliminated ***unless*** s/he has an overwhelming qualification to keep that candidate in the pool. This would have to be an extraordinary factor that would irrefutably lend credibility to the candidate. Another example could be if the position requires 15 years of experience with at least five years directly managing a team. If a candidate has only 9 years of experience with two years in a management position, the candidate can confidently be eliminated. It is important to keep in mind, however, that there are relatively few of these hard and fast filters.

People who spend a lot of time reading resumes and interviewing candidates accumulate a learned wisdom that is drawn upon when considering whether an individual is "in" or "out". They do not simply see the individual accomplishments, but the story that leads to, enables, and stems from stated accomplishments. A resume outlines a person's history which can, in turn, be the best predictor of future success. As a recruiter reads about an individual's background, they must think critically. Even if the content is entirely expressed in a positive light, as it likely will and should be, there are often less glowing undercurrents that need to be brought to the surface. It is helpful to review resumes as if they are trailers to a movie. They have been designed to stimulate the reader's interest and to portray them in a positive light. Yet, as we all know, movies frequently don't live up to the enthusiasm generated by a preview.

For example, what if a resume shows a candidate has changed companies every 2 to 3 years? The recruiter must learn of the reason for the frequent change. If each two year segment is highlighted by bullet points describing valuable contributions, why would that company have let the individual leave and/or why did the candidate want to? What's more, the recruiter must evaluate the resume in the context of the overall industry in which the candidate works. The digital economy, which is fast changing with new companies entering the market and others fading-out with great regularity, may require more career moves than a career in finance. More frequent moves at the early stages of an individual's career can be common or even expected. Start-ups and cutting edge companies (frequently backed by PE or VC funds) often change hands, especially when they are succeeding. Perhaps this was at the root of candidate job transitions.

Apart from tenure in past positions, other cues from the candidate's resume are important. Does the resume show that the candidate needed to change employers in order to obtain a promotion or was the candidate recognized by his/her company and promoted from within? Does the resume speak to mentoring others or helping reports recognize their goals? Indicating revenue growth or increased productivity is great.

It is worth looking into the broader market in order to determine if everyone in the industry was doing the same thing or if this was truly a “stand-out” accomplishment. A recruiter often evaluates proven, tried-and-true, successful candidates who are thriving in their current and familiar environment. While vetting a candidate, it is essential to size-up their ability to move into a new position at a new company and to continue their growth trajectory in a different culture and environment. It is important to explore with the candidate how they have successfully transitioned companies in the past. What worked well at these times and what might they do differently if they were to join your hiring company? Interestingly, while displaying lengthy tenure with a single employer and good career growth is impressive, it makes it difficult to determine how this person will do at adapting to a new culture and corporate environment.

Assessments can be another vital tool. For example, the Leadership Effectiveness Analysis (LEA) allows a hiring team to evaluate a candidate’s behavioral leadership tendencies compared to previously identified successful behaviors within the hiring organization. Once the synergies and gaps are identified, thoughtful interview questions can be devised which are based on qualitative data and the science of effective leadership, as opposed to boiler-plate interview questions. In leveraging the LEA, interviewers are able to explore a candidate’s behavioral tendencies in order to understand how successfully the candidate can deliver on broader categories of leadership such as creating a vision, developing followership, implementing the vision, following through, achieving results and team playing.

However, like other tools, assessments should not be the final determinate. For example, an assessment can place a candidate in the 25th percentile with regards to a specific behavior. However, when engaging the candidate in conversation, the individual may give examples that override concerns that are derived from the assessment scores. The interviewer can proceed knowing that they have probed effectively into an area of potential concern. An open-minded recruiter or member of a hiring team will ask the hard questions to get a more robust evaluation of the candidate.

As the recruiter sells the opportunity to the candidate, they study the demeanor candidates have displayed. How does the candidate communicate? How does the candidate carry him/herself? Just like the rest of life’s relationships, there is no substitute for sizing up a candidate with conversation.

At a search firm like RRG, the front line recruiter’s job is to be vigorous in aggregating candidates to obtain a viable pool and to generate data for comparison. From there, it is the search consultant’s job to whittle down potential candidates. This process is aided by the relativity and perspective gained from interacting with a larger pool of viable individuals. While resumes serve to get conversations and face to face meetings lined-up, it is the conversation that resumes enable which allow the recruiter/consultant/hiring manager to make the hard decisions as to who stays in the process and who is rejected. The surest arrow in the quiver is a good conversation which typically requires at least 45 minutes and often significantly longer. The focus of that conversation is to have the candidates walk through their background, their values, their motivations, their failures and successes, aspirations and objectives.

In conversation, it is important to gain historical perspective and not skip over the earliest stages of candidates' careers. Candidates' most innate coping mechanisms to challenges, their ability to strategize to achieve, their drive and determination and their ability to lead a team forward can be foreshadowed in their formative career experiences. A robust inquiry into these early experiences is necessary. Indeed, a revealing conversation may focus on candidates' college experiences or even pre-college experiences. For example, if a candidate was a first generation immigrant and the first family member to attend college, it is noteworthy. If a candidate worked high school or college jobs to cover college costs, it is noteworthy. It is the job of recruiter to flush out relevant information with regard to viable candidates and let the hiring manager be the ultimate decider of which candidate will be the best fit.

First jobs, first motivations, early lessons learned – they all imprint upon a candidate, and the recruiter needs to hear about those firsts. The recruiter seeks to hear how a candidate transitioned for the first time from contributing to a team within an organization to actually managing others. The transition to being a leader of others can be a wobbly experience. What important decisions did the candidate make in his/her emerging leadership role(s)? What were some of their failures? How did they learn from them? Who were their mentors and why were these more seasoned individuals so impactful? What lessons did the candidate take with them as they advanced into other opportunities? What strategies did they develop and implement and what was the impact? What shortcomings are they working on overcoming? What do they see as areas of strength? What are some of their biggest mistakes?

Vetting is a blend between job descriptions and role requirements, resume statements, the science of assessments, and deep dive conversations. Face-to-face engagement and actual handshakes are irreplaceable, but not always possible. Modern Skype or video conference technology is better than a faceless phone conversation, but there is no substitute for actually meeting with people.

As candidates are vetted, the recruiter must impress upon the hiring team to ask well thought out questions and to each discuss the open position with the candidates in the same terms. Viable candidates' enthusiasm can quickly unravel if someone within the hiring company tells them a contrary version of the organization's vision or a variant understanding of the open role. Often the hiring team will assign specific interview topics to team members' based on their area of expertise. A technical person should ask technical questions. Another team member could ask questions to discern a candidate's cultural fit. Another team member can ask questions about general business and financial acumen. When the team gets together to discuss their thoughts, they can create a thorough picture of the candidate and make the final decision regarding who to hire.

At this point, it is common to start discussing an offer. However, the "million dollar question" of cultural fit has not yet been addressed. Before going to offer, the hiring team must contemplate whether or not the finalist candidate will be a strong cultural fit. Without cultural alignment, all other qualifications are irrelevant. It is for this reason that cultural alignment will be the topic in the next installment - Step 5.

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.

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 post membership chair. Additionally, he is a member of Vistage, HRMAC, and The Executives' Club of Chicago (ECC).