

Reaching Out to Recruiters As You Work Your Way Up

By Sarah E. Needleman

Developing strong ties with executive recruiters can pay off. Many organizations rely on them for help in finding senior talent and negotiating job offers. We asked Kimberly Bishop, senior client partner in the New York office of Korn/Ferry International, for advice on how to initiate and nurture lasting relationships with search professionals. Prior to joining the Los Angeles-based search firm, Ms. Bishop was an executive vice president in the financial-services industry, responsible for recruiting talent and generating new business.

- **At what point in one's career should a person contact an executive recruiter and how?**

It's beneficial to build relationships with executive recruiters throughout your entire career. A good place to start is online. A lot of search firms have Web sites where candidates can enter information about themselves. They can make updates as their careers progress -- if they get new responsibilities, join a board or change jobs -- and the information is accessible by all of a firm's partners.

You also can ask people in your network if they know any executive recruiters who could be helpful to you and make an introduction. If you don't know anyone who has relationships with recruiters, research various search firms to determine which ones would be most beneficial to you and introduce yourself. You can reach out to their recruiters via phone or email. You may not always get an immediate response, but you have at least introduced yourself to the firm.

- **How often should you contact recruiters?**

Get in touch with recruiters whenever something significant has occurred in your career. If you made a job change, joined a board or won a big award, those are always good reasons to get back in touch with recruiters, versus just calling to say hello.

- **Should you approach more than one recruiter at a time?**

Yes. It's always beneficial to have a broad and robust network, so you can get different perspectives and feedback. There will be different opportunities in different places. Be targeted about who you're reaching out to. It's important to build relationships with those who specialize in your area of expertise, because they will be working on searches likely to interest you the most.

- **When talking with lower-level candidates with an eye on the corner office, what impresses you most?**

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I'm always impressed by someone who is really clear about what they want to do.

Candidates who have a high level of confidence and energy generally stand out. They know who they are and what they bring to the table and they show that they're really interested in the next opportunity and what the next step might be.

- **What kind of background does a person need to be considered for a CEO job?**

Generally, you need to have held roles in which you were responsible for growing and managing revenues within a company, as well as exposure to the actual operation of a business. Leadership is also important. You want to have broad exposure to leading all facets of a business -- finance, sales, product development and so forth. In today's business environment, CEO candidates need to understand corporate-governance issues, such as the Sarbanes-Oxley Act, business trends and key issues facing their industry. They also need to be creative and have critical-thinking skills when it comes to complex decision-making.

- **When talking with job candidates about pay, what's a common turn-off?**

When candidates are unwilling to share their current compensation with me or the hiring company. That isn't helpful because compensation is a key component of getting an offer. You want to have an open and honest dialogue with your recruiter, because that's how he or she can best support you and their client.

- **What's the best way to talk about your pay expectations without seeming greedy?**

As you talk about what you're looking for in your next role, it's OK to share your expectations. That's important for executive recruiters to know, because the last thing we want to do is take up your time or our client's time if we're not on the same page. Share what your expectations are and add to that why you think they're warranted based on the skills and added value you'd bring into the role.

- **What's a common question executives have about pay packages these days?**

A lot of questions that come up are about equity and bonus. Candidates want to really understand how a company measures the success that their compensation will be based on. They want to know the details of what will be expected of them for getting that bonus. Recently there's been a lot of conversation about benefits. Questions have surfaced around insurance and vacation time. Being very knowledgeable about all of these things is good for the candidate as well as the employer because it eliminates surprises.

- **If you're not happy with a pay offer, what's the best way to indicate this?**

This is why it's important to build relationships with recruiters, so you can be comfortable with being candid and straightforward about pay. Recruiters are there to help you be successful in the negotiation process.

- **When talking to candidates, what's a common turn-off?**

When you say you're going to send additional information and don't follow through. Not following through can be a deal-breaker, because it can give the impression that you're not interested in the opportunity and that's how you conduct yourself in business. Sometimes executives are extremely busy, and we understand that. What you need to do in that case is drop a quick note to say you're not able to get to it today, but will next week. Recently it took someone several weeks to follow up on any opportunity, and by that time it had already passed. Meanwhile, someone who was very interested in a [different] opportunity called and said he wouldn't be able to follow up on a client's request for three weeks because he was busy working on a transaction. The client was so interested in learning more about the candidate that he offered to wait until the candidate could resurface.

Another turn-off is when you call someone about a search you're working on, and they don't return the call. Maybe

it wasn't the right opportunity for them, but it's important to call back, because you show that you're responsive and interested in building a relationship with the recruiter. If you're not interested in the opportunity, the conversation will probably turn into one about you and your career. It's just another opportunity to strengthen the relationship between you and the recruiter.

-- Ms. Needleman is associate editor at CareerJournal.com.

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