

How to be headhunted

Discussion Group

Date: 3 November 2009

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Introduction

These key points were drawn from a Criticaleye Discussion Group, hosted by the career transition experts, **Penna**, and chaired by the respected executive search consultant, Valerie Stogdale. This is the third in a series of gatherings of Criticaleye Members, many of whom were in between roles, to assist and guide them in their pursuit of their next career move.

The objective of the afternoon was to provide the delegates with practical advice on how to present themselves to head-hunters and then to manage the ensuing process. The following subjects were elected by the participants for discussion:

- How to find the head-hunters that are right for you (and then to manage the relationship with them)
- Tips on getting noticed and getting on the shortlist
- How to avoid being pigeon-holed
- Key tips on compiling the ideal CV
- How to embark upon/plan a portfolio career

Find out who you are

It is a full time job Seeking a new position is not a part-time task. Manage it as such. Do your letters in the evening, have lunch at lunch time and make calls when people are at their desks.

But don't get depressed! It can be very lonely, so balance the job hunt with something you enjoy. Learn something new – use the time to develop/reinvent yourself.

Remember who you are Use the time to remind yourself who you are and, in the process, figure out what your 'brand' is. What role would you like to have?

Write down your career Write down your career chronologically in terms of what you have achieved and look for a pattern.

Get a personal 360 Find five referees and ask them, 'Where wouldn't you see me job wise?'; 'What words come to mind when you think of me?'; 'What role can/can't I do?'

Remember the good times Take eight feel-good instances from your career. Break it down. Why did you feel good? Is there a theme?

Most careers make more sense backwards Look up the Steve Jobs' Stanford Commencement Speech 2005 on YouTube.

No stigma There is no longer any real stigma attached to being unemployed . . . as long as you can explain why and what you have been doing while out of work.

Finding & managing the relationship with your head-hunter

Shop around Adopt a shotgun approach, rather than rifle fire: there is no magic bullet anyway. You shouldn't be *too* selective but, at the same time, don't include everyone. Try to find a favoured circle (chemistry is important in this). This will take some trial and error but must also be served by recommendations (from your own network, including other head-hunters).

Mix it up Pick boutiques as well as the large shops. It is a fragmented market, but often the real gems go to small firms you may never have heard of.

Get referred/recommended The head-hunter is far more likely to see you on spec if you have been recommended. Use your network ruthlessly to achieve this. This also applies to courting potential employers directly.

Hunt the head-hunter Once you find a good head-hunter, follow them from firm to firm (as a client and a candidate). They will appreciate it. As a client you may also get a deal on fees.

The Bible The head-hunters' bible is *The Executive Grapevine*. It is a good reference guide and great for validation. It is expensive but you can access it through places such as the IoD and outplacement organisations.

Have you hugged your head-hunter today? Treat your head-hunter like anyone else you value in your network: work on the relationship and remember that they need to feel appreciated just as much as you do. Send them a Christmas card for example and, generally, keep them updated.

Don't ignore head-hunters when you don't 'need' them Talk to them when you are in work and help them out when they call. They want time from you when they need it, just as you want time from them when you need it.

Know the talent Try to keep abreast of the good talent around you so that, when you are called by a head-hunter for referrals, you can offer some. They will consider you a useful source and feel more inclined not just to remember

you but to help you when you need it. Head-hunters operate in much the same way as journalists in this respect: a frequent and trusted source is highly valuable to them.

Getting shortlisted

Shortlists are short There is (certainly at the moment) a lot of talent out there and most shortlists have three to four candidates on them. It's competitive.

The perfect candidate There is no such thing. For all sides it is a game of compromise so put your best foot forward, 'spin' the negatives *but...*

Be honest, natural and relaxed Make sure that you live up to the CV (don't overstretch) or you will be found out. Be natural and confident. Relax.

Be smart and prepared It may sound obvious, but don't be scruffy. Look the part. And prepare thoroughly.

Be enthusiastic Show that you want it: be enthusiastic. A smile and some energy can compensate for any shortcomings *but...*

Don't be desperate There is a fine line between enthusiasm and desperation. Don't cross it. Maintain a certain level of detachment.

Say thank you Drop a line to the head-hunter afterwards (probably by email) to say thank you and say how much you enjoyed it. Also, don't be afraid to mention something that you feel you may have missed in the interview.

"Call me in a year" There is about a three to six month cycle on all head-hunters' activities so there is no point in telling a head-hunter that you will be available in 6-12 months. It won't register.

Long notice periods Most companies will aim to recruit someone three months in advance. As a result, try not to have a six month notice period. Negotiate it down so as to be more attractive to head-hunters when the time comes.

Timeframes Try to get a feeling for the timescale of an assignment – particularly when the shortlist is due to be presented. That way you won't hound the head-hunter too early when the phone stops ringing.

Avoid being pigeon-holed

It is easy to put a square peg in a square hole Bear in mind that, for the head-hunter on a deadline, it is easier to stick to the path than to go off-piste with an unusual candidate. Some head-hunters may put a pear in with the requested box of apples, but most won't unless the rationale is very clear.

Present yourself properly on your CV On average, head-hunters will spend 10-40 seconds reading a CV - so make sure that, to avoid being type cast, you write your CV according to how you want to be labelled (and be succinct).

Send it to the right place Remember that head-hunters have different departments. If you send it to the wrong one it is likely either to be thrown away or sent back to the research department to be 'reallocated'. At which point it may be thrown away anyway. Do your homework.

The bottom drawer Whilst it is rarer these days, you may fall prey to the head-hunter who wants to keep you all to him/ herself (locking your CV in their bottom drawer). This could be a compliment as they may consider you a 'walking fee' not to be shared with their colleagues. However, this will clearly lengthen the odds of you being considered for assignments. Avoid this by finding the Head of Research in the firm and giving your CV to them as well – they are incentivised to ensure good candidates are coded correctly and made visible to the consultants.

On that note, don't get lost in the bowels of the database Your CV may be filed. Make sure that it is clear (and succinct) enough that it will be found again by the research department in relation to future searches.

Use the right words An experienced head-hunter will scan a CV for key words/references (e.g. 'P&L', 'International', etc). Make sure you are clear that the words that relate to how you wish to be perceived ARE ON THAT CV.

Time is money Bear in mind that a courtesy interview with a head-hunter is not billable and they would rather be spending time on a current assignment (or finding a new one). As such, make it interesting for them.

Be clear In your first meeting with a head-hunter be as clear and accurate as you can, in as short a time as possible, about who you are, what you want and why you should be considered for such roles. Make sure your CV is just as clear.

CV writing tips

There is no universally accepted formula – these are just some thoughts. A CV is a very personal document after all. Don't forget that.

The first page must be idiot proof Make it simple for the (potentially disinterested) head-hunter. Make it sharp, concise and well laid out. *Put your contact details on the front where they are obvious.*

The paragraph at the top Head-hunters don't want to know that you have three wonderful children, enjoy knitting or are a natural leader. They want a brutally honest, very short paragraph at the top of your CV explaining who you are and what you want. This will impact how they then scan the rest of the CV. Remember you may only have 10-40 seconds of their time.

Be consistent and honest And don't elaborate or stretch the truth. Most good head-hunters are perceptive enough to see right through you if you are not being straight. Make sure that your CV is consistent with your profiles on Linked-In, Facebook, etc.

Don't rely on the stapler The covering letter will be ditched rather than kept with the CV - so ensure that all the interesting stuff is on the CV itself.

Bios are not CVs A biography is a present and future statement – a precursor to a conversation perhaps. A CV is more of a past statement. Head-hunters are not interested in just having your bio – they want everything. Your power paragraph, though, at the top of your CV must be consistent with your bio – which you may be using on Linked-In, Criticaleye, etc.

Bland is best Don't overdo it with colours or fancy fonts. Ensure the font style and size is legible. The head-hunter who has to reach for his/her reading glasses may just as easily reach for the bin.

Some potential obstacles that you should consider It is a moot point whether or not you should include your nationality, gender, date of birth, marital status and race on your CV. It is important not to dehumanise the document entirely (you are trying to be authentic after all) but do consider that these things may raise prejudices from the reader that you don't necessarily have to risk.

No photos please – it is strongly recommended not to include a photo, even if it is professionally done as it is very unlikely to be a positive, even if you look like Claudia Schiffer or George Clooney. That might actually count against you.

References

Always be authentic You may have a list of referees, but a good head-hunter will always take out their own references on you. These will be from past employers – your subordinates, peers and superiors.

Letters of commendation Are not worth the paper they are written on. They will probably be ignored. References will only be taken directly.

Manage your exit Always exit a company gracefully as it will matter down the track when your background is being checked.

Linked-In et al.

Be a lion Linked-In Open Networkers are LIONS. You MUST be on Linked-In – “never resign from a club, never close a bank account ... don't leave Linked-In!” Linked-In is crucial as it is a source for head-hunters to find you

but also a way to network effectively. Twitter is the third largest job market in the world.

For information on how to manage these profiles see:

www.experteer.co.uk; www.exec-appointments.com; www.how-to-really-use-linkedin.com

Join Groups – on Linked-In.

Get recommended – by your contacts on Linked-In.

Consider, but be wary of outplacement These firms are very useful but have a mind that you do not become too 'production line' as a result of using them – be yourself. Check them out before writing a cheque.

Portfolio careers and moving sectors

A portfolio career is a real alternative A collection of varied small roles may be more satisfying, more financially rewarding and more stable than another big corporate role. The 'status' of the corporate role may be what you think you want/need but it may not be as fulfilling.

Find something you are passionate about Things start to happen to you as your interest and passion shines through. It makes your brand more visible (to you as well as to those around you).

Beware of tying yourself down If you are seeking the *big* role, then be careful not to take on, for example, a large NED role while doing so.

Transportable skills If you want to move into a new sector or discipline, then find something in your background that is relevant and will help this happen.

Internships Consider doing work for free as an intern in a new sector or field. This is a way in. Make yourself indispensable. Do it for free though as it is easier to leave and there will be no angles/grudges about you staying. Also, if you charge a small amount, it will be hard to negotiate upwards later.

Miscellaneous

Be proactive Your career is something that happens to you until it stops happening.

Spend a lot of time networking You should spend more time networking than talking to head-hunters. Make sure you are known to head-hunters but don't bother them. Increasingly, roles (particularly the most well-appointed ones) come through networking.

Criticaleye Remember that you are a member of Criticaleye. Use it for the development of your personal brand.

Please see [Part One](#) and [Part Two](#) of the discussion