



Managing Sensitive Candidates and Situations: The Work of Search Consultants

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In our earlier article, we emphasized that because no two searches are alike, all colleges would profit from using the customized services of an executive search firm to recruit the best-qualified candidates for senior-level positions. If colleges and universities do so, they will save time and money while expanding their candidate pool. The executive search firm will ensure a thorough vetting process, assist with the selection of finalists and constantly manage contact with the client and appointee.

Contrary to popular myth, firms such as ours (Hyatt-Fennell) are not “headhunters” seeking merely to fill positions. Rather, our pre-search visits, institutional profile, position specification preparation, candidate recruiting and evaluative process ensure a lasting, close fit between candidate and the hiring institution. We are truly a firm that partners and searches for the best person for each position with every institution. Our credibility, contacts, confidentiality and complete background checks can also expedite the sharing of information not typically possible when using in-house human resource departments.

There are several other reasons to retain an executive search firm when sensitive situations exist in the process. Two of the most common are Board-recommended candidates and in-house prospects favored by many internal constituencies, but perhaps not by the hiring manager. A third is composition of the search (interviewing) committee to create a balanced group that will fairly reflect the institution to candidates without alienating internal audiences. Everyone must realize that one person or group hires.

In the case of a presidential search, the Board makes the choice when hiring senior-level people. The president makes the final decision. Interview committees (search committees) are important to the process, but search committees do not have the authority to hire. Experienced executive search firms also work with candidates and hiring institutions to negotiate a successful contract.

Seasoned executive search consultants will present well-qualified internal and external candidates. We often see excellent internal candidates who, for whatever reason, may not be the right candidate for the position. Sometimes Board members or close friends of the institution nominate individuals who they deem appropriate, yet are not the right fit. Internal candidates and those nominated must be treated correctly and respectfully and presented in a fair and equal manner with all other candidates. However, if the administration does not see or want them in the position, seasoned consultants can work with the internal candidate to appreciate his or her current value within the organization, or with the nominated individual to understand the strength of the other candidates, thus helping the institution to retain a valued employee/Board member/friend without alienating internal audiences.

Search Consultants can assist in the formation of search committees to ensure necessary representation from all constituencies. In addition to culling committees to a manageable size, we can help the Board or President appoint the best committee members who will be able to ascertain the fit necessary for success. The search/interviewing committee must be able to work together, interview well, serve as representatives of the institution, and present the pros and cons of each candidate to the person(s) responsible for hiring for the position.

Executive search firms can “broker” negotiations between candidate and hiring institution. Consultants work closely with the candidates and the hiring institution to assure that there will be a successful conclusion. They monitor the wants of the candidates and keep them in line with the offerings of the hiring institution. Consultants work toward a win-win situation for both the successful candidate and the hiring institution.

Timothy Healy, SJ, the late former president of Georgetown University, said it best with regard to hiring senior-level candidates: “We are looking for God on a good day.” Competent professional executive search firms can work to help you do that. Good search consultants

know your needs, your wants and your hopes. They can expand the pool and raise the quality of the candidates. A search firm can be your partner, your guide and your spokesperson. It will be your advocate for candidates as well as the one who does the requisite heavy lifting throughout the search process, from recruiting candidates to conducting thorough and complete background checks. Every stone must be found, examined, weighed and evaluated. An error can be costly if you hire the wrong person...whether you use a search firm, or whether you conduct a search without counsel.

The more views heard... the more details checked... the more investigation undertaken...the better the opportunity for a good fit!

Dr. Marylouise Fennell, RSM, has spent more than 35 years in higher education administration and search and is among the best-known and highly respected consultants in the field of independent higher education. She served as president of Carlow University in Pittsburgh and is the senior counsel to the Washington, DC-based Council of Independent Colleges. She has been an independent search consultant for more than 20 years, and has consulted widely throughout the world, where she worked with many colleges, universities and non-profits. Dr. Fennell currently sits on three college boards and is the chair of the board of one of these institutions.

With almost 20 years of executive search consulting experience, **Cheryl Hyatt** has been responsible for successfully recruiting senior administrative professionals for educational and non-profit organizations. She brings 30 years of management and organizational leadership experience to her role with clients. Cheryl's breadth of experience, knowledge and contacts make her sought after profession-ally in her field. Mrs. Hyatt also sits on various local non-profit boards offering a variety of expertise to each organization.

Both authors are partners in the Executive Search Group Hyatt-Fennell, a firm that works with not-for-profit clients with a strong commitment to education.