

Hand-holding CEOs beyond hiring

AESHA DATTA

Get the job description from the client, trawl your database for candidates who hit the right checkboxes, place the person in the job and walk off with your search fee.

If you thought that about describes the role of a recruitment or talent search firm, think again. Where the question of hiring a person for a top role in a company is concerned, it becomes a lot more complicated. Executive search firms today have to play a strategic role, working with clients to get an accurate fix on who — and more importantly, what — they need.

However, the challenge for search firms nowadays doesn't end with just finding the right candidate to fill the top job — it extends beyond recruitment to actually helping the candidate settle into the job.

HIGH RETURNS, HIGH RESPONSIBILITY

Given the importance of the role that top-level managers, such as Chief Executive Officers, Vice-Presidents and others, play in the success of the company, recruiting in this space is also seen as a high-risk business. And as such search firms' responsibility extends to a certain period after the hiring process has been completed.

The first three to six months (and even up to a year in some cases) of a recruit's work life in a new organization are now seen as crucial and search firms continue to act as mentors for the candidates — helping the recruit and the company bond.

Ronesh Puri, Managing Director at Executive Access, says that since head-hunting for top positions is a high-risk, high-returns job, they cannot leave anything to chance and as such Executive Access continuously hand-holds new recruits, and also ensure that they are in constant touch with the company for up to a year after the recruitment.

"We need to collate information from



Much like ballet dancers, executive search firms and their clients share a relationship that involves the former hand-holding new executive recruits even after the initial process is over. — S. SUBRAMANIAM

recruits and stakeholders of the firm, and even other employees, to ensure that the needs of both candidate and client are met."

He adds that the stakes are very high for executive search firms too. "Our fees are also dependent on the performance of the CEOs in the job," he says, explaining that a significant percentage of their fee is paid only after the hired executives settle into their jobs.

COMPANIES MORE CAREFUL

"For a candidate sometimes we have to act as coach, mentor and guide, since a person who has just joined a new environment may not be able to approach the stakeholders of the company in case he has a problem," Puri says, adding that they always ensure that they play a proactive and not a reactive role.

Nalina Suresh, Executive Vice-President (VP), DHR International (India), agrees

when she says that they, too, work with the clients and candidates to help the new recruits and to intervene if required.

However, she says, these days companies are extra careful about who they hire and because they have clearly defined roles for their new executives, the situation where things go sour between the company and the candidate are few and far between.

"We have seen a time when multi-national companies hired a number of VPs in one year. That is not happening now. People don't just hire because good talent is available. Because when you do that, people aren't suitably utilised. The first three months are very crucial for the candidate to bond with the company. So, if they are not given substantially meaty roles they become disinterested," Suresh says.

She says these days companies do not leave

things to chance and start thinking about the returns on investments from their new hires right from the beginning.

"The trend of being isolated after they are hired is reducing. They are in the thick of things right after they are taken on board," she says.

However, she adds that in the rare instance where a dissatisfied candidate leaves the job, DHR offers a replacement.

Given the high costs involved in replacing hires, it is not surprising that executive search firms do everything to ensure that the marriage between the company and the new executive goes off without a hitch.

MADE IN HEAVEN?

However, there are others who feel that head-hunters acting as consultants after the recruitment process is over, is not an ideal scenario.

"The two require different expertise. One is about head-hunting and the other requires specialised HR skills," says Rajiv Burman, Managing Partner, Lighthouse Partners. He says if the company selling talent is also required to ensure that talent stays in the job, then that is a conflict of interest.

"Can a search firm bring value in the induction process? The answer is no. Once the candidate has been recruited, it is the individual chemistry that works," Burman says. However, he adds that his company also has an understanding with its clients that if a new recruit leaves the company then either a replacement is offered or the fee is returned.

He attributes the trend of executive search firms taking on the role of leadership consultants to the increasing pressure that is being witnessed in the west, where search firms' revenues are seeing a steady dip. "To arrest the decline, top search firms are also looking at leadership consultancy," he says, adding that the trend is slowly catching up in India as well.