

Working with Job Search Organizations

By BNET Editorial

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When you begin your job search, you want to ensure that the best opportunities are available to you. But many openings only exist in the “hidden job market,” that exclusive network that links the favored few with the very best job opportunities. How do you get connected? The best openings usually require a candidate with special skills, experience, or education, so, rather than publicly advertising an open position, companies use refined recruitment techniques to attract only those candidates who qualify for these unique positions.

One technique companies use to fill these positions is to retain search organizations—the so called “headhunters”—that specialize in locating the best candidates. Not only is it hard to learn about these particular positions, it’s even more difficult to apply for them. And the very best search organizations’ general message to the public is: “Don’t find us. We’ll find you.”

To many of these organizations, the mere fact that you are looking for a job and reaching out to them renders you an undesirable candidate. They prefer to recruit candidates who are not really job-hunting.

Considering the closed-club impression search organizations give, you might feel that actively setting out to attract their attention is counterproductive. However, there are ways to use the connections and power of search organizations to promote your career.

Before you contact one or more search organizations to help you with your job search, you might ask yourself the following questions:

- Do I need a search organization to help me find my next job?
- How quickly do I need a new job?

What You Need to Know

How does a contingency search organization differ from a retained search organization?

A contingency search organization makes its money only after it successfully places a candidate. Contingency organizations usually fill junior to middle-level executive positions, with salaries ranging from \$50,000 to \$150,000. A retained search organization fills the more senior positions, receiving its fee regardless of whether or not a particular position is successfully filled. Both are legitimate forms of business; however, it is generally agreed that retained search organizations have a higher quality relationship with their client company—a long-term interest in which the mutual goal is the company’s prosperity. The emphasis in a contingency organization is more likely to be on the

individual placement, in which case, both you and the hiring company could find yourselves in a wrong match.

What to Do

Identify the Best Search Organization for You

Use word-of-mouth and other indirect marketing techniques to discover which are the best search organizations and to help them find you. Ask your friends, family, colleagues, and college career centers to recommend the organizations—and consultants—they found helpful and easy to work with. Go where search organization consultants go. Use some of your contacts to get invited to high-end business receptions. Attend human resource seminars in your community or industry. Participate as a speaker (or even a volunteer) at business conferences. Write articles for your industry journal.

Contact a Search Organization Consultant

If you have had a friend or colleague recommend a search organization consultant to you—or even better, have had that friend or colleague recommend you to the consultant—phone that person right away. It is the best way to initiate contact with an organization. And have an expertly prepared résumé, of no more than two pages, ready to send immediately. If you do not have a personal introduction, send the résumé with a cover letter describing your credentials, abilities, and objectives.

Be Prepared

You may be asked to come in for an interview immediately. Or you may be notified that your résumé has been keyed into the search organization's database. If your résumé contains the important keywords associated with your career skills, knowledge, and experience, your name will come up the next time the organization searches those keywords for a suitable candidate to fill an opening. Working with a search organization is likely to be a long-term proposition. Success for you and the consultant depends upon a compatible opening becoming available at a client company.

Know How to Recognize a Good Organization

If a search organization that you are unfamiliar with contacts you, be sure to assess the organization's ability to serve your interests well. Ask the organization who their client companies have been. Organizations you want to work with will be pleased to offer you a list of prestigious clients.

Work with More Than One Organization

You should never let yourself be pressured into signing an exclusive contract with only one search organization. The organization's client is the hiring company not you. Because an organization receives its fees from the company—approximately 30% of the new employee's first year's salary—your personal interests are not part of the search organization's business concerns. Therefore you should be free to market yourself in any way you choose. While you should never sign an exclusive contract with only one organization, you also should never sign with more than a very few organizations: you need to stay focused and in control of your interview schedule.

Follow Up

After you have had the initial interview with the hiring company, follow up with that company in the standard ways, such as with a thank-you letter and a phone call after about a week. Do not let a search organization stand in the way of your cultivating a relationship with the hiring company. Your being hired will benefit you, the hiring company, and the search organization, and you need to do whatever you can to improve your chances of receiving the offer you want.

Be Open to and Accepting of Consultant Feedback

The consultant may see you as the best possible candidate for an ideal position; however, he or she may also see something in your personal demeanor, grooming, or body language that could spoil your chances of success. If the consultant's recommendations do not require that you fundamentally change who you are or compromise your values, seriously consider following the advice.

What to Avoid

You Waste Your Time with the Wrong Consultant or Search Organization

Insist on a personal meeting with a search consultant at that person's office. If the consultant insists, in return, on a telephone relationship, or if you find that the organization's offices are shabby, it may indicate that their clients do not offer the top-market employment opportunities you are looking for.

You Wait Until You Need a New Job Before Cultivating a Relationship with a Search Organization Consultant

The most successful search organizations receive hundreds of résumés a day, so you have to compete for their attention. In addition, it would be a rare coincidence, indeed, if on the day you find you need a new job they have a client with just the right position available. So be sure you are in the search organization's system long before you become desperate for that new job.

You Try to Camouflage a Spotty Past with Finessed Answers

Most consultants and hiring managers have heard it all—the language and rationalizations typically used to camouflage a firing or a dismissal for a company's downsizing. If you are looking for a new position because you were dismissed or fired, be as candid as possible, then move on to the future.

You Drop Your Search Organization Consultant After Having Accepted Your New Position

If you and your search organization consultant have achieved a mutually satisfactory relationship, stay in touch with that person. Send the consultant excellent candidates for other positions that may become available. Meet for lunch now and then. There is no need to make that person your best friend. But the days of working for one company for the rest of your life are over and you may be searching for a new position within a few years. Your earlier good relationship may keep you moving ahead along your career path.

Where to Learn More

Book:

Gurney, Darrell W. *Headhunters Revealed! Career Secrets for Choosing and Using Professional Recruiters*. Los Angeles: Hunter Arts Publishing, 2000.

Web Sites:

Global Executive: www.economist.com/globalExecutive

Executive Grapevine: www.askgrapevine.com

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