How to get the best out of Recruiters and Headhunters

Recruiters and Headhunters are not the same. Some people have the impression that Headhunters are high quality recruiters, an impression sometimes encouraged by recruiters, but this is not the case. Basically Headhunters are retained whereas recruiters, mainly, are not.

So how does it work?

Recruiters are in business to earn fees for providing a service that supplies a selection of people for interview to companies. This involves taking the strain of advertising a vacancy, filtering and interviewing applicants and providing a shortlist of suitable people from which the company can make their choice.

But in reality...

The basic principle is OK but reality shows a very different picture indeed. Recruiters are generally not well respected by either companies or candidates and it is their practices and the manner in which they obtain business that has attracted so much condemnation.

Another reason recruitment companies attract so much bad press is the simple fact that generally job seekers do not understand what a recruiter does. They think they are there to help them find a job AND THEY ARE NOT!

We often hear people compare recruiters to estate agents, another group of much maligned professionals. The role performed by recruiters is generally misunderstood because people assume that recruiters are working for candidates (or YOU), they don’t, they work for the COMPANY.

As in all walks of life there are good and bad and it is dangerous to condemn all recruiters because of the practices of some. Would you for instance, condemn one supermarket chain because you had a bad experience at another?

The majority of recruiters spend their time looking for vacancies, not candidates. Finding a vacancy is hard work and finding a company prepared to pay a large sum for them to effectively supply a few CVs is even harder. When a recruiter does find a vacancy there is never a shortage of applicants. The first thing you must take on board is that recruiters are not on the side of the candidate. Neither are they on the side of the company but if there is a leaning towards loyalty it will be towards the source of their income - the company.

Recruiters spend their time on the phone looking for vacancies. This can be from a portfolio of companies with whom they have dealt and therefore have a relationship or just from a business directory where they are working through cold calling from a to z. Often they would need to be on the companies ‘suppliers list’ but that is not always the case as cold calling is extremely common.

Recruitment is a sales job and it is highly competitive. Most employers will tell you they get bombarded by recruiters calling looking for vacancies trying to sell their ‘database’ of CVs. Recruiters need to act quickly when they get the green light to provide candidates since as soon as they place an advert, their competitors will “pounce” and look to fill the vacancy themselves. Recruiters require a database of relevant (careful choice of words... not necessarily ‘suitable’) CVs. They employ various methods of finding those CVs. One is to place
adverts for candidates but this is expensive, causes delays and is less common. Some interrogate the job boards (many people place their CV on an internet job board in the hope that a recruiter will pick it up). Others advertise on the internet, on their own sites and on the job boards for vacancies that do not exist. Some re-advertise vacancies after they have been filled to ‘harvest’ more of the same type of people.

Advertising vacancies that do not exist is, of course, illegal. It is not policed other than by the advertising agent placing the advert on the recruiter’s behalf so mostly the practice passes unchallenged. There is a general wisdom which maintains that more than 50% of all advertised vacancies are not really ‘live’ vacancies and exist simply to fill the recruiter’s databases.

The practice, where a recruiter does not have a prior supply agreement with a company, is that they send CVs with an email stating that the action of opening the attachments commits the company to a fee should they employ any of the candidates represented. In this case it is probable that the recruiter has removed the candidate’s name and contact details from the CV to avoid the company contacting the candidate direct and in doing so removing the recruiter from the process.

The fee is negotiable but generally averages over 20% of the successful candidates first year’s salary paid to the recruiter after the initial probation period or three months, whichever is the earlier. For salaries in excess of £100k the fee is between 30% and 50% of the first year’s salary.

From your point of view it is all a bit loose, vague, weak, unfocused.... and not a system designed to support you, the applicant, in getting a job. It certainly is not a system designed to get good people into good jobs.

It is unlikely that your CV, however well written, will give an adequate description of your true ability and potential. How can anyone really communicate their full skills and ability in two pages? It is also unlikely that the job description adequately describes the role. Try describing your current job or last job in a couple of pages of A4, the description is likely to be limited or inadequate at best.

So this system of recruiting is marrying CVs that do not adequately describe the candidate with job descriptions that do not adequately describe the role. Again, not a system designed to get good people into good jobs. It is entirely a system to make money from a process of CV sifting.

There is NO obligation for a recruiter even to tell you about a role. This leads us to why recruiters reject people who are actually well suited to the job being discussed. The answer is quite simple; they have no way of judging who would perform best in a role. Nor do they concern themselves with this level of detail. Perhaps this might need a little explanation.

Firstly let us take an example. A bid writer applies to an advertisement. The recruiters who are ‘canvassing’ to supply the company with CVs of Bid Writers for a vacancy are not themselves Bid Writers. They are recruiters. They are unable, therefore, to make a valued judgment whether one experienced bid writer is more effective at bid writing than another experienced bid writer. The only way they can determine the applicant can actually do bid writing at all is if they are already doing it somewhere else, or has done so recently.

A recruiter needs to use a different set of criteria to decide whether to put you forward or to filter you out. That criteria is therefore arbitrary. Criteria includes Experience (current role or recent role is the same as the vacancy), Salary (matching the vacancy salary will determine
seniority), Education (degree, specific degree, number of degrees, university status all might play a part), Age (Illegal to discriminate but how would you know?) and then several other or more specific area that might include illegal criteria such as disability, colour, religion, race etc.

**Headhunters** are very different. They ‘choose’ the CVs with whom they work. Their brief is to approach “Ms I Deal” and they have no interest in talking to anyone else. Why would they? They do not accept speculative calls from candidates because they only have a vacancy for “Ms I Deal”.

Headhunters are often called Search & Selection consultants. Search & Selection is a little broader based. The brief is to find an MD or Operations Director or HR Manager and so on and they usually approach the client company’s competitors first. Both are retained. That is to say they have already been paid and are therefore not concerned with making a sale/fee. For this reason Headhunters and Search & Selection consultants are far more concerned with maintaining the relationship they have with their client company.

The fees can be huge. Rarely do headhunters work in salaries below £80k in the private sector or £50k in the public sector. Fees can be 30% and, for high profile appointments, a bespoke service might be considerably more. We met one very senior headhunter who placed two solicitors and earned his company £500k in fees.

Retained consultants will not be interested in the majority of people. They look for people who are highly effective in a role, very well presented and able to ‘carry’ an interview. They are not interested in candidates who have poor CVs and/or are poor at interviewing. You may argue that this does not affect the individual’s ability to do the job, but think of the impression they are making.

Often the decision maker for a senior appointment is not a skilled interviewer. They have to take time out of their busy schedule, they do not interview enough to be particularly practiced and their perception of the candidate is not going to be as sharp as the headhunter, who is, as you might expect, usually very sharp at interviewing. If the candidate is a senior executive and marketing themselves with a weak or poor CV and poor interview skills, what are they thinking? They will not be put forward regardless of their ability in the role because the ‘perception’ is they are not going to be a good performer. Certainly the headhunter is not going to take the chance, in case the decision maker doubts the headhunter’s ability to find candidates of the right calibre.

Headhunters represent a very small and elite fraction of the overall job market and are out of reach for most people.

Even in times of business growth and a booming economy, recruiters have only been responsible for 10% of the job market. The effect of the recession on the recruitment market has been devastating. There are less than 50% of the consultants working in the industry today than pre 2008. In 2012 the agencies (all Headhunters, Search & Selection and recruiters added together) only handled 2% to 5% of roles that were filled.

Despite all the above, you still need recruiters. They are, after all, out there looking for vacancies and if they find one that would suit you and you are not on their radar, you lose! But if only 5% of roles are filled via this process perhaps you should only spend 5% of your job searching time chasing them.

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