



Why using Executive Search in a recession is justified

By Caroline Hayward

Background

I have been working in recruitment and Executive Search for over 25 years, focusing during the last 20 on Executive Search in the technology sector. I founded Hayward & Associates during a recession in 1988 and the company has also survived the dotcom crash of 2001 as well as the aftermath of September 11, when most US technology firms pulled out of Europe as a kneejerk reaction to everything that was happening in the world at that time. In fact, 2002 was one of our best years.

Maintaining our strong reputation, brand and message, as well as consistency of delivery is what got us through those difficult years and will do so again in 2009/10.

The less pressurised times also gave birth to The Chairman's Network Ltd, now established as the Private Networking Club of choice for Chairmen, CEO's and Independent Directors. This business is busier than ever as we all decide to get out more and network. It's the people who make business happen, and if you are senior in a mid-market or SME business, the Chairman's Network provides the ideal forum for networking and business development.

Why Executive Search adds value

The Executive Search business is often misunderstood and somewhat maligned as being expensive and unnecessary - especially in a downturn.

For a senior appointment, whether in a downturn or not, Executive Search is the way forward and the headhunter has to front and lead the assignment at every stage to add real value to the process. Recent research states that over 60% of companies still use Executive search to recruit at the management level and here are some of the reasons why:

- **The qualification process**

If you are in a senior role and you are approached by the researcher (quite normal) or headhunter, you are "qualified" professionally as to your interest in and suitability to the opportunity. You are subsequently sent a first rate briefing document about the company and the role, giving you a positive impression about the seriousness of the client and the professionalism of the search firm, before you have walked through the door of either. As a result you are potentially more interested in the opportunity.

The qualification process is an inexact science, even when supported with psychometric testing. I have seen candidates with first rate tests offered the job and fail in it and candidates

with poor psychometric tests do exceptionally well in the role. Therefore, much is based on the skill, experience and intuition of the headhunter.

- **Understanding the client**

Good headhunters understand their client and the company they are representing in some detail, from the products and services offered through to the cultural fit of the organisation as well as the personality of the future boss. Most good headhunters also have a strong intuition and can pick up on any aspect of strength or weakness and drill down accordingly. They can summarise the opportunity succinctly and sell candidates on the real benefits. They will be direct, honest and open with the candidates interviewed and keep them fully informed at every stage of the process. These people are, after all, our future clients too.

- **Keeping to timescales**

Timeframes can be managed more effectively than an ongoing interview situation based on candidates from various sources. At Hayward & Associates we shortlist in 4-6 weeks, mainly by week 5. Big search firms can take a lot longer but I'm not sure this is justified in all cases. If you use your own networks such as LinkedIn, Plaxo, Word-of-mouth etc then you may get lucky and find a suitable candidate quickly but it takes application and it could be several months before you have an acceptable shortlist. We are in information overload with data coming at us from every angle and it is this focus and persistent drilling down on all of this information that creates a first rate shortlist of the best talent available at that time. Our consultants are industry specialists and work full-time on each and every search until the shortlist is presented.

- **Managing a variety of sources to produce a first rate shortlist**

Some headhunters claim that pure headhunting is "the only way" as companies do not make good people redundant and advertising only attracts people that are available and desperate for a job.

I refute both these arguments. It is of no consequence to me where my shortlist emanates from, so long as it is always first rate.

In current times, redundancy is no longer a stigma. If we have a specific assignment to fill where we are looking for a "square peg for a square hole" and that square peg happens to be redundant at the moment, so be it.

Hayward & Associates hold a massive database of talent relevant to the technology, software and services industry and it is without doubt a major asset. Senior executives internationally

are recommended to us and wish to be “known to us” so that when their ideal job comes along we are sure to call them, whatever their current role or status. We can also leverage this talent base of over 40,000 senior technology executives to affect an introduction to almost anybody we choose.

It's the same with high level recruitment advertising. Our “square peg” candidate may have **previously** been in exactly the role we are looking for but as they are not currently in that capacity, they are unlikely to be headhunted. It does not devalue their ability to do an excellent job in the role we are assigned to. Advertising responses mean more data to work through and a lot of work, but if the role is not confidential then we are happy to do it to ensure that the client has had the opportunity to meet the best available talent. Additionally, our candidate may currently be in Australia and not on our target list for headhunting but will see the advert or get sent it by a colleague.

And, yes, we do also use LinkedIn and Plaxo and that has limitless possibilities but also takes a huge amount of time and application.

It is only by combining these methods that it is possible to bring together a fully researched and well balanced shortlist of highly qualified individuals in only 4-6 weeks.

Candidates there are many but a first-class shortlist is a much bigger challenge. Executive Search ensures the quality and speed of delivery that organisations need in current times.

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