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Are You Managing Your Own Career?

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"The most important part of your job search is your own networking and outreach into the market," says Slepín.

SAN FRANCISCO—So, you've decided it's time to start thinking about your **next career move**. Or maybe you've just lost your position, so it is not just "start thinking", but it is "uh oh, turn on the spigot; I gotta find a new job." In either case, you are putting together your strategy and are wondering how to best work with recruiters. Recruiters are indeed a valuable part of one's job search and overall **career management**.

Big picture, recruiters should play only a limited, but important, role in your job

search and in your overall career planning. Unless you are in the C Suite, it is most likely that your next position will be found without a recruiter in the mix. So, by far, the most important part of your job search is your own networking and outreach into the market. But, as part of that strategy, definitely reach out to headhunters, particularly to those who you know are leaders in your industry or niche.

We have lots of tips on networking, but this article is about how to work with recruiters. First, it is important to know the difference between contingent and retained searches. [Please note, my firm does only retained searches.] These are the two types of business models in the recruiting business and they come with very different behaviors. Both types of recruiters work for, and are paid by the company that is looking to fill a position, but the dynamics and behaviors of each are very different. There are some recruiters who will take a fee and “represent” a candidate generally in the marketplace. My advice: run, don’t walk. Bad dynamics, particularly if you agree with my overall premise that “your job search is your responsibility and cannot be outsourced”.

The first type of search, mostly found at the low and sometimes mid-level (rarely above \$200,000 in compensation), is contingent. Contingent recruiters work on a paid-upon-placement basis with a company, often on a non-exclusive agreement. They make money only if they make a placement. Hence, they need to make a “sale” to get paid. You are their “sale”. Given the probability of a placement, they act essentially as brokers and matchmakers since they can’t really spend the time to intimately know you as a candidate.

If you network with a contingent recruiter, he/she might tell you that they will present you to some of their clients for unspecified positions. Again, run, don’t walk. They might just send you out in an email blast, which essentially puts a price on your head (the client has to pay them if they get your resume in first). If they are presenting you to companies without a specific client-driven mandate, they are actually going to try to network into the companies that you should already have on your target list. Hence, if you are working with a contingent recruiter, I highly advise you to require them to notify you and get your permission before they send your information to any potential employer and to only send to clients when they have an existing mandate.

Retained recruiters, on the other hand, work on an exclusive basis for a client to fill a specific position and are paid as consultants along the way. Retained recruiters work at the higher end of the employment spectrum, almost always above \$150,000 positions. A retained firm typically collects about half of their fee in retainers with the other half paid when the candidate is hired. Like contingent recruiters, a retained firm is motivated to generate revenue by making placements, but given the dynamics, our behavior is more as a consultant than as a broker or matchmaker. Retained recruiters are advisors to their clients and, secondarily, as advisors to their candidates. Since we are matching candidates against a specific, retained mandate, we do get to know candidates on a fairly intimate basis. I view my in-depth interviews as a two way investment for both me and the candidate, after which the candidate is potentially inside-my-circle in terms of a relationship.

So, how do you work with recruiters when you are in outreach mode on your job search? When a headhunter, either a contingent or a retained recruiter, gets an unsolicited call or resume, they will be immediately responsive if the resume happens to fit one of one of their current searches. But just think about the numbers – a recruiter, or their firm, is working on a limited number of assignments and the chances are that your background does not fit anything in their current line up.

Recruiters also take what'll seem like a conservative approach just by the nature of our business. A client comes to us with an assignment. We work hard with them to identify the core skillsets needed from candidates for that job. It is then our job to find a group (four, six or more) of candidates who meet the bull's eye (or, as we say "checks all of those boxes"). As such, this sets up a fairly transparent and competitive process in which the client will then hopefully get to select the best fit from a group of qualified candidates, any of whom could do the job well. Lesson #1: it is really hard for an out-of-the-box candidate to get into the process and even harder for them to win the job. Lesson #2: get to the client before they hire a recruiter since the client will not approach filling a position with as disciplined a process. Lesson #3, although this fits in with interview strategy, which is a different topic, if you do get an interview, assume it is a highly competitive process and that you will not get the job – use the interview to make a contact with whom you will wind up doing business one way or the other. That guarantees a win no matter what the outcome. So, it all circles back to networking.

Be aware that it is hard for recruiters to keep up with the number of requests from what we all call "unsoliciteds." And that includes requests from friends of friends. So, if you do not fit a current search (which, as said above, is most likely), either the recruiter will be non-responsive or will send you a note that they are putting you into their database for future searches and to check back periodically.

Do not take that as a form of rejection; it is just reality. Do beware of the limitation of recruiters' database capabilities or of their individual memories and certainly of their time. While most recruiters use sophisticated databases as contact management tools and to search for potential candidates, the database technologies are behind the times and do not always deliver back logical candidates based on Boolean queries. Indeed, LinkedIn is sadly often a better tool than a recruiter's own database, so make sure that you have a strong LinkedIn profile and a deep network in your industry to help recruiters in finding you through that vehicle. I tell candidates to check in occasionally via email and, when checking back in, to resend their resume. It saves us the step of checking the database to retrieve your resume and, truly, people do not always make those extra mouse clicks, so make it easy for the recruiter.

There is a consistent theme—I view careers and career strategy in the long term view, not just the current episode. With that in mind, every professional should build a long-term relationship with one or two recruiters and maintain it as a two-way relationship—recruiter helps candidate when needed, candidate helps recruiter when recruiter needs help. Your career is a long-term game and your relationship with one or two recruiters is part of managing your career. Given our knowledge and understanding and perspective on the human capital part of your industry, recruiters can be great advisors.

So, if you are embarking on a job search, it is indeed important to know how to engage with recruiters. Know their business model and therefore motivations, will help you successfully manage and guide these relationships. Remember that your job search is primarily your responsibility. Take the long view. Your relationships with recruiters should be viewed in that context, as well as your meetings with everyone with whom you network during your search – if you handle well, you will find high, lasting value from both recruiter and industry connections that you make during your search.

Matt Slepín is the founder and managing partner of Terra Search Partners—an executive search firm focused exclusively on the real estate industry. The company has worked with some of the largest multi-family developers across the nation. Headquartered in San Francisco, the firm also has locations in Los Angeles, CA, Seattle, WA and Washington DC. For more information, please visit www.terrasearchpartners.com or e-mail matt at matt@terrasearchpartners.com. The views expressed in this column are the author's own.