

How you work with Headhunters

Why Headhunters don't want to meet you. Yet!

Once upon a time is the phrase which begins fairy tales and fabulous stories set in some unspecified moment in the past. Except the story you are about to read.

There is nothing fairy or fabulous about this real life experience of mine. I absolutely hated headhunters. My story starts like this: Once upon a time when I was a candidate myself.

My resume was the obligatory two page document without my photo. Of course I had not typed RESUME on the top of page one, as I knew recruiters are intelligent people who know a resume when they see one. I didn't list several names of references because I knew the space was better utilised for listing more of my accomplishments. I did not state the reasons for leaving each job that I had chosen to list in the resume. I had not included details of my compensation or what I expected to get in my next job. My hobbies were so irrelevant to the job I wanted, that it would confuse rather than clarify my qualifications; so I left that out too.

I used traditional fonts like Times New Roman and Arial. There were no text boxes and other fancy features that would jeopardise the beautiful look of my Word document, when printed out on someone else's computer. I had the Career Summary and Value Proposition as my first paragraph just below the header with my name and contact details.

Oh yes, my resume was a master piece. I was ready to roll it out and impress the headhunters. I should have known better; but I didn't at the time.

To really get into the groove of job hunting I read several great books on the subject. You can still buy What Color Is Your Parachute by Dick Bolles.

Or the smaller book Don't Send a CV by Jeffrey J. Fox. And if you have just lost your job, go get the Mars And Venus Starting Over by John Gray. And check out www.ilostmyjob.com.



I do apologise if I am just stating the obvious, but trust me, most people have no clue about how executive search firms work. And why should they. You can imagine the surprise and increased frustration that grew inside me, when I realised that headhunters didn't want to talk to me when I called, they didn't return calls when I left messages with an assistant or on voice mail, nobody bothered to answer emails either.

What was going on? I never understood what was going on until I moved to this side of the table. My current table as a headhunter that is.

It was back then that I made a promise to myself. I wanted to be a headhunter, I wanted to be different in my approach, I wanted to tell people why there is a lot “don’t call us, we’ll call you” in the recruitment industry. Here’s the thing. You need to accept the fact, that headhunters are retained by clients and not candidates. In other words, it’s the clients who pay their fees. Not you. Any minute the headhunter spends talking to people who are no way near a client’s requirement will just delay the completion of the search assignment. It steals valuable time away from the client’s project and as a business person yourself, you will appreciate that billing fees is a part of the cycle that makes business successful. We need to keep the eye on the ball.

A delay in the process to fill an important position could also easily spill over to the client side and have serious impact on their business, whether being the introduction of new projects, an organisational restructuring, a classy sales campaign to kick start a dull period, a greenfield getting off the ground, or whatever it may be.

Headhunters are typically under a lot of time pressure. But don’t worry; we thrive with that positive stress. We know that all assignments by definition are difficult-to-find positions. It is the mere reason and purpose of our industry. If all fruits were hanging low and you all had great skills in assessing the well thought out dance of candidates... well, you get the picture.

So executive search firms will in general only engage in meetings with candidates if there appears to be a good match between their client's requirements and the particular candidate profile. Assessments of qualifications take the form of a structured behaviour based interview, the use of a unique designed questionnaire that links to the needed technical skills and performance competencies. Only this way can the headhunter and a candidate have a meaningful meeting that will be helpful to both parties.

Oh well, it’s out of the bag now and the secrets revealed. This can no longer be a fairy tale.

Article by Tom Sorensen, Partner in Grant Thornton; first published in Bangkok Post April 2010.

