

Using recruitment consultants in Higher Education:

Issues and solutions

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ECC Ltd
3 Gray's Inn Square
London WC1R 5AH

Tel +44(0) 20 7430 8368

www.ecc.ac.uk

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INTRODUCTION

Organisations have a number of reasons for using the services of a recruitment or executive search consultancy. This group of specialists are sometimes known, colloquially, as headhunters and should be differentiated from employment and advertising agencies. The latter are typically focus on advertising placement and design while the former tend to be concerned with the provision of casual and temporary staff often for clerical, secretarial or operational posts. Recruitment Consultants offer a wider range of services and tend to be more concerned with the permanent placement of professional and senior management staff.

Any consultant provides services and performs tasks that an organisation does not, cannot or does not want to do for themselves. For example, the organisation may not have the expertise, time, resources or the desire to be directly involved in the recruitment process. Alternatively, the organisation may need additional support or expertise to take some of the pressure from the Human Resources function.

Recruitment consultants can also offer access to wider networks and the experience of bringing creative, specialist and strategic solutions to resourcing difficulties. They are able to approach people directly and confidentially in a manner that may not be appropriate for a potential employer and can obtain additional information which candidates and referees might hesitate to provide directly to a potential employer. Another service they can offer is the provision of feedback to candidates which may be better conveyed by an independent third party.

The CIPD guide on the relationship between HR and recruitment consultants¹ reports that 78% of employers taking part in their recruitment and retention survey made use of recruitment consultants but only 36% had a structure approach to enable them to evaluate their services.

Research published recently by Glynis Breakwell² assessed the way in which higher education makes use of recruitment consultants and suggested that improvements could be made. She recommended that guidelines be drawn up to facilitate this and is leading a task group on this.

This publication does not intend to duplicate this work; rather it intends to provide practical guidance on how recruitment consultants can be used to best effect. The document explores the issues and identifying ways in which they may be addressed. One simple step is to make use of the HERA role profile and competency specification as the core for briefing the recruitment consultant.

We are grateful for the assistance given by Barnes Kavelle which has provided an insight from "the other side".

¹ CIPD The relationship between HR and recruitment agencies: a guide to productive relationships. 2008.

² Glynis Breakwell

ISSUES

An article in Times Higher Education ³ and the work of Goodall ⁴ elsewhere have raised concerns, additional to those highlighted by Breakwell (op cit) about the sector's use of recruitment consultants. Criticisms have been levelled at the cost, the failure of the consultant to understand the context of the sector and the particular needs of the organisation. Cost is an ever-green issue and one of the main advantages, the consultant's ability to source candidates from a wide pool, has been called into question as some doubt exists about the extent of the search.

Widening pool of people

One of the main reasons for using recruitment consultant is their ability to find people who would not respond to a public advertisement. Passive applicants are those not actively engaged in a job search and have no pressing reason to leave their current role but may be prepared to consider an interesting opportunity if it is brought to them. Many active applicants, including those who register their CVs with recruitment consultants and on web sites, are more concerned with leaving their current post rather than wanting the advertised vacancy.

While increasing the pool of potential applicants is an argument for the use of recruitment consultants, this can be a negative if the organisation is unconvinced about the benefits of widening the pool. In these cases, the organisation can place tight constraints that serve to limit the consultant's ability to search for passive candidates or those people with the sought for skills but slightly different experiences.

Breakwell (op cit) noted that for senior posts, the sector is dominated by a small number of consultants who often draw on the same small pool of individuals, many of whom are already employed in the sector. Even though such appointments can be made from other organisations, and some of these individuals have been very successful, there is considerable scepticism about the ability of people without a sector background being able to understand the culture of higher education. Certainly, according to Breakwell's research, there is a belief that candidates for the most senior roles must have an academic background.

Thus, a vicious circle is created. Consultants are briefed but the boundaries of the search are so narrow they are not able to make full use of their search capability.

These practices also beg questions about the way in which the sector equips people for senior position. Despite the efforts of the Leadership Foundation in recent years, the criticism of the size of the pool of people with the potential to occupy senior roles suggests there is an issue with training and development and succession planning. It also raises questions about the way in which the sector values and uses wider experience and makes full use of the contribution made by other professional groups.

Another criticism of consultants arises from them pressing organisations to take their preferred candidate. Consultants do maintain registers of candidates seeking employment and this is no secret. The practices of some may give grounds to the suspicion that they simply draw on this register rather than engage in a more extensive search. The temptation to do this must be

³ THE (30 November 2007) Alarm at lack of players in v-c hiring.

⁴ Goodall, . A 2007) How do leaders get selected. University of Warwick Business School.

great as it makes the consultant's job easy and enable them to receive a lot of money for not much effort. However, reputable consultants would not do this and would be willing to provide an audit trail of their search action, if so requested.

The role of recruitment consultants

The situation described above suggests a deep misunderstanding about the consultant's role. It may have arisen as a result of the organisation's handing over responsibility for the process rather than developing a managed working relationship with the consultant.

Another weakness arises when the organisation lets the consultant become too involved in decision-making. As the consultant's staff carry out the initial sift of candidates, it can be easy to assume that they are able to identify which will be most suitable for the role. This leads to them being pressed to identify the strongest candidates during short listing meetings.

The consultant's job is not to select the candidate but to provide advice on how best to manage the recruitment and search process and to produce a shortlist of people all of whom would be capable of filling the role. It is for the organisation to decide which of the suggested processes to use and which of the presented candidates should progress through the selection process. The organisation must make the final choice.

The value and importance of having a clear role description, setting out what the occupant will be expected to do, and a specification describing the skills, experience and expertise needed to enable the person to fill the role to the standard required cannot be over-stated. This may seem to be a statement of the obvious, but Breakwell (op cit) highlights this as a major weakness in the way selection criteria and consultant briefings are carried out.

The detailed brief these documents provide should enable the consultant to recommend how best to source candidates who are likely to be able to meet the role requirements and where they are most likely to be found. This is the stage when any concerns about the ability of candidates from outside the sector being able to fit with the culture can be raised and teased through.

If the brief provides for a wide-ranging search, the consultant will be responsible for ensuring the candidate is fully apprised of the sector's culture and comfortable with its distinct features. However, to do this, the consultant needs to have a thorough briefing and be given insight into the sector's idiosyncrasies. This role also suggests that the consultancy company is selected for its understanding and its staff's ability to empathise with the sector's and organisation's cultural values.

Again in her criticism of recruitment consultants, Breakwell (op cit) draws attention to the small number of companies operating in the sector. Even if the consultancy has a track record, it does not necessarily follow that the individual consultant has a good understanding of the sector, nor does it mean that they have insight into the needs of a particular organisation. It is easy to make assumptions about the nature of higher education institutions and fail to appreciate the diversity of the organisations in the sector.

Market awareness

It is obvious to state that recruitment consultancies' core activity is recruitment. As most organisations recruit senior staff infrequently, the former's knowledge of the labour market should be superior. The consultancy should be aware of the pushes and pulls and supply and demand issues, within the sector and with sectors closely related and relevant; in terms of

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organisational specialism, occupational groups, geography and cultural values. Exploring the extent of this knowledge should be one of the tests used in the selection of the consultant.

The definition and scope of the market can be used to determine the scope of the search. The consultant should be able to advise the organisation about this and where people with the required skills and expertise may be found. Often, however, as noted above, the limit of the search can be set too narrowly, based on assumptions rather than a proper assessment of supply and demand.

There are similar assumptions made about pay levels. There is a pervasive assumption that money is the main attraction and reason why people decide to change jobs. For sure, money is important but the truth is that there are many reasons. For many there are other benefits of working within higher education sector that prove attractive to highly skilled and capable people. Their wish to move into the sector can be driven by it having values and an ethos very different from the one in which they currently work.

ECC provides a labour market pay and data service which can be used to compliment the market intelligence provided by the recruitment consultant. In any case, it is good practice to triangulate such data to ensure that bias or statistical quirks do not distort the picture.

Attraction of candidates

The recruitment consultant, once engaged and in contact with potential candidates, becomes the employer's representative. It is therefore essential that the consultant has a thorough and detailed understanding of the role requirements and for the specification, of skills, competencies and expertise, sought to be defined precisely.

The way in which the consultant engages with and treats individuals will be seen as a reflection on the organisation. The consultant is, in effect, the prospective employer's agent so it is important that the consultant's practices and values are explored during the selection process. Some of the bad press received by recruitment consultants is caused by the poor treatment of candidates.

Another difficulty arising from the use of consultants concerns the way in which assumptions are made about the meaning of terms such as "leader" and "managing change". The culture of higher education means that expectations of how these processes are carried out can differ from commercial and industrial sectors. These need to be clarified before the consultant begins the search process.

Part of the consultant's role is to advice on how the search process might be best carried out as well as potential sources of candidates. There are a number of different methods available; some in common use in the sector, others less so. The consultant should be able to propose methods intended to search out the candidates with the portfolio of skills and expertise required for effective performance of the role. The consultant may therefore suggest methods that are not familiar but nevertheless appropriate for the role in question. This is most likely in the case for roles that are new to the sector or highly specialist ones. If the consultant only suggests typical methods, perhaps they are not carrying out their function to its full capacity.

DIVERSITY

It should go without saying that all recruitment consultants should be steeped in equality of opportunity and diversity considerations, since many of these are legal requirements. This may be not the case in practice. Public sector employers have particular responsibilities to both staff

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and students and the legislation is only the basis. The gender and other equality duties require public authorities to promote equality as well as comply with legal requirements. This duty includes making sure agents acting on the authority's behalf fulfil these responsibilities in spirit as well as in name.

Many higher education organisations chose to be proactive in their pursuit of equality of opportunity aims. There is some concern that this commitment to diversity is being compromised by the use of recruitment consultants who limit the search for candidates and apply, perhaps unwittingly, selection criteria that are not free from bias.

There is an argument for relying on consultancy companies established in the sector as they will have built a good understanding of its priorities. They will be familiar with its reality and developed networks within the sector and this can be helpful. However, as Breakwell (op cit) pointed out, a limited number of consultancy companies dominate VC recruitment although a greater number is used for less senior roles. She also suggested that the pool from where proposed candidates are drawn is limited. As the search may be restricted to a comparatively small number of individuals, some of them will have had experience of being considered for similar posts in other organisations.

As well as obvious factors such as competitive pricing and conflict of interest, Breakwell indicated that organisations relying on a very small pool of consultancy companies may be vulnerable to a 'single point of failure problem' and it may not help open up opportunities to those with less traditional backgrounds.

Confidentiality

The weakness of most traditional search methods is they rely on potential candidates seeking out the vacancy, by scanning job boards or looking at the advertisements in professional press and newspapers. This, and particularly in the case of web based advertising, demands the individual takes action. Some people with the sought for skills and experience will be happy in their current position and not seeking to change job. As it is unlikely they will be scanning situation vacant columns or job boards, they will probably be unaware of the vacancy, unless someone tells them about it and this is where a recruitment consultant can help.

Recruitment consultants can front the search, certainly in its early stages by approaching potential candidates, not actively engaged in a job search, to test out their interest in the position and organisation on a "without prejudice" basis. Names of such individuals are generated by the organisation and by people known to have good connections and networks. These people are contacted by the recruitment consultant who asks for the names of potential candidates. This modus operandus attracts two criticisms:

- a) Its potential dependency on the network thus potentially compromising equal opportunities considerations
- b) If the people deemed to be in the know are approached too often by too many consultants they may withdraw their co-operation.

Moreover, if the identify of the employing organisation is concealed in the early stages, the reputation of the consultancy and the way in which potential candidates are treated by the consultancy staff will form an impression that could be taken to reflect the employing organisation. This may not be realistic or even a fair representation of the employer.

Resource requirements

Using a consultant's services costs money. This is a major consideration within the higher education sector, so it is often a reason why organisations decline to use the services of recruitment consultancies. However, focusing on cost alone can make it easy to miss some of the benefits that the use of a consultant can bring. Their services can be particularly helpful when appointing to a senior post, when confidentiality, efficiency and sensitivity can be of paramount importance, especially if existing members of staff are candidates.

Recruiting to any post takes time and senior appointments can be even more time-consuming and complex. It can therefore be useful to approach each as a mini-project with distinct phases. Some of these need specialist skills if they are to be managed effectively. Not every organisation will have the level of expertise, especially if new recruitment and selection processes are to be used, and some highly specialist posts may require special treatment, beyond the experience of in-house HR staff. This is where the skills and professionalism of recruitment consultants come in. However, this does not mean that in-house HR staff should be excluded and certainly senior managers should dedicate time and attention to the process.

Most consultancy companies are prepared to negotiate their costs and willing to work alongside in-house staff so each are used most effectively. The upfront cost should be balanced with the provision of the consultant's expertise and ability to do things the organisation is not able to do. The true cost-benefit calculation should be made with the long-term view and take account of the benefits accrued and saving made by hiring a candidate who presents an excellent fit for the role and organisation.

Competition

The recruitment consultancy business is highly competitive. This means that the various companies are constantly striving to offer their market a distinctive and attractive set of services. Remaining with one supplier may deprive the organisation of the developments being made within the recruitment industry and inhibit the renegotiation of fee levels. It is therefore wise to market test the supplier on a regular basis, by comparing experiences with colleagues in other organisations, both within and beyond the sector and if needs be retendering.

Fit with internal recruitment processes

The use of a recruitment consultant can send messages to existing employees and create the illusion that their applications are not welcome. This, despite the fact that they have been told, openly, that this is not the case, the sub-text and impressions can lead them to believe that an external appointment is desired.

One of the common mistakes made by organisations when filling senior posts is its blindness to the abilities and distinct qualities of internal candidates. There is often an illusion that people working in other organisations have better experience, different skills and new thinking. These impressions are frequently formed on the basis of scant information. They may have qualities to offer but internal candidates have inside knowledge and loyalty and perhaps skills and experience not known to their employer. They should not be written off but given the same access to the opportunity as external candidates.

If there are potential internal candidates, the consultant should be aware of this so the individuals can be given appropriate and sensitive attention. Unless this is afforded, the

organisation's commitment to training, development and succession planning may be called into question and other problems created.

The consultant should also be aware of policies and imperatives that will affect the decision and the processes used to make it. This is not to say that the consultant should be tied into procedures but the methods proposed should not cut across organisational values or be contrary to accepted practice. Detailed briefing and good quality information will allow the consultant to design a search methodology that is fit for purpose and complimentary to the organisation's policy intents.

Technology and e-recruitment

Web based advertising and the use of re-recruitment technology is spreading rapidly and bringing about seismic changes to recruiters' practices and job seekers' behaviour. Considerable benefits can therefore be accrued from their use, particularly their ability to increase the scope of the search and to speed up the process. It is also possible to provide candidates with far more information about the role and the organisation. However, they do contain their weaknesses.

Essentially, the formation of an employment contract is about the development of a relationship between two parties. The recruitment process represents the formative stages of this relationship which, hopefully will last a number of years. The relationship needs to be based on trust, the building of which relies on the open exchange of information and establishing a good understanding of the parties' rights and responsibilities. The quality of the relationship will depend on the way in which it was formed and how each understands the wants and expectations of the other.

The process thus demands that information is exchanged. This becomes increasingly personal as the process moves from expressions of interest, through the selection phases to the point when the decision to enter a contract is made. The time taken to fill a vacancy is one of the commonly used metrics but in some appointments it may be better to take a little longer to make sure that both parties have sufficient opportunity to find out what they need to know to enable them to make good quality decisions.

As the information exchange becomes deeper, the assessments made by each party become more matters of judgement and feeling. The use of technology can help with the factual exchange of information but as soon as more qualitative assessments are required, human beings need to become involved.

Many organisations rely on comparative superficial processes to support appointment decisions. Comparing the size and importance of the decision to other investment decisions may suggest a more detailed appraisal of options is undertaken. The use of a consultant can facilitate the exchange of information by being able to provide each party with the information they seek in a neutral way. The consultant can also accelerate the process, by being able to dedicate resources in ways that the organisation can not do. They are also able to make use of both technology and human contact as appropriate

Legal issues

Recruitment consultants fall into the scope of the Employment Agencies Act of 1973 which prevents them from charging individuals fees for their placement. Consultants also have to

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comply with other legislative requirements and many are members of professional bodies such as the Recruitment and Employment Confederation.

Other legal considerations include equalities legislation and the data protection act. The Freedom of Information Act gives candidates some rights but sight of references can be denied as this is privileged information. The use of references have been the subject of case law, however, so the consultant should be mindful about the way in which information about candidates is obtained and disclosed.

Employment agencies

Employment agencies are different from recruitment consultants. The former tend to focus on clerical, operational and the lower level professional roles and usually supply staff for temporary appointments and short-term assignments. The relationship between the organisation and agency depends on the former's needs but contact can be made on a regular and frequent basis. In these circumstances, the agency is well placed to gain a good understanding of the organisation's business and needs and will probably have a dedicated client account manager responsible for ensuring and enhancing the quality of the service provided.

Recruitment consultants will have a different type of relationship. Contact with the organisation, given the fact that they tend to focus on senior manager and professional appointments, will be less frequent and often they are commissioned to fill a particular post.

Services provided

Most recruitment consultants follow a fairly standard process, represented by the following flow diagram:

Attraction of potential candidates

 advertising

 search

Selection of suitable candidates

 screening cvs

 sifting

Assessment of the best candidate

The consultant does not make decisions; their role is to set up the process to enable the organisation to do this.

Many consultancy companies offer additional services such as:

- Advice on labour market conditions, including the supply and demand for different types of occupation
- Advice on the development and management of talent pools
- Workforce planning

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- Legal advice, particularly relating to recruitment and employment matters
- Advice on recruitment and search methods
- Employer branding and market research, including feedback from candidates
- Design and operation of screening and selection methods, including testing, psychometric assessment, designing and running assessment centres and candidate profiling.

Some also initiate contact with employers on a speculative basis, offering to provide CVs for individuals who have registered with them. Many employers in higher education do not welcome this form of cold calling and can be suspicious of candidates on recruitment consultants' registers. Yet this is a legitimate and often confidential service provided to people who want to take a proactive approach to changing jobs and managing their careers.

The use of some or all of the above services can provide specialist, professional support which may be helpful, particularly when the HR department does not have the expertise or the resources to invest in the development of the same level of knowledge and experience as that provided by the consultant.

Conversely, the organisation may find that, in the long term, it is more cost-effective to develop its internal resource, particularly if the resourcing of high calibre staff is a strategic priority. This allows the use of consultants to be reserved for the highly specialist and sensitive vacancies.

SOLUTIONS

The keys to ensuring that the use of recruitment consultants is cost effective and adds value are:

- Make sure the selection of the consultant is as rigorous and robust as the selection of a new employee
- Provide the appointed consultant with a clear brief which is up to date with the organisation's requirements and context
- Managing the relationship proactively with regular communication and checking progress and understanding.

Selecting the right partner

The appointment of a recruitment consultant should be treated in the same way as the appointment of any other contractor and the assignment managed as any other project. The appointment is usually made through a tendering process but there are other ways of finding and testing a consultancy company. These include a word of mouth reputation and the experience of colleagues in other organisations.

Regardless of how contact is made, the choice of the consultant should be made against explicit criteria which can also be used to test the effectiveness of the service provided by the one eventually commissioned.

TENDER

An organisation seeking to engage a consultant typically approaches a number of possible providers and requests expressions of interest. This could be for the provision of recruitment support in general or for assistance with a particular vacancy.

One of the best ways of finding a consultancy company is by market reputation so it is worth asking colleagues in the sector if they can make recommendations. Some companies have a track record of working in the sector or may have consultants who have worked for universities or colleges previously. However, it is worth remembering the research carried out by Breakwell (op cit) which suggested a degree of complacency among well established recruitment consultancies.

Some organisations find it useful to approach several consultancy companies to discuss the nature of their operation and what they might be able to offer before requesting formal proposals.

The request to tender should provide the consultant with a clearly defined specification, setting out the services to be provided, constraints such as time scales and any particular requirements. The contents of this document should be unambiguous as it will form the kernel of any resulting contract.

The proposals submitted by the prospective consultants should contain details of costs, proposed actions and timescales. They should also set out the companies' terms of business. Some organisations also request testimonials from other of the consultancy companies' clients for use as a selection tool, but as with other references used in the appointment process, these are not likely to be the names of dissatisfied customers!

SELECTION

To ensure that the best choice possible is made, the organisation should aim to engage a consultancy company whose culture and values fit with its own. This means that the organisation itself should be clear about what these are and what they mean in practice.

Explicit criteria need to be developed and ways of gathering the information needed to assess each proposal against them devised. Typical selection criteria can include:

- Understanding of the sector and organisation's business and culture
- Fit with the organisation's values and style of working
- Experience of similar assignments and track record
- Understanding of particular requirements and experience in the use of appropriate recruitment and selection methods
- Understanding of the role requirements and skills needed for effective performance
- Ability to comply with the requirements and willingness to take account of organisation's preferences
- Availability of experienced personnel and adequate coverage in case of unanticipated absence of lead consultant
- Cost, adequate insurance cover and risk assessment
- Ability to provide additional services and add value
- Commitment to equal opportunities
- Clarity regarding the identify of the consultants will be working on the project
- Clear understanding regarding who will be the main point of contact within the organisation.

The above list contains a mixture of tangible criteria and qualitative factors. The use of such a check list provides a robust approach to the choice of consultant, but its use should exclude the exploration of some of the softer aspects of the relationship. Thus, the selection, as with the appointment of employees, should provide for both an examination of the consultant's track record, the nature of the service being offered and cost with an assessment of the skills and competencies of the key staff and, most importantly, the consultant's fit with the organisation.

Particular attention should be given to the consultant's ability and willingness to follow the brief and meet the organisation's imperatives rather than stay with their own preferred working practices. The CIPD has published a useful fact sheet on "Hiring consultants" which contains comments from both HR practitioners and consultants and can be obtained from its web site – www.cipd.co.uk/sibjectis/hrpractice.

Briefing

Once a consultancy company has been selected, the people working on the assignment will require a thorough briefing from the relevant individual or individuals from within the organisation. The consultant will have undertaken preliminary research to support the proposal but now the opportunity to gain a thorough understanding of the organisation and the role to be filled will be needed. The briefing phase will also help to mature the impressions formed by both parties during the tendering process and will need to mature into a productive working relationship.

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The consultant will need access to line managers and others who have significant relationships with the person to be appointed. The purpose of these meetings will be to provide the consultant with a deeper insight of the role and the team in which it operates. This information will supplement the role description and specification and will enable the consultant to provide prospective candidates with more accurate information and allow a closer match between the role, organisation and candidate to be made.

Meetings with other key individuals should also be organised to provide the consultant with information about the organisation's culture and broader priorities that will impact on the work of the role to be filled.

The consultant will also be able to contribute from the experience gained from within and outside the sector. This experience will enable the consultant to suggest other approaches and different ways of thinking. These may be at odds with traditional practices but could produce a better result. The consultant also needs the freedom to say if the assignment presents problems or is impossible to achieve within the laid down constraints.

The consultant will also have had contact with prospective candidates for similar roles. Thus, the consultant will have acquired an insight into the sort of things they are seeking from a new role and new employer and may be able to provide advice on components of the reward package. They may also be able to provide information about the push and pulls of the labour market which will compliment that provided to ECC's members by Capita Resourcing.

The aim of the briefing phase is to help the parties build their relationship and establish rapport and trust so the best possible outcome can be achieved. An honest two way communication is essential as the consultant will be acting as the organisation's agent and representative and the way in which the consultant acts will reflect back on the organisation. Therefore the consultant should be encouraged to question and challenge so that a good understanding of the organisation can be attained.

Developing and maintaining a relationship

The organisation may wish to establish a long term relationship with a consultant beyond filling one vacancy. This will enable both parties to develop a good understanding of each other's way of working and for the consultant to gain an in-depth insight into the organisation's needs and culture. The consultant will be able to contribute both sector-specific knowledge and broader expertise which will facilitate 'bigger picture' thinking and should encourage the organisation to expand its approach to recruitment.

The consultant should also be able to be proactive in offering 'added value' services based on understood needs of the organisation and, if truly engaged, can become a powerful ambassador for the organisation and a trusted advisor to senior management, willing to challenge thinking to achieve optimum outcomes.

However, if this approach is preferred, consideration should be given to the concerns expressed in the Breakwell report. She suggests that a relationship which endures year on year, without challenge can become too comfortable and lead to complacency. This, she warns, serves neither the consultant's nor the organisation's best interests. Both will risk the danger of ceasing to develop and losing touch with advances in practice.

It is therefore advisable to test the relationship periodically by considering alternative suppliers. This testing should be based on an evaluation of experience as well as an assessment of the achievement of the selection criteria used to make the original selection.

Evaluation

The evaluation of the strength of the relationship and quality of the services provided by the consultant should draw on the criteria used for the original selection. These should be complimented by a set of key performance indicators.

If the relationship extends beyond filling a single vacancy, a service level agreement will have been drawn up. This should include statements outlining the required quality of the service being supplied, as well as some quantitative measures such as turnaround time, application to hire ratio, and an assessment of value for money.

The main measure of achievement, ultimately, is the success of the appointment. This though will depend on factors other than the work of the consultant. This will have made a significant contribution, however, as the information provided in the early stages of the process will have been instrumental in enabling the candidate gain a realistic preview of the role and the organisation and in providing the employer with good quality assessment of the candidate's fit with the requirements. These are known to be determinants of success in post.

A good consultant will also follow up, after a period of time, with the organisation and with the candidate to assess how effective the process has been. This will be a health check to ensure that everything is progressing as expected and to determine whether there is further support that can be provided. The consultant should be able to use this assessment to provide feedback to the organisation to contribute to its evaluation.

As noted by the CIPD (op cit) it is rare for organisations to carry out systematic evaluation of the use of recruitment consultants and the long term success of appointments. Particularly with a high profile post, it is worth looking back after the person appointed has been in post for some time to review the recruitment and selection process from both the organisation's and the individual's points of view and to reflect on lessons learnt.

Key points

Plan each stage needed to fill a vacancy, using project management techniques.

Define the role requirements using an analytical tool such as HERA and identify the key competencies to provide a role description and specification.

Use the project plan and role description and specification documents in the request to tender.

Chose the consultant using selection criteria and evidence of their track record.

Amplify the role description and specification by providing contextual information to the consultant during the briefing stage.

Manage the relationship with the consultant through regular communication and periodically checking the understanding of the brief and role requirements.

Keep control of decision making by making sure key managers are actively involved in each stage.

Use the selection criteria drawn from the role requirements and specification to identify the best candidate, not the consultant's recommendation.

Evaluate the appointment and the process and learn lessons from this and the experience of others.

Developing people, delivering results

For more information
call +44 (0)20 7430 8363

Or visit www.ecc.ac.uk

ECC Ltd
3 Gray's Inn Square
London WC1R 5AH
Tel: +44(0)20 7430 8363
www.ecc.ac.uk

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Consortium Ltd