



## So You Want to Be a Headhunter?

EXECUTIVE WHITE PAPER



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## What does it take?

*Originally written by Paul Hawkinson -Modified by Patrick Ropella 9/2014*

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Almost weekly, I receive calls from people who want to know how to become an Executive Search Consultant (ESC). After listening to their questions, I can honestly tell most of these callers to choose another career.

Many don't know what the recruiting business is about at all. Some who may know something, assume what they've read about the profession's better-known trophy hunters is that they all make huge amounts of money across the board. To them, the work of a "headhunter" sounds romantic and mysterious. They're intrigued by the "behind-the-potted-palm" meetings while the search executives stalk candidates for top-level jobs, gaining a five- or even six-figure fee for finding them.

So why couldn't you do that? Perhaps you can, if you have certain traits and skills. But looking for candidates is just the tip of the iceberg in this profession. First, you need to find companies that will pay you to do so.

This part of the search business is pure sales, and high on the list of required skills is the ability to communicate highly effectively. No employer wants to pay you a fee to simply find candidates. They believe they can find their own candidates

by using their own website, Monster.com or Career Builder, etc...and often they can. ESCs are engaged only after companies have exhausted all other recruiting avenues. At that point, ESCs are expected to present them with only the most perfectly qualified candidates.

In other words, ESCs are brought in for only the toughest searches. How do ESCs find these companies? The old-fashioned way: by making endless cold calls until they find a company with a critical opening and a hiring manager committed enough to pay an executive search fee to fill his open high priority positions. This process is known as smiling and dialing--telemarketing at its most basic level.

### Lots of 'Nos'



If you like sparring with corporate gatekeepers and enjoy hearing "no" 95% of the time, you'll love the executive search business. Even in a booming economy when ESCs have more assignments than qualified candidates to fill them, the start-up months can be brutal. That's why the great majority of rookie ESCs (90% who joined contingency search firms) never make it past their first year.

Robert Melver, president of Robert Melver & Associates, a Los Angeles search firm, formerly a staff accountant with a public accounting firm, became a recruiter in 1974. Robert carved out a unique niche in the information technology field. "For those who last through that magical first year, it can be an addictive and very rewarding business," he says. "There's no sweeter sound than having a candidate you searched long

and hard for say 'yes' to an offer from an employer who has probably changed the job specs at least a few times during the search and turned down super candidate for all sorts of frivolous reasons."

Mr. Melver- attributes his success not so much to his search skills as to his client development abilities. He belongs to several professional organizations where he networks with potential clients. "I don't consider myself a great recruiter," he says. "I'm much better at keeping clients happy for the long haul. That's what has kept me going through the tough times."

Most ESCs spend their days filling entry level to mid-level managerial and professional jobs. Only a small percentage of ESCs are assigned c-suite and/or boardroom roles, the most senior-level searches.

These few retained ESCs have cultivated their client base for years and know most all of the movers, shakers, cultures and personalities within their respective industry, as well as the types of candidates their client companies actually want. No matter how carefully worded the job descriptions; they know when certain finalists can't be taller than their bosses...or have more hair...or a more prestigious degree.



Even then, some clients will hire the least qualified finalist because they like their personality or image better (the "halo effect") or they simply interview better (the "actor factor").

## Looking in the Right Places

Successful ESCs know they're retained to provide solutions to client problems, not just "fill slots" in an organizational chart. They also know the competitive candidate marketplace better than their clients and therefore can uncover candidates in places a hiring authority with tunnel vision wouldn't think to look. That's why ESCs are paid large fees and the process from rookie to search celebrity can be a long and bumpy ride.

Knowing how to communicate is extremely important in this business. It means painting persuasive word pictures for clients and candidates. To understand a client's needs, you must convey that you've practically "been there, done that." To convince a happily employed executive to consider becoming a candidate requires extraordinary persuasion, evaluation and problem solving skills.

A search for the perfect hire resembles a research project that produces a hundred or sometimes hundreds of possibilities who must be contacted and weeded until a final list of viable candidates is ready to present. Some rookie ESCs learn enough jargon about an industry specialty to land assignments, but the test comes when they present their final slate. What appears to be a relatively simple search can suddenly blow up. Your perfect candidate says something goofy in the interview. The client company changes the job specifications in mid-search, flushing weeks of work down the drain. The subtle skills separating superstars from also-ran candidates boil down to industry-specific training and a "sixth sense" that comes from a long fought indoctrination in the recruiting trenches.

## Essential Abilities

Aside from basic knowledge gained through training, successful ESCs also need:

- **A glint in the eye.** ESCs are the ultimate "sales consultants." As such they are always "on" and must exude

enthusiasm. Without being abrasive, they must be a cheerful conduit between two parties trying to advance their own, often disparate, agendas. The ranks of successful ESCs are filled with those who view the glass as half full, never half empty!

- **Patience.** Some searches are no-brainers, but most take unimaginable twists and turns. Trying to fit an interview into the schedules of two or more busy executives can take an incredible amount of time. Then, even if both sides like each other, the time required to make a final decision can seem endless. Issues include: For the company: Should we make an offer? To which candidate? At what salary? A committee decision (and most are) can take even longer. For the candidate: Will the company make an acceptable offer? Will this career move be in my best interests? How will my family feel about it? As an ESC/facilitator, you must have the confidence and trust of both parties to move the process along without appearing to be self-serving.

- **Money motivated.** ESCs shouldn't be confused with being social workers. The point of a search isn't altruism; it's for the ESC to collect a fee. This doesn't mean trying to force-fit the wrong person into the job, but the dating game must progress beyond the blind-date stage. Ultimately, someone must agree to uproot and take the job. This may require companies to accommodate candidates whose innovative notions aren't compatible with the current status quo. Making the right hire (for the company) and finding the right fit (for the candidate) is a very complex process for which we must excel.

- **Creativity.** Does the company need a clone of the previous incumbent or an "out-of-the-box" hire? Must candidates come from direct competitors or are executives from a closely related peripheral industry with transferable skills? More companies are looking outside of their traditional talent pools, and ESCs must know when to introduce candidates with new perspectives.

- **Resourcefulness.** Not every search for a new executive starts from scratch, but extensive research is the foundation

of every new effort. Knowing where to look is pivotal. ESCs also must be resourceful when attempting to reach ultimate decision makers who are protected by layers of naysayers. A well developed strategy before launching a search can save months of wasted times.

- **Knowledge.** Familiarity with your niche business segment or functional discipline is essential. Lacking the right background can add months to a successful outcome.

- **Empathy.** Hiring is stressful for employers. So is changing jobs. Understanding and sympathizing with these pressures is crucial to helping both sides feel they finished the process as long-term winners. Both sides need to feel the win..

- **Observation skills.** You must see things as they really are, rather than as clients or candidates want you to see them. Companies often don't know the realities of the marketplace, while candidates who haven't changed jobs for years may not understand their own true worth. Only alert



and sensitive ESCs can recognize these misconceptions and correct them before they derail a likely deal..

- **True grit.** A high tolerance for rejection is a must. You also can't leave anything to chance. Assumptions and/or neglect is the most common reason deals go sour.

- **Resilience.** Successful ESCs may juggle five to ten or more assignments at a time. It's a high-wire act with no net. Deals you worked on for weeks may fall apart, but you can't stop to mourn the loss because you must keep smiling and dialing

for a new assignment to replace it..

• **Ability to negotiate.** From the beginning of the process (your initial call to a hiring authority) until the hopefully happy conclusion, you're a mediator, go-between and diplomat who must and balance everyone's interests..

## How to Begin

If you have these attributes and want a crack at the high-stakes executive search business, where do you begin? You could start your own business, but without prior experience in the field, failure is almost inevitable. The landscape is littered with talented sales and human resources professionals, former executives and other wannabes who tried to become ESCs without the proper foundation. You can't earn a college degree in this discipline. It's a learned skill and the best place to acquire it is from a mentor at an existing executive search firm.

To find a good firm, ask a dozen hiring authorities in the local (city/region) you live in, or in the industry you work in, to name three top recruiting firms they admire or respect. The same firms will likely be mentioned repeatedly. Calls the

managing partner at these firms, and tell him or her you're interested in the field. Ask if you can come in to discuss the possibility of working there. Search firms are always looking for good people, and if they sense you have the right attributes, they'll probably offer you a chance.

The recruiting industry has grown dramatically since it was founded almost 50 years ago. U.S. revenues now total \$1 to \$8 billion annually – in the U.S. Business is often so good that successful ESCs are turning down some assignments. Industry growth should continue even if the economy falters, because companies recognize the value of using ESCs, especially as they continue to re-engineer and restructure, and because baby boomers are now retiring in larger numbers.

Is there room for new blood? You bet. But before jumping into the profession, know what's required for success. Those who do this important homework may reap the benefits of a rewarding new career.



*--Mr. Hawkinson became publisher of The Fordyce Letter, a St. Louis, Mo.-based newsletter for the recruiting industry, after a 25-year career in executive search. He is the author of several books on executive recruiting.*



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## ABOUT PATRICK ROPELLA

Having dedicated his career to helping companies across the globe in sourcing, marketing to, assessing, recruiting, on-boarding, retaining, training and transforming top talent, Patrick Ropella has a global perspective on Executive Search and Talent Management.

He has worked across all roles and functions, cascading from the top levels of management to also placing apprentices coming straight out of college. Over the past 20+ years he has seen many individuals he's personally assisted make career transitions, become well trained leaders, join the C-suite at many of the world's largest corporations.

His experience within the global chemical industry as a dominant talent management leader allowed his firm, Ropella Group, to grow to the leading position it now holds with a wide variety of corporate clients with the chemical industry, transition to serving major consumer product companies, energy companies, Nano, Bio and other high technology companies.

Patrick has traveled extensively, meeting with middle level to C-level executives at the top 100 largest chemical and consumer product companies in the world, branding the "Ropella" name globally. He has successfully placed hundreds of senior level executives with top name companies, including but not limited to: DOW, DuPont, Exxon, Georgia Pacific, SONY, Anderson Windows, GE-Silicone, P&G, Clorox, Pfizer, BASF, PPG, Monsanto, Revlon, Baxter Labs, Sealy Mattress, Ciba Geigy, Johnson & Johnson, Shell, Sherwin Williams Paints, New Balance Tennis Shoes, and many more.

Patrick has written for a wide variety of trade publications, newspapers and business journals on subjects related to the topics covered in The Right Hire. His writings have also been published in Germany, Italy, Latin America and Asia.

Patrick and Robbie reside in Milton, FL. with sons Richard and Robert nearby.

### AUTHOR OF

- ▶ The Right Hire
- ▶ The Right Team
- ▶ The Right Fit
- ▶ Over 50 published articles



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