

# Career Advice: How to find and work with a headhunter

**W**orking with a headhunter can be the single most life-changing decision you make for the future of your career. During the 30-plus years I've worked in the executive search industry, I've seen families brought closer together, watched a single new hire create innovations that changed the world forever, and forged relationships that stood the test of time. That being said, if you don't quite fit the laser-focused qualifications the headhunters are seeking right now, they may ignore your call. Perhaps they want someone in oleogels while your expertise lies elsewhere. Headhunters work for corporate clients, not for you. So, you may face a whole lot of direct rejection when you reach out to them. Still, there's no better way to land a great job than when a top-quality recruiter contact and qualifies you. This article offers some basic guidelines that will increase your odds of success should you choose to work with one.

## HONESTY PAYS

Be real about your skills, experience and knowledge. Headhunters get paid to find people who bring specific skills and experience to the job. They don't get paid to try out this man or that



woman. If you lack the exact experience the headhunter is seeking, tell the truth. If you don't, your shortcoming will inevitably become obvious, and you will never hear from that recruiter again. A headhunter's fees are substantial, because he is expected to find and develop a slate of highly qualified, well-screened candidates. His clients can clearly tell if a candidate has the specific experience sought, fits the compensation range, and is motivated by the right reasons. Be ethical. If a headhunter tells you about a job in soybean processing that another headhunter already mentioned to you, you must tell the second one, "Thanks, but another headhunter already told me about that opportunity." Same thing goes if you have already directly submitted your résumé for that same job to the company.

## HOW TO CHOOSE THE RIGHT HEADHUNTER

- Any recruiter can source candidates from the Internet, but the best headhunters use the Sourcing, Marketing, Assessing, Recruiting, and Training (SMART) search system and provide it to their clients.
- Study headhunters' websites and biographies. Ask yourself, "Will this relationship be a good fit based on personality and the positions and the companies the recruiter works with?"

- Be open to exploratory interviews.
- Follow the headhunter's lead if she says, "Although you're not a perfect fit for this job, the client is open to people with your background in palm oils and edible fats."
- Respond promptly if a headhunter requests more details. This makes his job easier and shows that you're professional. (Your recruiter will go to bat for you, but he needs solid information to keep the client interested. The more specific the information, the better he can make you appear.)
- Listen carefully and ask questions when the recruiter offers interview preparation.
- Ask your headhunter about the process. How many phone or face-to-face interviews will there be? Are presentations required? What are the expectations and goals? The more details you have, the better equipped you are.
- Call the recruiter immediately after the interview to discuss the next step. Make your headhunter a partner in the process and you'll gain more insight and improve your odds of success.
- Provide all computer database information so the headhunter will easily remember you when he gets new clients. Keywords should spell out your skills, abilities and experiences, products, industries, roles, languages, and so on.
- If you specialize in a specific industry or in a specific role, find headhunters who specialize in your area. Ask them what positions they recently filled.
- Generally, retained headhunters are more polished and respected than contingency recruiters; industry or



**Patrick B. Ropella**  
*Chairman & CEO, Ropella*  
Tel: (850) 983-4777  
Web: [www.Ropella.com](http://www.Ropella.com)

Patrick Ropella is Chairman & CEO of the Ropella Group an international Executive Search, Leadership Transformation, and Corporate Consulting firm. He authored the book and web-based training program, *The Right Hire – Mastering the Art of SMART Talent Management*, and has seen his content featured in many trade magazines, business publications, and industry journals. Patrick regularly speaks at webinars, career fairs, and conferences.

functional specialists are preferred over generalists.

- You want a recruiter who is seasoned in the business of executive search. Anyone with fewer than five years of experience can be risky. Anyone with more than 10 years of experience is most likely a professional. The few with 25 years of experience will stand out. You will recognize their expertise when you visit their websites, speak to them on the phone, or meet them face-to-face. Request references for both the recruiter and the client. It's a red flag if they lack references.

### THE RIGHT FIT, THE RIGHT JOB

Always show headhunters that you are most interested in the right fit and that you value job satisfaction and career development. The right fit is the alignment of skills, attitude, cultural fit, experience, and other requirements of the position. This mature approach will make the headhunter respect you and want to help you more.

#### *Here are more specific tactics.*

Tell her where you will and won't relocate.

In setting salary expectations, realize that your current or past compensation, benefits, and experience may not apply to the position offered. Use current and past details as benchmarks, not as requirements.

If you get a raise, more power to you! Still, consider the whole package: the role, the relationships, the location, and other factors. I often see people take less money just to get into more satisfying circumstances. Focus first on the right fit, and the total compensation will take care of itself.

Help your headhunter by providing clear expectations. If you believe this position is the right fit for you,

tell him 1. what salary you would reject, 2. what salary you would consider, and 3. what salary he can accept on your behalf. Don't try to control the negotiations between the headhunter and your

potential employer. Your headhunter knows the employer's compensation and benefits flexibility and the breaking point, as well as other candidate statuses that you don't know. Partner with your headhunter, but let her drive the car.

Consistently update your headhunter whenever you improve your resume, gain new experiences or skills, or change your contact information.

The more a recruiter shows you what's in line with your goals and aspirations, the more effort you should put into developing a long-term relationship.

Good headhunters help you sharpen your technique for winning the job. Use the tools they give you for better results the next time you go for an interview.

### PROS AND CONS OF WORKING WITH A HEADHUNTER

#### ADVANTAGES

When a headhunter presents you to a company, you're much more likely to be noticed.

If the hiring authority says, "I don't see a perfect fit here," your recruiter will address questions and sell you to get you an interview.

If you're on your own, you wouldn't even know why you were rejected.

A company willing to pay for a headhunter takes hiring seriously and wants to make the right hire. It shows that the company is financially strong and committed to making this hire succeed.

Often, headhunters help fill openings that are confidential or high priority; these openings are rarely found on job boards or in other recruiting venues.

Headhunters can guide you through résumé and information presentations, interview preparation, and negotiations.

They do this over and over; they're adept at improving the odds of your success.

#### DISADVANTAGES

As in most service industries, 80% of the people in the recruiting business are apprentices who are learning and growing through the school of hard knocks. About 20% are masters with time-tested systems of excellence; they do 80% of the business, leaving 20% for the apprentices.

You will need to spend considerable time to ensure that the headhunter understands your successes, talents and qualities. This time may seem wasted if you don't get the job you wanted. But the truth is you probably would never have gotten as close to the job without them.