

Helping Search Firms Help You

By **TONY LEE**

Executive search firms carry a mystique that often deters senior-level job hunters from making unsolicited contact. Candidates tend to believe that recruiters are too inaccessible or specialized to have interest in a resume that arrives over the transom, whether by e-mail or the Postal Service.

But almost every reputable search firm saves the resumes it receives from job hunters. Computerized record keeping allows firms to store arriving resumes indefinitely in searchable databases. Your resume can then be retrieved when a search assignment calls for candidates that match your industry, function, location, education and compensation level. If your qualifications closely mesh with the needs of the client company, chances are good the recruiter will contact you.

"If you have the right qualifications at the right time, it makes sense to contact search firms because it's possible you could be brought into the loop of a search," says Paul R. Ray Jr., president and CEO of Ray & Berndtson, a Ft. Worth, Texas-based international search firm. "My philosophy is: nothing ventured, nothing gained."

Do You Earn Enough?

Of course, not every resume received by a search firm is entered into its database. The criteria for inclusion is strict throughout the search profession, with a large percentage of unsolicited resumes weeded out each day. Salary level is the biggest hurdle.

Most retained search firms don't accept assignments for candidates earning less than \$100,000 annually, so resumes from job hunters who don't meet that salary minimum are discarded. At some firms, an exception is made for IT pros who are in short supply. If you still don't qualify, consider contacting a contingency search firm, which typically maintains a lower minimum salary level for the positions it fills. (Retained search firms are hired by client companies to fill a specific opening and are paid regardless of their success. Firms that work on contingency are paid only if the candidate they recommend is hired.)

Your next hurdle is creating a resume and cover letter that's viewed positively by the search firm's research department, which is where most unsolicited resumes are forwarded. Correspondence that's poorly written, full of typographical errors or unconventional in format or style—even when sent via email—is eliminated quickly from consideration.

"Assuming that a person is at the right salary level, we contact about 10%" of the job hunters who submit resumes, "unless they've given a half-hearted effort in their letter and resume," says David M. Richardson, vice chairman of Chicago-based recruiters DHR International. A poorly written resume or cover letter demonstrates a lack of effort and ability, which is justification enough for throwing it away, he says.

Being resistant to relocating is another barrier that excludes many candidates from consideration. Few search firms limit their clients to one geographic area, so by sending your resume to a recruiter, you implicitly acknowledge your willingness to move for the right opportunity, says Mr. Ray. His advice to candidates: "Think seriously about whether you'd relocate and under what circumstances before becoming involved in a search."

Making Contact

When trying to develop an effective strategy for contacting search firms, recruiters suggest following a few guidelines. First, contact headhunters who have called you in the past. Even if you rebuffed their advances before (hopefully for a good reason), you aren't necessarily eliminated from future consideration. Next, talk to colleagues and other executives in your industry. "Ask if they've ever been contacted and get the names of specific recruiters for you to write to," says Mr. Ray.

If your network doesn't turn up the names of recruiters, you're left to choose between two approaches: rifle and shotgun. "Candidates who feel they're in the senior-level national or international job market should take a broad approach and contact all of the largest search firms. Those are the types of positions they specialize in," says James. H. Kennedy, the retired founder of Kennedy Publications in Fitzwilliam, N.H., publisher of Executive Recruiter News.

Conversely, technology has made it possible for you to tailor your efforts more efficiently. By searching the database of executive search firms located within careers.wsj.com, you can uncover the names, phone numbers and postal and e-mail addresses of recruiters that match your specific criteria.

Part of your approach might also be to target smaller search firms that specialize in your industry or function. "The top 100 firms by and large are generalists," says Mr. Richardson, who's based in Upper Montclair, N.J. "Of those, the top 40 receive material from every possible source: outplacement firms, universities, senior executives." By focusing on smaller firms, he says, you increase your odds of attracting personalized attention if you match a client's needs.

Whatever size of search firm you decide to target, how you get your resume into the right hands is a matter of contention. Some firms actively discourage follow-up telephone calls, while others advocate a personal follow-up.

"To zero in on the right person to contact, it's a hell of a good idea to call each firm and ask who specializes in your industry," says Mr. Richardson. "You might get the name of a research director, from whom you can find out if there's one person or one office that handles more searches in your field," he says.

Yet few search firms welcome cold calls from candidates. "It's a hassle to have people follow up by phone," says Mr. Ray. "We receive from 500 to 1,000 resumes a week, and we'd be on the phone all the time," even if just a small percentage try to call, he says.

If your efforts to enlist a recruiter's support are successful, Mr. Ray offers the following suggestions that can make your relationship with the search firm more effective:

Remember that the recruiter's primary objective is to serve the client, not you.

Be candid up-front about your background, education and salary requirements. Those facts will be verified later, and even a "little white lie" can disqualify you.

If a position doesn't appeal to you, say so immediately and ask to be kept in mind when a better match arises.

Ask about the firm's track record in your industry or function before agreeing to an interview.

Ask for specific information about the job, such as responsibilities, exposure to top management, the company's culture and the compensation package, but realize that not all information can be shared during the early stages of the search.

If you aren't invited to an interview, realize that it usually isn't a reflection of you personally. It's probably just not the right match, says Mr. Ray.

— *Mr. Lee is Editor in Chief/General Manager of careers.wsj.com, a free career site from The Wall Street Journal Interactive Edition.*