

Boston Business Journal

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Recruiters put on consulting hat in tight labor market

Boston Business Journal - March 23, 2007 by [Jennifer LeClaire](#) Special to the Journal
Recruiters aren't just order-takers and résumé-generators any more.

As the labor market tightens, more companies are expecting headhunters to serve as full-fledged recruitment consultants. These consulting recruiters rely on industry and company knowledge to design custom search strategies that deliver qualified, retainable candidates, said Joe McCabe of the Boston office of executive search firm Heidrick & Struggles.

"A single search can have a tremendous impact on an organization either because it's mission critical or because they have a specific time frame," McCabe said. "At higher levels in an organization, companies can't afford to work with a recruiter who doesn't understand the challenges."

The challenges through which consultative recruiters help clients wade are many, from finding qualified talent to developing compensation plans to building retention strategies. The concept is similar to conceptual selling, a strategy for determining what a client wants and why they want it in order to best meet their goals.

Eric Preusse, vice president of the Atlantic search division of professional staffing firm Kforce's Boston office, takes the consultative recruiting concept one step further. He thinks of it as a partnership with the common objective to attract and retain targeted talent. That partnership, he said, often includes discussion around compensation.

"Some of our clients have asked us for advice on compensation plans that attract the right talent and then reconstructed their equity stakes and bonus programs as a result," Preusse said. Recruiters, he added, have to stay atop market conditions to make the proper recommendations.

That includes knowing the going salary rates for specific positions in specific industries.

Proper recommendations are not always straightforward. McCabe recalled a recent search for a financial services client that needed a high-level marketing guru with a consumer marketing background. Heidrick & Struggles brought in two of its recruiters, one who knew the consumer marketing industry and the other who understood the financial service industry, to consult the client on the best strategy for finding that all-in-one candidate.

"The search strategy can vary dramatically based on the skill sets and industry. The type of candidate you are searching for to work at a public company is different from a private company. The interview process is different," McCabe said, noting that companies don't have time to spend months in the interview process only to discover they have to start from scratch because of a "surprise" in the candidate's background or career desires. Due diligence, he added, helps prevent that.

Stephen Seckler, managing director of BCG Attorney Search Inc. in Boston, is as much a candidate consultant as a client consultant. While the client foots the bill for his services, Seckler said a large part of his role is to help the attorney find a firm that will help advance his or her career. This candidate consulting perspective helps the client because it fosters retention in the long run.

"We don't just fax résumés around. We want people to make good career decisions in the short term," Seckler said. "That said, I have discouraged law firms from hiring what looked like an ideal candidate because I found out information about them that would ultimately lead to a mismatch."

Seckler also clues law firms in to what it would take to land specific attorneys. Recently, he worked with a patent attorney who wanted a broader mix of casework. Seckler was able to find this attorney a position at a firm that afforded him new opportunities. It was a win-win for the client and the candidate, he said, the fruit of a true consultative approach.

"No one wants to waste their time in this job market with a lot of tire-kicking," Preusse concluded. "We want to make a match quickly."

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