

A client's "Bill of Rights"

By Sandra Burmeister

Executive search has always demanded a significant financial and time investment by the organisation seeking to fill a position. Rightly so. It's leadership skills you're looking for and they're never in abundant supply, all the more so in South Africa where the established talent pool is sorely stretched and the upcoming generation not fully initiated.

Besides, acquiring, training and retaining leadership skills is about ensuring the long-term sustainability of your organisation. Better to take the time and care to be sure of getting the best candidate for the position than rush into a disastrous appointment. The estimated cost of a mis-hire at an executive or senior management level is estimated at 15 times the annual package of the individual.

Still, you want your money's worth from your executive search firm – so how can you tell whether you're getting it, and how do you judge whether the firm you are appointing is the best ambassador for your organisation? The answer is: by sticking to best practice, as in other areas of business today. But what is executive search best practice?

By working with an executive search firm that is a member of the Association of Executive Search Consultants (AESC) – a global organisation founded in 1977 – you have the assurance that key processes are aligned with the association's codes. The AESC was founded with the aim of promoting the highest professional standards in retained executive search, broadening public understanding of the executive search process, and serving as an advocate for the interests of the industry as a whole.

The AESC defines retained executive search *"as a specialised form of senior-level management consulting, conducted through an exclusive engagement. Its purpose is to assist a client organisation in defining executive positions and then identifying and selecting well-qualified candidates through comprehensive search processes"*.

That sounds fairly straightforward. But executive search firms have to be able to accurately read your organisation in the context of its market so as to be able to introduce precisely those skills that will enable it to grow and innovate faster than its competitors. And they can't do that constructively through a series of discrete, occasional transactions. They have to build relationships with their client organisations, the talent pool and the community at large. What good, for instance, is a search firm in South Africa today that doesn't have broad-based black economic empowerment or gender equality at heart?

How effectively does your executive search firm act as ambassador for your organisation? More often than not, between 20 and 50 potential candidates will be contacted in a single search assignment. The potential for significantly enhancing or damaging your organisation's reputation during this process is high. Candidates will judge your organisation on your choice of strategic search partner.

In South Africa many recruiters call themselves executive search firms or "headhunters" without any real understanding of what that should involve. It is therefore up to the client to be able to differentiate between a recruiter and a strategic partner. The best way to ensure that you can do

this is to insist on your rights as defined by the AESC. The AESC client bill of rights stipulates, for example, that a search firm must provide its clients upfront with proof that it has the resources, time, knowledge, credibility and expertise to handle a given assignment. It must disclose any conflict of interest – real or potential – or any limits caused through servicing other clients that may have an impact on the client. It must define the conditions under which it will not recruit candidates from a client organisation. And it must clearly define the scope and nature of the services and the fees related to those services.

Obviously, the client organisation has to proffer its own information about the position to be filled, its own corporate culture, and its business needs. Otherwise there's no way to match the search firm to the client organisation with sufficient accuracy. But the requirements of a search firm don't end there. It must disclose which of its consultants will be working on an assignment as well as which of its third party suppliers (verification checks, for instance, are often outsourced) will be brought in.

The firm must also demonstrate its knowledge of the industry in which it will be conducting the search – including the availability of suitable candidates, comparative assessments of those candidates, and remuneration levels – as well as industries where transferable skills could be sourced to augment the choice of talent.

It should also be able to provide thorough market research to demonstrate that it understands how the client organisation is perceived in its market – in terms of preferred employer status – and also that it knows which of the recruitment strategies currently in play in the market are working. Holding client information confidential at all times is a given.

The next point seems as obvious, but all too few client organisations ask their search firms to demonstrate that they understand the nature, qualifications and skills requirements, and impact on the organisation of the position to be filled. Good search firms will do more than just feed back your own job description. They'll proactively help you develop, modify and refine your own understanding of the position, specifically in relation to the strategic direction and current challenges within the business.

Naturally, once the search process has begun, your search firm must provide you with regular reports on progress. And they must guide your interaction with the candidates they recommend, bearing in mind that the very first interview you have with a candidate is the benchmark against which your future relationship with him or her will be played out.

In other words, retained executive search is a continuum of relationships that reaches from the heart of your organisation all the way out into the business community and back – with the search firm acting as the facilitator. So use your rights as the client not to enforce obedience from your search firm, but to ensure that you get access to the best skills and an enriched relationship with your market and your community. **P**