

Getting the Most Out of Your Recruiter

Staff for most companies is the single greatest cost factor. The attendant costs for recruitment, training and retention make using a recruiter an important investment. Taking advantage of the enhanced talent available in a down market enables a company to really hit the ground running as soon as the recovery starts. This first mover advantage can more than pay the costs of the hire and recruiter.

Hiring staff represents a major investment in time, both for recruitment process and for induction and training, as well as in money, for recruitment fees, salary and up front bonuses. To get a good return on that investment, you have to look not only at turnover and cost-per-hire, but also at the quality of the hires, managers' satisfaction with the hires, time to reach beyond break-even productivity levels and other metrics. The wrong hire also represents opportunity costs, potential deterioration of work place environment and creates internal issues.

A recruiter will help define the role and skills needed and give initial market guidance. Then the recruiter will sell your company to the right candidate and help close the deal. This all sounds pretty straightforward, but it is quite a bit more complicated than it sounds. The value-add here is that recruiters will expand your reach in the market saving you time and money. In changing times, recruiting should be a long-term strategic goal to ensure a pipeline of talented individuals are attracted to your firm/company, regardless of whether you happen to be cutting or creating jobs in the short-term. Ideally, hiring managers should be communicating and building a pool of potential applicants who have already been pre-screened by the recruiter.

When a recruiter talks to you about your hiring need, they want to know a lot about you, your company and your company's culture. They will discuss why you need the hire, what the essential components are and what would just be nice to have. Then they can give you a general overview on the available talent, how realistic your expectations are and the amount you will need to budget. In this process, you will get the most out of it if you have given some thought to what you want from this hire. You also need to decide if there is a consensus, or if different people are weighing in with their own ideas. Recruiters quite often encounter situations where there are conflicting views or agendas within the organization regarding the kind of person needed and the precise role. They cannot resolve this problem for you but can help define the issues and choices that have to be made and if the ambiguity persists, can try to find a hire that is at least prepared to deal with the situation.

Finally, really give some thought as to how far you are willing to deviate from your ideal candidate. Prepare to be realistic, based on what the market and you have to offer. Talented people are vulnerable in unstable markets. Good candidates always have options and may be looking "just in case". Staff considering pre-emptive moves may contribute to rumours of instability of the company in the market. The market is not always rational, as we have seen, and rumours spread quickly with no basis in facts or numbers. Keep your key staff informed about the company and what is happening so they have a sense of ownership and belonging and can identify with management.

Once the recruiter starts defining the talent pool, he/she should use a combination of different methods. First a database search; make sure you use a recruiter who has focused on this specialty so they will have a good basis from which to begin. Having a track record in this area is important, meaning there is access to past placements that can refer candidates. A good recruiter will have an established network, both people working in that field and also through their own offices in other countries. Having resources in other countries can give the client access to candidates who would be unreachable otherwise. Next is advertising, which focuses on magazines and web-based job boards, as well as proprietary websites. Finally, there is the pure

research side, cold calling your competitors to find who can be approached and having substantial knowledge of the current market.

How do you get the most value from this?

First, use a recruiter who has enough experience to understand your needs. The right recruiter will have access to the kinds of people to whom you want to talk. Make sure you have been clear in outlining your parameters and demand good screening and evaluation, not just a sales pitch or a pile of resumes. The main reason you are paying for a service is to save you time and money. If you cannot rely on the recruiter's judgment, why are you using them?

Giving feedback to the recruiter is critical to establishing an efficient process on both sides. If you take the time to explain why X is right, or what you like about Y, the recruiter can refine the search further or tell you why they can't. This can relate to budget or being realistic about your expectations, but it will give you a clear idea as to the likelihood of finding your ideal candidate.

Candidates are not fungible. Each brings his/her own hard and soft skills to the table which is why a good recruiter will be sensitive to the nuances of the client and will look, not only for the people with the right qualifications, but for those who meet the standards of the company. Your recruiter should know about the candidates' motivations and expectations for this move. Are they moving for money? Because of a glass ceiling? Is there a personality issue? What is their career goal?

Without a good understanding of the expectations of both sides, a recruiter cannot ensure a good match and longevity. This is an important point to note when selecting your recruiter. It is not just how many placements they may have done in your field, but how long these placements have lasted. Placement longevity is a sign that the recruiter has understood the client and candidate requirements. Given the cost of training and recruitment, it is important your recruiter does not try to squeeze a square peg in a round hole. A good recruiter will be very glad to get another call from you soon but not about the same position.

In a recession, lots of candidates flood the market creating an overwhelming volume of work for HR. There are many factors to be considered when hiring in a down market that a good recruiter will identify, such as screening candidates who may be desperate for jobs and could accept positions even though they plan to leave as soon as the economy upswings. Some candidates may over-state interest or abilities to secure a role and then are not able to deliver, and some may be willing to accept a position for which they are overqualified simply to have employment.

Once a short list of candidates has been established, the recruiter will have to sell the company or job to the candidate. Many may think this should be simple; you are a great multinational, so of course candidates would jump at the chance to work there, but this is not always the case. Especially in a peer to peer situation, many candidates say, "Why do I want to go there? My own company/firm/employer is just as good/large or prestigious." In a recession, good candidates may be afraid to make a move. This is when your recruiter can really add value. There are always certain buttons a candidate responds to, and knowing what they will find alluring enough to consider a move is part of a good recruiter's skill. As a third party who knows the industry, a good recruiter can have a lot of credibility. Having a recruiter who can sell your company with sincerity, who believes in your business and who can communicate that enthusiasm and passion to the candidate is a very important factor in successful recruitment.

As the employer, please ensure you have explained the interview process, how many steps, if there are any tests and please, give prompt feedback. This creates a positive and professional image for the company. If an interview process gets too drawn out, candidates question if there is a real need for this position. They lose enthusiasm or they get other offers. A long process that

stops and starts leaves a bad impression on candidates and can negatively affect the company's reputation in the market.

Now that you have identified the candidate you want to hire, the final step is closing the deal. In China, this is not always as simple as it looks. Your recruiter will have given you the market comparable information, as well as the candidate's current and expected compensation. You will have already briefed him/her on the company's salary scales, bonus targets and history (the expected increments and the company's attitude towards guaranteed compensation as opposed to incentive compensation.) At this stage, it is good to have HR brief the recruiter on the benefits package as this can have a significant impact on a candidate's decision. The number of holidays, insurance plans, tax efficient structuring, pension plans and other substantive elements should be laid out. By having a good understanding of your company's compensation and benefits structure, your recruiter will be better able to manage the candidate's expectations and be creative in establishing a solution that works for everyone. While it is possible to attract skilled candidates for less remuneration in a recession, be careful not to under pay, because these individuals will continue to shop for a better deal. Short-term hires will be more expensive in the long run.

Once a proposal has been made, it is best to review it with the recruiter before extending to the candidate. This is very important, because an initial offer may not be attractive to a candidate. It can save a great deal of time, and sometimes some negative feelings, if you have received feedback from the recruiter as to how acceptable your proposal will be. Depending on how far apart both sides are, it is the recruiter's job to negotiate and work out a deal that is win/win for both sides. A good recruiter will help to structure an "optimal" package. Not so low that your new recruit will feel low-balled, and not so high that you are inflating the market.

So why use a recruiter? Using a good recruiter will save you time and money, not just in making the actual process work smoothly but in hiring the right person at the right price. A recruiter will promote your company to the market and reinforce a positive brand image which can be crucial in a down market.

The qualities of a good recruiter include: sensitivity, understanding your company culture and expectations, track record in long-lasting placements with a solid network of contacts and knowledge of the industry, good communication and salesmanship skills to sell your company and the role and finally, good negotiation skills to bring both sides to a happy understanding.

Should you use one recruiter exclusively or several? This is a matter of balancing several factors. To get the most value out of your recruiter, you have to collaborate effectively with him/her. How much time you can invest will partly determine whether you will use one, two or several recruiters. Take into account using too many will decrease the motivation of them all to work as hard as they otherwise would on an exclusive mandate. The investment in time and effort that productive collaboration requires is mutual and something a good recruiter will also weigh, so the more agencies you instruct, the less a reputable recruiter may be willing to invest since the potential for a worthwhile return on that investment is reduced. Using multiple recruiters may also lessen your credibility in the market. Candidate comments noted include: "This is the fifth call I've had about this. There must not be any candidates interested." "I hear they are desperate." Generally, it is recommended that senior-level hires be restricted to one recruiter or two at maximum. For more junior roles, where the potential pool of talent is larger since the skills are less specialized, you can use more.

Most of all, you are depending on the recruiter's judgment to find the right person for you, so use someone you trust and in whom you have confidence.