

Head Hunter

Finding the
Perfect Person for the
Perfect Job

Kim Johnston

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Acknowledgements

This book is the result of meeting, talking, and working with some of the most inspirational people in business in Northern Ireland. Many have shared stories and memories along with their expertise in growing businesses and developing teams.

I would like to offer my sincere thanks and appreciation for your insights, your confidence and your honesty.

All of the names have been changed and some of the stories are a mix of several unrelated events. They make a point which I hope you will appreciate.

Finally I would like to thank the Clients for whom I have found staff and the Candidates whom I have helped in their career. They have offered me their trust and for that I am ever grateful.

Preface

You might know this story. A sculptor was describing how he managed to find the perfect form by chipping away at a block of marble. He explained that he knew that perfection was in the stone, all he did was remove the unwanted stone until he found it.

Finding the perfect person for a job is essentially the same. You might not realise it but you probably already know exactly the person you want to do exactly the job you have in mind. But the idea is buried in bad employee experiences, failed job searches, ghastly interview sessions. Chipping away at what you don't want can be a hard job. Sometimes you need help.

Finding the perfect person to fit the perfect job is what I have been doing for more than a decade. It's all about doing just the right thing at the right time; refining your ideas about what you want, who you want, then knowing how and where to look.

But that is not enough. With the help of a Head Hunter, you can carry out a perfect selection process, induct the successful Candidate and ensure you have the perfect person for the role.

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1

UNDERSTANDING THE COMPANY NOT JUST THE JOB

I find people for jobs, not jobs for people. In simplest terms possible, that is what a Head Hunter does. A good Head Hunter will understand the job that she is trying to fill. To do that I need to understand more than just the job description, I need to understand the company. I also help the business understand exactly the sort of person they want.

Sam is the MD of a well established business. A few weeks before he and I had sat in his office his team began developing a new product. For the first time in many years Sam's company had decide to expand operations and engage with a new customer base and supplier chain. He believed he needed a Supply Chain Manager, but he did not really understand what a Supply Chain Manager was, what a SCM did and what were the skills a SCM should have. He understood the job title and had a fairly good idea of what he wanted this person to do. When I asked

Sam for a job description he gave me a short paragraph outlining some of the skills needed, but we were a long way from having a job description that would help the business and me find the perfect person to fulfil the role.

Usually when I work with a business, they will write the job description. This time the circumstances were slightly different. This was a new venture for a long established business so we both needed to spend some time defining the role and the skill sets required.

My job is to help a business define what it actually needs, not what it thinks it needs. To do that, an excellent Head Hunter needs will need to spend time understanding the business, its history, its structure, its board, its game plan.

Together Sam and I worked out what that what the business really needed was a Project Manager who understood Sales and could work successfully with the existing Sales Team. The match was as important as the job description. Here we had an established company planning to venture into a new area of business. The great strength of the company was its structures, processes and methods. It had a world class Board of Directors and a clear business strategy. The need was for someone to do two key things. First they would help grow the business fast using new methods and secondly they would help to develop new structures.

So a fuller understanding of the business itself, the people who already work there and its plans for the future – not just the vacancy – led Sam and me to devise a plan to recruit exactly the right person for the job and also to give greater clarity to the role.

There are Different Types of Ambition

Before we begin the process of finding the right person for the Client company, I need to know as much as possible about the business; its values, its culture, its ranking in the industry. The Head Hunter is going to be searching for the Client, but at some point, she is going to have to “sell” that company to the prospective employee. Those values and ambitions are going to have to align with the prospective employee’s values and ambitions. So I will want to find out, for example, where the company is ranked in the industry.

Almost everyone says they are Number 1. That phrase really has no meaning unless it is backed up with data. It does not always follow that being Number 1 in turnover means Number 1 in profit. Number 1 in market share is just that and nothing more. When I’m judging a company I think the only measure of Number 1 is found in the Profit and Loss Account. Among the first themes I will discuss with the business is their ranking. Not only will I have to find the most attractive Candidate, I will need to make the most attractive proposition to the Candidate.

Matching Ambitions

Not everyone wants to be “Numero Uno”. People’s ambitions differ and business ambitions differ. Everyone needs to make a profit, but for some businesses, the values they share with their staff are just as important. So the Head Hunter needs to match the ambition and the values of both the organisation and the person they are looking for to fill a vacant position.

Selecting a Candidate with a hard driving attitude and placing them in a business with more relaxed attitude will

not work for either party; a mismatch might even damage the business.

However there is one major caveat which a great Head Hunter will be aware of. If the owner of a business with high “life style” values meets a highly driven individual who can take their business (or a section of their business) in a new direction without damaging the business values, then that can be a winning formula.

I know of one Public Relations company who dealt with only a few blue-chip Clients. There was a small staff and they ran a highly profitable business; everyone was happy. A new dynamic Client Services Manager joined the company. She realised that there was great value in the work that was already being done. She also realised that if the owner continued to concentrate on the five leading Clients, she could chase new business, perhaps under a different brand. There was no reason to move the owner out of his comfort zone and every chance she could generate a new line of business. If the plan was carried out sensitively, retaining the values of the existing company but expanding into a new market with great verve and a new style, everyone was going to be a winner. And they were. The existing Clients were served with the traditional values of the old business and the new Clients experienced the vibrant new culture.

Everybody was a winner.

The Challenge Function

Normally it is the responsibility of the Board to challenge the Management of a business. But sometimes there is a greater value in placing a more challenging manager in a business, particularly if that business has become rather complacent. A business nestled in a comfort zone can

become slow to respond to market change, can appear to customers to be delivering a lower value product, can make a customer feel that they are taken for granted and not delivering value for money. A business that is stuck in its comfort zone can appear to a supplier to be so easy to work with that it is of no importance to incentivise deals.

Sometimes a business cannot see that they are just too comfortable and they really need a challenging manager to move them from Comfort to Action. I call it The Challenge Function and I believe it is important from time to time to present a more challenging Candidate to the Client.

A Skill Can be Trained – An Attitude Can't

I was working with an engineering company who had decided they needed a new Chairman. Finding the right fit is as much to do with finding the right personality.

Paul and I sat in his office discussing the search for a new Chairman for his Board of Directors. Paul is the CEO of a publically quoted company and his office matches his status. The business is in high-tech engineering. The style of the office was clean lines, glass and light, but not much personality.

I first met Paul five or six years ago. At that time he was “the Candidate”. I had Head Hunted him for this very company when they were appointing a Chief Financial Officer. Now he was “the Client”. Since his appointment Paul had flourished in the business and been promoted. He was now mapping out the company’s future. I knew him to be witty and warm. He was a generous host who, outside work, had two passions; his twin daughters and water colour painting.

Every morning when Paul came through the doors of

his business, he appeared to the people he worked with as a very different person. He took his role very seriously. People he worked with called him “highly efficient”, “an outstanding manager”, “driven to achieve success for the company”, but they also used adjectives like “cold”, “remote”, “analytical”. His employees and his board had enormous respect for him and his achievements.

We were discussing a shortlist of people for the Chair. One was perfect on paper, however, those words, “cold”, “remote”, “analytical” could have been applied to him, too. One other Candidate was very different. He was a “people person”. He was a very accomplished businessman with a superb track record, but quite unlike Paul.

For this company, the Chairman and the CEO needed complimentary personalities. After considering the needs of the business and the people involved, I told Paul that my recommendation was to appoint someone who had a great deal of experience in people management, who had mentored others and developed fantastic staff that had responded positively to his natural warmth.

It has been a perfect match for everyone and the as a result the business is thriving.

Test Your Theories with Others

As part of the exercise to find the new Chairman I spoke to all the senior managers in the business and a lot of other people outside of the business. Everyone I called knew they could trust me and all their observations would be in confidence. (I’ll be talking more about Trust in the next chapter.) Rather than relying only on my own perceptions, I relied on the understanding of the people who were going to have to work with the new Chairman and other business partners and customers. I tested what I thought

against other people's experiences. My intuition matched the perceptions of many of the people I spoke to. I backed up my recommendation with evidence and the opinion of the people who mattered. Paul likes data; he dislikes hearsay and rumour. He places importance on the opinion of people he respects.

The decision was to invite the Candidate with people skills to be the new Chairman. The business continues to grow.

Become Involved Early

A new and innovative technology business came to talk to me about to plan for rolling out their product globally. They are not Clients, but I hope one day they will. Before long, they will need a Director of International Sales. It is much too early in their business just now, but already I have spotted an experienced Sales Director who will be a great match for their ambitions.

The earlier Head Hunter can become part of the business development and recruitment plan, the better the job that will be done.

Don't Lurch from Job to Job

Average Head Hunters rarely spend time developing long term relationships. They react to the market and to Client demands. They spend less time understanding the Client than understanding the brief. A great Head Hunter takes the long view and considers what is in the Client's best interests now and for the future. It is simply good business sense. In time a returning Head Hunter Client relationship will pay off for everyone.

Bringing Businesses Together Not Just People

Some of the work I do is about building opportunities for Clients. Sometimes that is about introducing companies to other companies. As I write I know of a company that is in acquisition mode. They have already told me their plans and their ambitions. They want to grow their business and in order to do that they are looking around for businesses to buy to boost their customer base and revenue.

Recently, I met another company who I know would be a perfect fit for them, but they don't know about each other. Of course timing and Trust are important and it is foolish to blunder into someone else's business. But soon I will be calling the first company and suggesting that I arrange an introduction.

That does not move me away from Head Hunting. Bringing companies together will create new opportunities to find people for new positions.

The Head Hunter has a Different Insight.

I don't look for office juniors but in the one case when I did, I found it interesting that the Client did not really know what he was looking for. I had been working with Andrew for many years. By this stage he was more a friend than a Client. So when he asked me if I knew of someone who could do a few months administrative work I was happy to help.

As far as Andrew was concerned he needed an experienced clerical assistant, someone who had been trained and had experience. When I suggested Amanda, he was reluctant. I knew Amanda was bright, well educated and

had just finished first year in University. Her summer availability matched Andrew's requirements. She was studying in Belfast, which meant that during term time she could be available for work. What I knew about Amanda that Andrew didn't was she had a great attitude. Andrew was looking for experience and qualifications.

"Take her for two weeks – if it doesn't work out, let her go." I suggested. "In the meantime I'll keep an eye out for someone else."

After two weeks he called. He was bowled over by this smart young woman. She didn't wait to be asked or told; she anticipated. She filed perfectly and was naturally polite and friendly to customers whether in the office or on the phone.

Sometimes the Head Hunter knows you are looking for the right attitude rather than the right qualifications.

2

BUILDING TRUST

More important than knowledge, more important than experience, and even more important than networks, above all the Head Hunter's greatest asset is Trust.

The businesses I work with need to know that I have a track record on delivering what I have promised, but they also need to know that I can be trusted. Looking for the right person means that an organisation has delegated one of their most sensitive activities to me. They have trusted me with one of their most valuable assets; their people.

In the first chapter I told you about how it was important for senior managers to be able to talk to me in confidence. They were able to tell me about what they believed was important to the success of the organisation. Sometimes those were issues they could not always discuss with their CEO. The businesses and the leaders who hired me need to trust me – and I need to trust them.

When Ellen called me, she had been in her new post for about six months. Ellen and I had never spoken before I had begun the recruitment process which had resulted in her signing with my Client. During the Head Hunting process, we had spoken often and had got to know each other. This was the first call from her since then.

Some Candidates stay in contact with me after they take up their new post. It is good if they do; sometime they might need a Head Hunter's skills to find people for them. I tend not to expect it, though. If they are happy in their new jobs, that is good enough for me.

“One thing I just don't understand,” She said when we met for lunch the following week. “I work in an industry that lives on gossip and back channels; no one trusts anyone with private information, no one trusts anyone with sensitive information beyond the immediate need to know. So I don't understand that when I resigned from my last post you, me and Adam (her new boss) seemed to be the only people to know, right up to that point. How? Really, how did you keep it secret in this industry of all industries?”

My reply was succinct. “I didn't tell anyone else. I asked Adam not to tell anyone else and without asking you directly I understood that you would not be telling anyone else. I relied on you not telling anyone else.” Then I gave her the long answer. These are my guiding principles for building trust.

It's Who You Know and What You Know!

Successful businesses are built on good reputation. A personal referral will almost always bring greater benefits than an advertisement or a cold call.

I work within a massive network of colleagues, business acquaintances and friends, none of whom would give me a personal recommendation if they did not trust me. That trust has been built over the years and at all costs must be maintained. The good Head Hunter efficiently delivers on the contract. The great Head Hunter efficiently delivers and remains part of the businesses trusted circle.

Never Poach From Clients

Here is a quick suggestion if you are a Head Hunter and never want to work again; do a fantastic job matching the perfect Candidates with the business needs, then steal someone else from that business for another Client. You will lose two trusted relationships; the business you poached from and the business you delivered to. Why would you lose the second business? Well, although they got what they wanted, they saw how you operate.

All businesses want to minimise risk, they will be sure to minimise the risk of losing their good staff to your devious methods! So, you will gather – I don't poach from my Clients.

If Trust is Offered, Match the Expectation

I have found that people in general are generous with their trust. Most businesses I know will put a lot of faith in a good reputation. If someone I am working with or hoping to work with is open and shows that they are prepared to extend so much good will, then it is up to me to respond as generously. I have to ensure that everything I do with the business is faithful to that trust.

The work of a Head Hunter is not just to deliver high quality employees. The job of the Head Hunter is to build

a long term relationship with a company in order to help them deliver on their objectives

Learn from Mistakes; Mine and Others

A new colleague on his first Head Hunting assignment had reached a crucial part of the search. He had identified who he thought was exactly the right person for to be Financial Director. But there was one thing – at that point the position wasn't vacant. The current FD was going to be eased out (or to be more dramatic – fired). The business wanted his replacement lined up to ensure continuity.

In my colleague's excitement, he decided to send a fax to his with all the details of Candidate to the MD of the Client company. (Are your toes curling right now? What you think was about to happen, happened.)

It was an open office and a common fax. The young excited new Head Hunter hadn't even checked the MD was ready to receive the fax. And it was seen – seen by the FD who was replaced.

While this was in the days before email was commonly used in business, the same rules apply. When dealing with sensitive material, check, double check and triple check that any information being sent will remain confidential – whether in the post, email or fax.

I always check with the recipient the best most secure way of delivering information. Most times, the only thing to do is to meet in Client in person and hand-deliver the documents.

3

DEFINING THE SEARCH

There are three main ways to search for exactly the right person to fit a Client's needs. Each is effective but depends entirely on different sets of circumstances. It is always a serious business and there will be complex processes and legal matters to keep in mind.

I was working through these strategies with one of my new clients. "You know," he said. "This reminds me of when I was about 15 in the Youth Club. It's the old 'My mate fancies your mate' scenario, isn't it?" I hope it is a little more sophisticated than that, but I could see what he meant. The Head Hunter is the go-between but when the job is done properly, the Head Hunter's search is considerably less embarrassing than Youth Club gossip.

The Complex Search

For more than a decade finding the perfect people for Clients, I have built a strong reliable network of friends, contacts and colleagues. I have stuck to the values set

out in Chapter 2 “Building Trust” and that means when I speak to someone they know they can always rely on my discretion. The Complex Search begins by talking to as many people as possible. Talking to people in the industry helps me get a clearer idea of role and the sort of person who I’m looking for. Through this network I also begin to understand who is available, who might be a prospective Candidate, who might be interested in talking to me. Sometimes the excellent people I call are people who appear to be quite content in their job. I might only be calling to find out if they know about any prospective Candidates and they offer themselves to be considered. These are usually people who have known me for some time and understand how I work.

My business network includes people who have already contacted me, sent me a CV and I have had a preliminary chat with. As I have said, I find people for jobs, not jobs for people so if they fit the job specification I will call them at that stage.

After twenty or more phone calls and face to face conversations, a pattern will emerge. Names of people are suggested. Some will be people who I am told that I should approach and some will be people to avoid. Over a period of a few days, a list of several people will emerge. It is then I begin my campaign to hunt them down and bring them in.

Throughout this process, it is essential to keep the name of the business I am working for confidential. It is not until both parties are happy that names are released. And sometimes at that stage the interest evaporates. Both might be perfect on paper, but normal human dynamics come into play. That is why most successful searches are combination of two strategies, when the Complex Search and Targeted Search run in parallel.

The Targeted Search

There are times a business will know exactly who they want. There are also times when a business will know who they most definitely do not want. While the Targeted Search can be specific and direct, it is not without its own difficulties and limitations.

This is the conversation that can never happen: “Hi, this is Kim Johnston; I’m a recruitment specialist working for Company X. They have a vacancy as Sales Manager. They and I think you are the right person for the job. Can we talk?”

Where do you start pointing out the failures in that opener?

When the Client and I are sure that there needs to be an approach to a specific person, the first thing I will try to do is get a personal telephone number, direct line to their office, mobile, even a home number. The first approach needs to be handled delicately. Calling the switchboard is sometimes necessary. I do not use my own name. I ask for the person by name and if asked “Does he know what it’s in relation to?” I’ll say “No, but I would be grateful if he could give me a moment of his time.”

When I get through I will say who I am, what I do and that I’d like to have a conversation and if this isn’t a good time, when should I call? People almost always realise that it is a call they should take and we do have the conversation, if not then, soon after. It is essential to keep the name of the Client out of the conversation. The prospective Candidate is in business, too. They might be perfectly happy and have no intention of looking for a new

job. But it would be excellent business intelligence to know that a competitor is Head Hunting.

The Advertised Search

Advertising a Job Vacancy while at the same time carrying out a Complex or a Targeted Search is a fairly common approach. The Client will pay for an advertisement in the Press. Sometimes it is good just to get the company logo into the public eye and there is always the possibility that an unexpected applicant will step forward. If the Client has a particular person in mind, I will make a quick call to let them know the post is advertised. Not everyone – particularly the best people who are satisfied with their job – reads Situations Vacant regularly.

There still needs to be care in this approach. Just because someone is on the Head Hunter's radar does not mean they are the target. There is still a requirement to handle the situation diplomatically; no one wants egos to get bruised or to damage the business's reputation.

Why HH is not HR

The Human Resources Department plays a specific and important role in any large business. The HR staff ensures that employment law is followed, that policies around recruitment are fair. Human Resources deals with staff retention and rewards, salary and bonuses. Sometimes their job is unfairly trivialised as “Tears Tantrums and Tissues”. The HR department will write the Job Specification and the Person Specification and ensure the interview procedures are followed correctly.

The Head Hunter usually does none of those things. The Head Hunter's role is to Search, Identify, Find and Present the right Candidate. Following that the HR staff will tick the boxes to ensure Fair Selection and adhere to Fair Employment legislation.

However sometimes if the business is small and does not have an HR resource, I will be happy to help out with the Interviewing, Fair Selection and matters around Fair Employment legislation.

When it comes to the Interview, I will be glad to prepare the Interview Panel and if needs be, sit as an observer helping with note taking and any discussions.

4

THE INTERVIEW

When I was starting out in my career and I was “the Candidate”. Prospective employers would invite me to an interview and yes, often I was nervous. What I know now that I didn’t know then was that some – if not all – of the Interview Panel were nervous too. The HR professional was less likely to be; they understood the process, why certain questions should be asked, what they were looking for. Other members of the panel were concerned that they would ask the right questions, get the answers they needed to make the best and most informed choice. And more often than not, try not to look foolish in front of their colleagues.

The Interview is a Process

Like all processes the Interview has aims and objectives. It has desired outcomes. It has Key Performance Indicators. The performance of the candidate and the whole process is measurable. A good interview is like any other good piece of work. It is about understanding, planning, executing perfectly and reviewing. When an interview process is complete, the right candidate will be offered and

will accept the right job.

First, Understand the Job

You will probably have noticed Understanding the Job is a recurring theme for the Head Hunter and the Client. The Job Specification and the Person Specification will be the map and the navigation. They will set out what real function of that job and the skills that the Candidate will need to carry it out. As the Head Hunter I am going to help you understand the map and navigation.

I will help you understand the subtleties of what you are looking for and challenge any assumptions you make.

The First Sift

I mentioned “ticking the box” in the last chapter. People often talk about “ticking the box” as if it were a perfunctory exercise or something that lacks imagination. People refer to “ticking the box” as if it is something that is performed merely as a routine something done in a hasty or careless way. That can be true, but “ticking the box” is exactly what is required to carry out the first sift of applications and CVs. It is important and will remove the inexperienced, the unqualified and yes, even the chancers.

Your advertisement or Person Spec. will have set out your expectations including the minimum qualifications required to reach the interview. There will be a scoring matrix setting these minimum criteria; “Five years experience as Senior Manager”, “An MBA”, “Fluency in Spanish”. These are the qualities, experience and education that are needed to do the job. They can be written down and measured. When that process is complete, then you can be fairly sure that the people you will interview have the

right experience – or they say they do. Now you will test what they say in an interview.

The Interview Plan

Still using the map and navigation of the Job Spec. and Person Spec. along with the Head Hunters experience in this particular jungle, a panel will be convened to meet the candidates. It is familiar to us all. But while it is familiar, are we all sure we are doing the right thing? Here is where the Head Hunter will help. The planning for this exercise is a key function. You will meet well before the interview and agree the questions. The Panel will agree what they expect the outcome to be and they will build a plan; who will ask questions, what they will ask and if any members of the Panel will play an observer role rather than an interrogative role. It is an outdated concept that everyone must ask a question. One – or even more – members of the Panel can observe, listen and take notes. However, they should reserve the right to jump in to ask questions for clarification or deeper understanding.

Now we have a new scoring matrix which will be weighted to reflect the importance of each of the candidates' competencies. If being a good team worker is more important than, say, having good financial skills, let the scoring reflect that.

Finally, the person who should be asking the bulk of the questions is going to be the person the Candidate will be reporting to. They will take the lead in the interview and should be the person who best understands the job and the sort of person who could do that job.

The Core Competency Question

People that I have worked with both as Candidates and Clients have often spoken to me about how the job interviewing process has changed over the years. Michael is Head of Banking for a business which is a major contributor to the Northern Ireland economy. He took me to dinner a short time before he retired. Michael was one of my first clients and we had worked on many recruitment exercises. “It used to be so slapdash.” He told me when I asked about interviews for this book.” We would meet for 20 or 30 minutes before the interviews started and tell each other what the questions we planned to ask – we didn’t discuss the quality of the questions, mind you. We just wanted to be sure we weren’t asking something legally questionable. As far as we were concerned, the job of HR – or Personnel as it was then – was to keep us protected legally. When the interviews began, we would fire off the most inconsequential questions. We always made sure that each candidate was asked the same questions, but they sometime bore no resemblance to the job or the person we wanted. We hadn’t a clue. All the candidates were financial experts with buckets of experience, most had the some sort of qualification, they were broadly the same age – and gender come to that. What the hell was I going to ask them? The one who looked least stupid, nervous, confident got the job. I guarantee if we sat them all down, offered them each a cup of tea and then tried to read their tea leaves, we’d have done a better selection job. Not that I’m complaining. That’s the way I was interviewed, too.”

The real point of the interview is to identify and test the core competencies of the Candidates. Core Competency is the fundamental knowledge, understanding and expertise within a particular skill set. The examination revolves around questions like “Give me and examples of ...”, “What methodologies did you use ...”, “What was the

outcome ...”, “How did you measure ...” Drawing on the candidate’s knowledge and experience will help you identify the right person. If you are unsure then it is a Head Hunter Core Competence to support and advise you on the process.

Keeping it Formal

The first interview should be formal. It is respectful to the candidate and it is respectful to your business. You will explain to each interviewee that note will be taken, and everyone on the panel will be writing throughout. At times the Interviewee will be talking to the tops of people’s heads. Make light of it, they are professional too and are likely to have interviewed people themselves. Let them know how long the interview will be. Show you are in control and have command of the room. Let them know who everyone is, their function and whether or not they will be asking questions. But be kind; understand that they are nervous.

I have seen and heard about some terrible interview techniques and experiences; the interviewer who kept telling the interviewees the answers he wanted (leading the interviewee to agreeing to everything he said), the aggressive interviewer who caused an interviewee to storm out swearing that he would never have anything to do with the company again. I attended one Interview Panel where half way through one interview while the Candidate was answering a question, the Chairman stood up, sighed deeply, walled over to a window, opened it and stuck his head out.

Remember, it is an Interview not an Interrogation. The interviewee should and will ask questions. Their questions can be as revealing as their answers to your questions. The interviewee is testing you, too; do they want to work

for you? Do they feel that this business fits their expectations? One interview springs to mind when a particularly conversational exchange was happening. One of the Panel got quite cross and said to the Interviewee “Why do you keep asking us questions?” The Interviewee stopped, looked at the Interviewer for a heartbeat and replied “Context.” She waited another heartbeat and then gave a perfect answer to the question she had been asked.

Keeping Notes

The interview is a serious business. HR (or I if you ask me) will help you through the legalities and you will be expected to take notes of what the Candidate said. It is essential these notes are as detailed as possible, that they agree. The main interviewer is permitted to take fewer.

“Ding, Ding Round Two”

There is likely to be a second series of interviews and sometime even a third. They become less formal. You are looking for a personal fit by this stage. Can you find a person who can fit the team? Does the Candidate really inspire and have the vision you need? While there are fewer formalities, it is still necessary to plan and record. The Head Hunter and HR will probably not be involved at this stage, but it is still a formal selection procedure.

What’s The Worst Interview You Have Experienced?

Most of us have nightmarish interview memories. You do not get the best person for the job by being unpleasant, unprepared or unethical. Try not to give the Candidates that you interview nightmarish stories of the time they met you.

5

MANAGING THE TRANSITION

I called Jennifer at home one evening. Her name and number had been passed to me by a mutual friend. I was looking for a new Head of International Sales for a pharmaceutical company. Jennifer had been running a successful team for five years and had built a considerable reputation. She was happy with her employer and her employer was very happy with her work. Later she was to tell me that she had not for one moment thought about working for anyone else in those five years.

I called her to ask if she would be interested in working with an international company who had plans to expand into Northern Ireland. Her response was a polite but cautious “Thanks, but no thanks”. She recognised that this was a door opening. I knew and she probably knew that she was probably not going to close it immediately.

People rarely move from one employer to another just for the money. When I call potential Candidates they will assume that my Client will be able to match their earnings. But why move from somewhere just because the money is

the same or slightly better? In my experience a Candidate will listen to a proposal, they might even consider it for a while. The motivating factor will not be just the money. They might move for a better job title, a car, more holidays, more control of their destiny; there is an almost endless list of reasons.

When Jen and I met in a coffee shop in the city centre, it looked as if two old friends were catching up over a cappuccino. It was the first stage of a negotiation. In that first half hour meeting it was clear to me what might motivate Jennifer. Although she had been with the company for five years, she had inherited the team she now led. There had been some changes, but essentially it was the same people with whom she had been working from day one. She knew their strengths and weaknesses, but they were not “her people”. There were some that she was satisfied with, and some she was not. That was not the point – Jen wanted a team which she had selected, trained, motivated and knew she could trust to build an outstanding sales force rather than the “really quite good” sales force she had now. She also wanted an iPhone. Her current employer only supplied Nokia to staff as their business phone. Yes of course she could afford to buy her own iPhone – she could have 10 if she wanted. The phone was not the point. The phone represented the underlying paternalistic attitude that her employers had. She could have the phone and the team they supplied. She wanted her own team. “You know, I never realised I thought that until this moment.” She told me.

The new company that I wanted to introduce her to needed a leader with the vision and the ability to build a team from the ground up. And that is what Jennifer wanted to do. I told her I could not guarantee an iPhone, but if it was a deal breaker I would see what I could do. She laughed and we parted on good terms. Better still the door was not closed; it was open a little further. Jen still had

deniability if it became known she had met a Head Hunter.

Phill was also on my list, too. She was ripe for promotion but there was no indication from her employer that a rise in the ranks and a rise in salary were in the immediate future. When I met her to discuss this new company coming into the market, she was still a reliable and conscientious employee. While she was keen to advance her career, she too had not considered a move until now.

Alan knew nothing about pharmaceuticals, but was a strong Candidate because of his background in international sales. He had a long list of previous employers in the UK, Europe and the USA. The list of successes was just as long. For Alan, the prospect of long term engagement in a company was not attractive. He told me his mantra was “Hit, Score, Win, Run”. It worked for him; it worked for his former employers. “What would attract you to a new challenge?” I asked. “Clear objectives, achievable targets mixed with some real stretch targets and deadlines. But the milestones, the team and resources are mine to choose and when the project is over I get a pre-agreed bonus to match the success.” He said. Alan’s personality is a bit strong for some people; he strikes some people as being over confident, yet people who have worked with him say he is inspirational, he commands and gets total loyalty and no matter how hard the task gets everyone knows it will not last forever and when it is over the rewards and personal satisfaction will be unbeatable. So he has a lot to be confident about.

With the search complete I had a short list of three people to interview. Only one would get the job. Two would not. Two of the three had not been looking beyond their current employer for advancement and now they had a Head Hunter telling them how perfect they were for this new position. Alan was looking around – as he almost

always was. In his opinion he was perfect for the job and he did not like to lose. Soon they would have the MD from this new company also telling them how wonderful they were.

Preparing the Candidate and the Client

The Head Hunter needs to understand the Candidates' motivations. It is vital that their motivation matches my Clients' business needs. Once the Candidate is in place, will the business be able to deliver on the Candidates expectations? If they cannot, then the Candidate will probably not stay, or worse, perform below expectations, disappoint the Client and me. It is in my interests that I deliver the perfect Candidate to the perfect job with the perfect employer.

When reporting back to the Client, I will need to ensure that they fully comprehend all of the Candidate's expectations and are in a position to satisfy them. Even if it is as apparently minor as an iPhone as communications tool of choice.

Preparing for the Competition

Three weeks after my first call to Jennifer she had psychologically moved from being content in her job to bursting to get this new one. The people I deal with are highly motivated individuals who play to win. Nothing is half-hearted. Jennifer has had three weeks of being wooed, complimented, having a great deal of attention paid to her and had a new glittering career dangled before her. She always knew she was good, but these strangers are telling her that her reputation is of International standard and she was the one they wanted. Well, one of the three people they were interested in. She had

convinced herself this is the job she wants now, these are the people who she wants to work for and this wonderful Head Hunter has introduced her to a fantastic new future. Jen wants to win; this is where she needs to put her head. It is all part of the competition preliminaries for her – and for the others.

I believe strongly this is the most difficult part of the whole process. Finding the Candidate can be time consuming and sometimes a little prosaic. But when the Candidates are preparing for battle and while the interviews and negotiations are taking place the Head Hunter needs to hold each of the Candidates hands and roots them in the reality that they are right for the job. But they have to always understand that they are one of three.

Delivering the Bad News

So who got the job? Phil was young, bright and ready to take on a new challenge. The older more experienced Jennifer was the perfect person to build a new team. Alan not from the industry, but in international sales he is second to none.

It is almost always impossible to explain that a Candidate was not quite the right “fit”. I do not even like the word “fit” in this context. But the decision was made. The MD got to call the winner. I got to call the two ... well let's not call them losers. They only lost this battle. They are still successful in their careers and the great Head Hunter will help all the other Candidates through this period. An average Head Hunter will deliver the bad news and move on.

Why do I continue to help? Simply, these are fantastic Candidates who one day will be exactly the right fit for a different company and the great Head Hunter will be there

to help place them. Why would they want to work with someone who treats them shabbily? Who wants to work with someone with a “You’ve lost, you’re dumped, good-bye” philosophy?

It is likely that I will not be on the interview panel. Always, the final decision will be taken by the people who are about to set those targets, set the performance standards and who have a long term relationship with the Candidate. Maybe they don’t like Alan’s apparent over confidence, maybe they don’t like Phill’s barely perceptible apologetic manner; perhaps they don’t like iPhones. But they are the people who make the decision.

I call the other two Candidates and tell them “The interview panel has decided to appoint someone else.”

Now the Winner is Feeling Vulnerable

Now there are six partners in this dance and the Head Hunter is thrust into the centre. There is the Client, the winning Candidate, the two losing Candidates and the Employer who is about to lose a valuable member of staff.

This is the moment when it can all go wrong. The deal is sealed and delivered, but not signed. It has been an exhilarating race and the winner has been chosen. But now it is the winner’s turn to deliver the bad news to the Boss they have worked with for years.

She (or he) has been happy working with her employer. They have travelled a long way together. They have had their fights and their wins, their disagreements and their successes. The good has outweighed the bad 10 or 20 fold. Now the Candidate needs to say “Good-bye”. This is where the great Head Hunter earns her commission. It can be an emotional time. There will be thoughts about whether

this is the right decision. It is still up to the Head Hunter to deliver.

Negotiating the Package

Part of the delivery process is helping negotiate the package. It is in the Head Hunter's best interests to get the best possible salary for the Client – that is what the Head Hunter's commission will be based on. But there is a delicate balance. I need to be realistic. Sometimes the Client and I will agree on a cap; that is in both our interests. If I do my job well, we will both want to work together in the future. For the Client, they will be able to up an offer to a Candidate without penalty of having to pay me more.

Moving from The End to a New Beginning

Is this where the journey ends? We move to Signed Sealed and Delivered? Sometimes it is. But there is a vacancy created by the departure of the Candidate, and possibly a business opportunity for the Head Hunter. I very, very rarely will take on the losing business as a Client. There is no greater reason than "it just feels wrong". While it might appear to be overly opportunist, sometimes there are good reasons to go against that general rule.

Sometimes the business does not replace the Candidate. They see it as a time for review and renewal. Sometimes all the love has been one-sided and while the successful Candidate was happy where she or he was, the business was looking for a way to release them. There have even been occasions when the "losing" business has quietly asked me to place one of their staff somewhere else where they might be a better fit.

6

AND FINALLY ...

The two key themes in this book are:

- What is Best for your Business and
- Trust

Finding the best people who will understand what is expected of them and perform to the highest possible level is a skill.

It is a skill for a leader.

It is a skill for an entrepreneur.

It is a skill for the Head Hunter.

Trust is something that develops. Both parties need to build that trust and that is why all the names in this book have been changed as have the scenarios.

When the Head Hunter and the Client build that respect and trust, the Head Hunter can become a confidante.

One Final Story

A client was looking for a new Head of Marketing. The first person he met was a young woman who had been married for about a year. He was immediately convinced that she was the person for the job “But don’t tell her yet.” The days drifted into weeks and he had made no decision. Meanwhile, she was calling me every few days “I want this job, why has he not made a decision? When will I know?”

“I don’t know what to do.” He confessed at the end of the fourth week. “This woman is perfect for the job.”

“So what’s stopping you? Let’s just tell her now.”

“I know – I’ve lost four weeks of business – but she’s just married. Next thing you know she’ll get pregnant. I know I can’t disqualify her for that ...”

I stopped him mid-sentence and reminded him (perhaps too firmly) that he could not disqualify her because she was a young recently married woman. I told him that I was glad that he could be open with me. “She is not going to change her lifestyle to suit you. She the best person for the job and you are about to lose twice. You will lose her as a great employee and then you will lose her to a competitor. Hire her now. If she becomes pregnant so be it; she is a career woman, not a stay at home mum. Plan for the time she might be away. Plan now so if she does take time off, you are ready.”

He hired her that day. She is brilliant in her job, but importantly, he and I have a great trusting relationship. A good ethical and legal decision was made, and his business continues to improve every day because she is there.

