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## ***Evaluating Executive Search Firms***

### **Suggested Questions**

#### ***Can you provide references?***

It's important to keep in mind that most contractual relationships between executive search firms and their clients may require a confidentiality clause as part of the agreement.

This makes sharing or promoting specific client names difficult without violating the agreement.

However, any search firm ought to be able to at least provide a sample outline containing position titles, locations and general industry sectors involving placement success.

#### ***What is your competitive advantage?***

Any reputable, established recruiting firm should be able to articulate their competitive advantage or unique approach.

With smaller search firms, the advantage can be that of stealthily conducting the search without raising suspicion with candidate's current employers (sometimes a little known name is not paid much attention to which works to the clients advantage).

Smaller firms (a.k.a. boutique or specialty firms) are also less prone to be hamstrung by stacks of non-compete agreements established by former clients.

Large, global search firms with 100s of offices and prestigious pedigrees often include Ivy league and Big Four or large consulting (Bain Advisors, Towers, etc.) alumni whom can be advantageous when it comes to tapping in to a similar community of prospects.

The drawback can include being encumbered by their own name recognition. Example, if a cell phone on an executive desk's displays in big bold lettering "Korn Ferry" the call may be sent to voicemail if a boss is standing nearby.

Large firms are often bound by thousands of non-compete agreements established with clients before you ever initiated contact. Your search therefore, may include only a fraction of the talent pool if the company is forbidden from approaching many of the companies you'd like to see candidates from.

Example: A global firm with 100s of U.S. offices, may have all its offices bound by non-compete agreements involving the same companies. If the same 500 companies are immediately off the prospect list, multiplied by each of the 100 offices, the search may be impeded before it even gets off the ground.

### ***"How would you approach this search?"***

A simple question such as "How would you go about conducting this search?" will reveal volumes of insight as to the search firm's know how.

Pay attention to large hesitations, gaps, pauses. Regardless of industry, specialty, or job discipline, the search firm ought to convey a solid grasp of how it will go about conducting your project. You should sense conviction and confidence.

Any reply that seems to make things up as you go along should be a warning.

### ***What's the difference between you and \_\_\_\_\_ ?***

This is a good question to ask if you already have another search firm in mind and are merely seeking to narrow the choice down to a finalist.

## **Additional Questions**

The following questions should be considered “filler” or ancillary questions. For example, a lower fee is not going to save you money if in six months the search has to be redone by another firm. Or, if mid-way you find yourself having to contact another firm.

But fees, experience, years in business can all add up; completing the picture once the more important issues have been established.

Flexibility is also a key trademark of the more successful firms. At the end of each day, it is their ability to *accommodate* and bend their process or procedure to satisfy each client that sets the consistently successful apart from the others.

1. How many years in business?
2. What is your fee arrangement? Are there options?
3. Who will be working on our assignment? Will it get assigned?
4. Who will be accountable during the entire process?
5. What is your past track record of success with positions such as this?