

A Collaborative Approach to *How HR and Search Firms Can Partner*

By Melissa Fincher



Higher Ed Executive Searches

An executive search can feel like drinking from a fire hose. Where do we start? What kind of leader are we looking for? Who will serve on the search committee? Where do we find the right candidates?

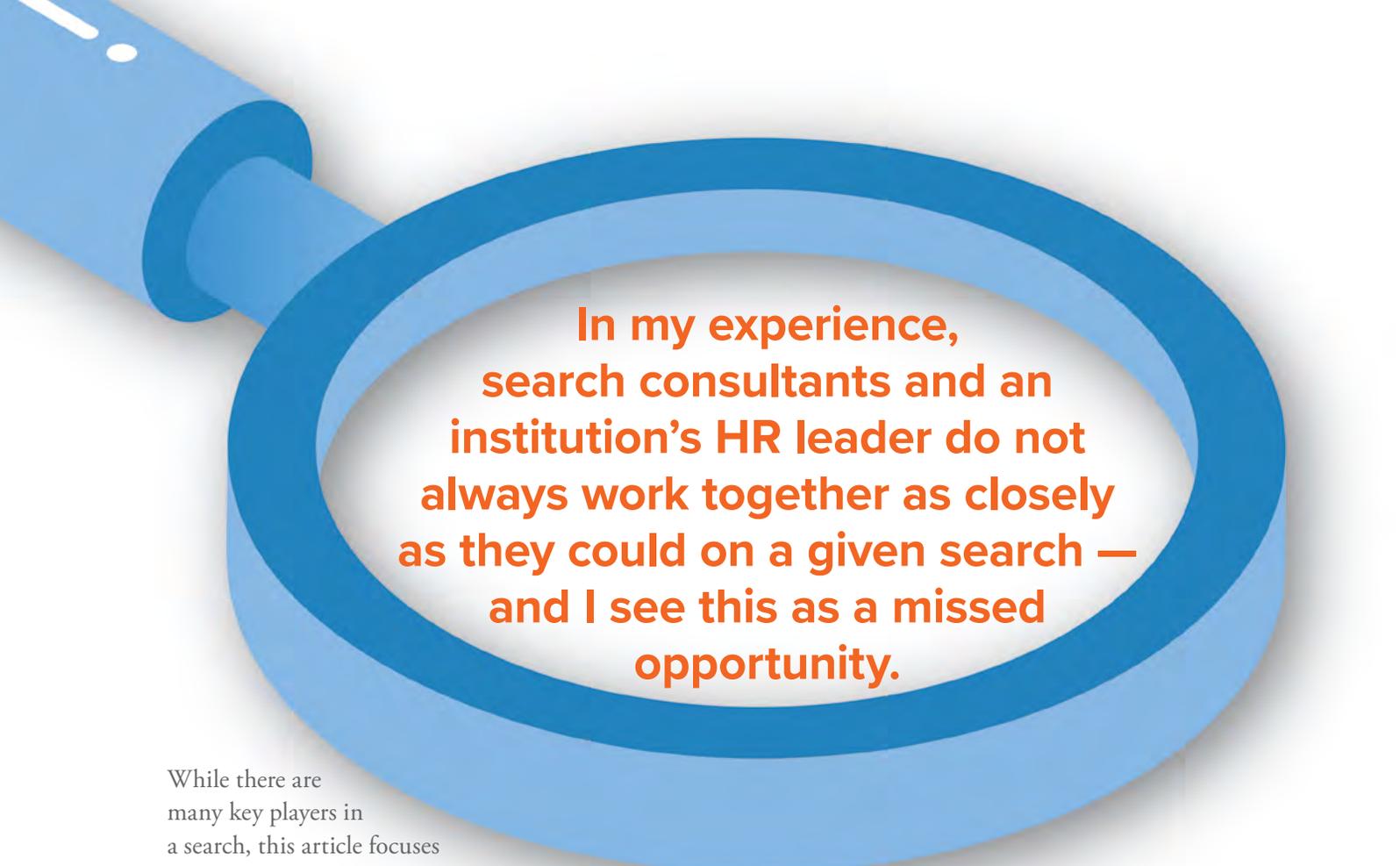
Because of the complexity of a high-profile search at a college or university, search firms are often hired to take the lead and are charged with managing the various stages, providing counsel to the hiring manager and search committee, conducting widespread sourcing, and producing a slate of diverse and intriguing candidates for the committee and institution to consider.

As a search consultant, I believe we excel at what we do and provide real value in identifying difference-making leaders. As a former higher education human resources administrator and talent manager, however, I know the value that the chief HR officer (CHRO) can and should play as a trusted partner to search consultants, from the very beginning of the engagement. In my experience, search consultants and an institution's HR leader do not always work together as closely as they could on a given search — and I see this as a missed opportunity.

I recently completed an executive search in a major metropolitan area that experienced significant hardship following the recession in the late 2000s. Making the case to candidates for relocation to this area was an obvious challenge, and I knew that identifying leaders who had a strong affinity to the region and a passion for its revival would be paramount to the search's success.

In speaking with the CHRO about the market response and about times when the institution was successful in attracting candidates from other parts of the country, I learned that when several of the major local industries failed, entire families relocated to other cities throughout the United States for job opportunities. This information uncovered a very specific niche market and was pivotal in forming a sourcing strategy that ultimately identified several excellent candidates with a desire to return to the region. This is just one example of many in which partnering with an institution's CHRO aided a search in which I was involved.





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While there are many key players in a search, this article focuses on the search consultant/CHRO partnership and suggests some ways HR can collaborate with search consultants on recruitment and talent acquisition efforts. Here's how HR can play an active role.

Advocate for the Value of the Search Firm

When an external firm is hired, there may be questions as to why it was brought in and what the CHRO's role will be. One of the most important factors to consider is that search consultants have relationships with passive candidates who are looking for a layer of confidentiality between the client and their candidacy, and they may feel a bit more exposed by working directly with the hiring authority. The search team and CHRO can work together to anticipate questions and concerns from stakeholders and present a unified voice in responding to them.

Provide Key Background Information

The executive search firm and search committee will want to move quickly through the initial steps of an assignment. As they do, they'll want substantive information — including fiscal reporting, organizational charts, strategic plans, executive profiles and more — to support the recruitment strategy. The CHRO, having a comprehensive knowledge of the institution and its resources, can be the primary point person in obtaining reliable information.

Provide Effective Recruitment Insight

As the search progresses, it is important that the head of human resources remains a visible and active partner to the committee and the consultants, especially pertaining to the institution's

competitive differentiation in the marketplace and as an employer of choice. A neutral but invested HR leader can be the go-to authority on what has and has not worked within the institution's culture, challenges to attracting and retaining talent, compensation limitations and other matters.

Ensure That the Search Firm Adheres to Internal Policies, Practices and Procedures

It is important that the search firm understand the unique needs of an institution's recruitment procedures with regard to documentation, analysis of credentials, the institution's application process and so on. This will help ensure that the firm is satisfying the institution's internal recruitment requirements relative to the qualitative and quantitative analyses of candidate credentials. The chief HR officer can

and should work closely with the firm in this area.

Steward the Finalists

As candidates for a position are narrowed, the hiring manager will seek to understand the professional and personal considerations candidates may have in making a major life decision. The CHRO can play an important role in aligning the second part of that narrative — the personal components.

At this point, the CHRO and search consultants can consult with each other on matters such as career support for a trailing spouse, academic needs for school-aged children, or the state of the local real-estate market. Additionally, discussions around compensation are not always as simple as “base and bonus.” There are cost-of-

living and other considerations, from healthcare benefits to tuition remission and a flexible work schedule. The CHRO’s input in crafting a customized total rewards package that will attract and retain the candidate of choice is essential.

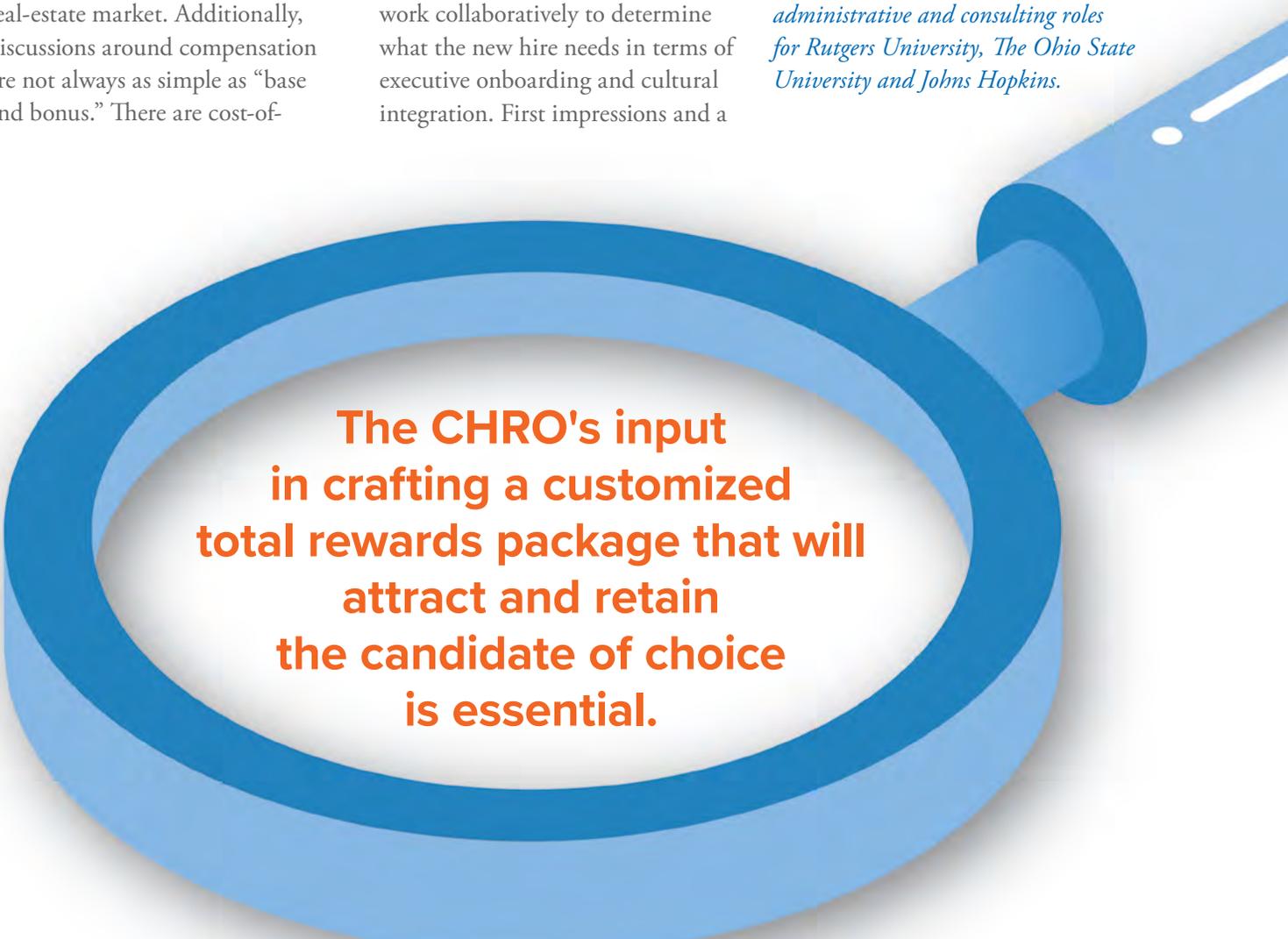
Ensure a Successful Transition

The hand-off between the search firm and employer is a delicate one. It should not feel like a transaction, but rather one more stage in a strong, ongoing partnership. It is critically important that the CHRO and hiring manager are committed to a smooth transition, warm welcome and substantive orientation. The search consultants, hiring manager and CHRO should work collaboratively to determine what the new hire needs in terms of executive onboarding and cultural integration. First impressions and a

well-thought-out onboarding process can make all the difference in setting the new leader up for success.

While there are many critical elements to a successful executive recruitment effort, a strong partnership between the client institution’s chief HR officer and the executive search consultant is an invaluable component of a successful search and creates a foundation for them to work together efficiently and effectively on future engagements.

***About the author:** Melissa Fincher is a member of Witt/Kieffer’s Education Practice. Prior to joining Witt/Kieffer, she served in various senior administrative and consulting roles for Rutgers University, The Ohio State University and Johns Hopkins.*



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