

How to Work with an Executive Search Consultant

By Suzanne Teer, Witt/Kieffer

As an executive search consultant in higher education, I have had the pleasure of working with countless candidates for academic and administrative leadership opportunities. In executive search, we consult with our clients on all aspects of the search process to help them hire talented leaders for their institution. A primary part of our job is to develop a pool of applicants that meet our client's current leadership needs. Whether you are new to working with a search consultant or have some experience, this article provides some "dos" and "don'ts" to help you engage with a search consultant with success throughout each stage of the process.

Initial inquiry

When you learn about a new leadership position, your first step should be a conversation with the search consultant. Even if you are confident it is a position that you want to apply for, slow down and reach out to schedule a call. When candidates apply for positions without talking to the search consultant, it can create an impression that you are applying without much thought. And, more importantly, the consultant is a valuable resource that you can take advantage of. In your conversation with the consultant, you may learn some important insights and nuances about the position that may be helpful to you in deciding if this opportunity is a good fit for you and in preparing your application materials. In addition, the conversation gives the search consultant an opportunity to get to know you.

Application materials

Use the insights you glean from your conversation with the consultant to help shape your application materials. Tailor your CV and letter to the institution and position. Demonstrate that you have done your homework, understand what the institution is looking for in its next leader and have the experience and qualities to do the job. I am surprised by the number of errors I see on resumes and cover letters. Likewise, some resumes are very hard to navigate and far too many are simply lists of responsibilities rather than an outline of accomplishments and ways you have made an impact on your organizations. Ask someone you trust to be honest with you to provide feedback on your CV and letter of interest. If you are not certain about the length and level of detail expected, ask your consultant for their input.

Phone screen

A consultant will often want to conduct a phone screen to get to know you better. This call can be part of your initial inquiry or may come at a later stage, perhaps after you have applied. Be prepared for an in-depth call even if you just have a few simple questions. Although you may see the call as a great opportunity to sell yourself, remember that the consultant has key questions they need you to address to help determine if you are a good fit for the job. Resist the urge to monopolize the conversation. Let them guide the conversation so they can ask the questions they need to ask. Be brief but thorough in your responses. And as much as possible, tell stories and share concrete examples that illustrate your accomplishments.

Be prepared for the common questions: Why are you interested in this particular position and institution? What are some specific examples of the impact you have had on your organization? What questions do you have for me? Do your homework on the institution and read the leadership profile carefully. Come with a few thoughtful questions for the consultant — they illustrate your approach and how you think about things.

Internal interview

Our firm often conducts internal interviews with candidates we believe are well-suited for a position before we present the slate of applicants to our client. This enables us to explore their background and experience in more depth and provide insightful feedback to our clients. Take this interview as seriously as you would an interview with the client. All of the same rules apply. If you haven't interviewed in a while, now is the time to brush up on your interview skills — there is an art and science to conducting a strong interview. Your interview may very well be conducted by video. There are important considerations for video interviews — again, do your homework.

In-person interviews

In a typical search process, there will likely be two rounds of in-person interviews: a first-round interview that is typically a brief interview with the search committee, and a second, final-round interview that is typically an all-day schedule of meetings with stakeholders across the institution. Often your search consultant will schedule time to prepare with you so you know what to expect. They want you to succeed as much as you want to succeed! If your consultant doesn't offer a call to prepare, ask for it. Be sure to ask your consultant questions that they are uniquely prepared to address — composition of the search committee, insights into key influencers in the interview process, logistics for the interview and the timing of next steps, for example.

Communication and follow up

Communication with your search consultant is important throughout the entire search process. Get in touch with your consultant if you have questions or new information to share. If your schedule changes, you are having second thoughts or you become involved in another search, let your consultant know. Likewise, if you have questions you are reluctant to ask of the search committee, talk with your consultant. The more information your consultant has, the better he or she can serve you and their client. Discretion is an essential quality of a successful search consultant. If you are invited back for a final interview and are having serious doubts about pursuing the opportunity, contact your consultant right away. He or she can talk through the situation with you and help you determine next steps. When you are asked to submit references, complete an on-line survey or submit additional information, take care of these tasks right away. Your responsiveness demonstrates your interest and attention to detail and helps keep the process moving efficiently. Search consultants really do want the best for our candidates and our clients. If the match isn't the right one, no one wins. Likewise, if all goes well throughout the process, and you are in fact well-suited for the position, your search consultant can be a very strong advocate for you.

In Closing

Although we work on behalf of our clients, we cannot do our jobs well without great candidates. We are highly invested in your success, too.

The way you handle yourself through the search process says a lot about the care and attention you will demonstrate in your new role. You make an impression at every step in the process. Let every point of communication and engagement with your search consultant reinforce your professionalism, thoughtful approach, quality of your communication skills and attention to detail. The best-case scenario? You get the job and enjoy great success in it. The worst case? You don't get the job but now you have a search consultant who knows you well and will be ready to assist you when the next opportunity comes along.

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About the Author

Suzanne Teer is an executive search consultant in Witt/Kieffer's Education practice. Suzanne supports leadership searches across all academic areas, with particular expertise in development and advancement. She brings extensive experience in fundraising within the field of education spanning liberal arts colleges, independent schools, top-tier research universities, and academic medicine. Suzanne is based in the San Francisco Bay area.

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