

Is It Crossing a Line for a Search Consultant to Counsel a Job Candidate?

Dennis Barden

“I am ready for you to help me find my next job.”

My fellow search consultants and I receive calls and emails with that sort of appeal fairly regularly. Some of the requests are more subtle than that; some are more direct, even demanding. All betray a basic misunderstanding of what we do.

People call us headhunters. Although some among us bristle at the term, it nonetheless seems apt. We do hunt, in that we observe the environment, identify our targets, and pursue them aggressively in an effort to capture them — or rather, their imaginations — on behalf of our clients. In that this effort provides us our daily bread (i.e., our compensation) and that our targets are people, the headhunter moniker seems appropriate.

One of the ways in which the metaphor breaks down is that our prey very frequently wish to be stalked and captured. So willing are candidates to be hunted that, in fact, they reach out to us to let us know where they are and what bait would be necessary to tempt them to stray from their current lair.

With some frequency, they even ask us to make them more obvious and attractive targets of college and university search committees.

A recent conversation with an up-and-coming institutional leader is a typical example. So promising is this person that he had never had to apply for a job — he was always sought out, recruited, and hired. Now he finds himself near the top of the pyramid in his profession without ever having been proactive in pursuing his next opportunity.

As a result, when he learned of an open position that seemed too good to resist, he had no idea how to pursue it or where to get help. He turned to what must have seemed to him

the obvious source of aid: the consultants hired to guide the search. Could we help him to craft his materials, practice interviewing, and otherwise navigate the hiring process?

This sort of request puts search consultants in a predicament. Our jobs are twofold:

- Generate a pool of candidates worthy of the institution we serve and the role that we seek to fill.
- Catalyze a thorough and efficient process that results in the best possible placement and garners the support of the vast majority of the campus community.

It is not part of our official role to help individual candidates position themselves to be more compelling in a search.

Yet sometimes we do.

Search consultants are frequently criticized for playing favorites, seeking to provide a competitive advantage for some candidates to the disadvantage of others. One result of such criticism is that my colleagues and I are very careful not to tilt the playing field. We do our best to leave all decisions about the candidates to the client, as is appropriate. We disclose the nature of our relationships with candidates so that our search committees and hiring officials will be aware of any conflicts of interest — or even simply so that they are able to factor our biases into what they hear from us about a candidate.

In short, we go out of our way to avoid even the appearance of bias or favoritism. And then a candidate asks for help, landing us in a difficult gray area:

- On the one hand, we have responsibilities to the institution. When we coach people on their interview performance

or make suggestions on their written materials, we risk corrupting the data our clients use to judge the candidates.

- On the other hand, the hiring process is somewhat arcane and mysterious, made more so by the fact that most people don't encounter it very often. That is particularly true in higher education, where hiring is highly process-driven and dominated by institutional culture, precedent, and compliance issues. Even excellent candidates can be flummoxed by it and fail to present themselves effectively, which undermines the search not by bias but rather by compromising the hiring committee's perception of the candidate.

So what is an ethical headhunter to do?

Some responses are easy. For example, the answer to the request at the top of this column is no — we are not here to help you find your next job. That is not what we do. We work for the institution, and our covenants require us to work only for its benefit.

Some requests require more nuance — for example, the relatively common request to review a candidate's written materials, especially the eternally mystifying cover letter. Is it in the institution's best interest for its search consultant to help a candidate? Are we not serving our client well by ensuring that judgments are made only on the substance of a person's experience and expertise, unsullied by any inadequacies in the appearance of their documents or interview style? Is it not a serious problem in the hiring process that some people are better able to present themselves compellingly than are others, regardless of actual merit?

Well, yes and no. Rightly or wrongly, in executive leadership such appearances definitely do matter. It is not unreasonable to assume that a person who makes multiple grammatical mistakes in a cover letter will also make them in a proposal to a foundation or in a speech to an alumni group. By correcting a candidate's errors, search consultants would be masking key information that search committees and hiring officers need in their decision-making. It is critical, therefore, that we not subvert the process by allowing people to misrepresent themselves, including as communicators.

At the same time, institutions often criticize a consultant who allows candidates to present themselves poorly and, thus, waste the search committee's time. Many — perhaps most — clients expect us to prepare candidates for the conversation to come, so that it is substantive and comprehensive. That is

difficult to achieve if the candidates are confused about how to manage their side of the dialogue.

What, then, are reasonable expectations on this front for all parties involved in an executive search?

- Candidates: Don't expect the search consultants to alter or enhance your attractiveness to the search committee. Our job is to ensure that both parties are representing themselves accurately and fairly to the other. Always remember that we work for the institution in everything we do.
- Search committees need to have complete faith in the consultants' abilities to create and maintain a level playing field for all candidates. That includes working with people to ensure that they present themselves accurately to the search committee.
- Search consultants: Our interactions with candidates must be only for the purpose of clarification and preparation. That should be our standard. There is an enormous and consequential difference between clarifying and coaching, and search consultants must always stay on the appropriate side of that boundary.

Do search consultants ever cross over that line? Of course we do.

We are human, and it is a part of our personalities and our professional training to nurture relationships and to provide support. Search committees must look out for even the slightest whiff of potential impropriety, and my colleagues and I should only do what we are prepared to disclose fully to our clients.

So if you want your head hunted, make sure that it stands above the crowd. We may help to ensure that you stand at your full height, but please don't expect us to give you a boost.

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