

How to secure your next executive role

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In a previous article I discussed “job search strategies” from three perspectives: candidate, employer and recruiter (Foster, 2007).

This article updates those strategies and provides action steps to help secure your next executive role. The steps we discuss are:

- Have a clear objective
- Take a strategic, personal and thoughtful approach
- Be distinctive
- Have a well rehearsed message
- Build a strong personal brand
- Ensure you are a good ‘fit’
- Maintain an engaged, active network
- Go the extra mile

Have a clear objective

Start by writing down your ideal role and what excites you, including the type and level of role you are seeking, the type of organization you prefer (e.g. large corporate, non-profit, consulting, start-up), whether you want to leverage a particular industry or service skill-set, and the lifestyle and environment you are looking for (e.g. overseas travel opportunities, flexible hours, dynamic or more stable workplace).

You may come up with more than one option but it is important to articulate them. When you are in contact with a potential client or recruiter, being clear and concise about your objectives and capabilities will help you be remembered for specific opportunities.

Take a strategic, personal and thoughtful approach

Whatever the market climate, a sizeable proportion of jobs are filled long before a company ever considers advertising them.

“Jobs are created either where there’s a need to be addressed or a leader is dissatisfied with the performance of someone in their department and starts thinking about making a change” (Simon, 2008).

Doing intelligent research on companies who may be undergoing major change gives you a chance to identify potential opportunities ahead of them being formalized. If you can initiate a dialog and position yourself as an expert who can help before a position is advertised, you have significantly increased your chances. Your initial objective is to get the attention of a decision maker with whom you can discuss how you can address the company’s needs. Simon also suggests that sending “a succinct note” (as opposed to a resume), talking about the company’s needs and relating it to your background and experience, is a good way of initiating a dialog.

Be distinctive

Many people do not spend enough time establishing what makes them different, memorable, or even “unique”. To get hired, particularly in a competitive market, you need to stand out from the crowd. At a high level, your skills and experiences will look very similar to others. Ask yourself, “In what am I an expert?” It is also worth asking peers, clients etc. what they see as your key strengths and skills – we often interpret our own capabilities differently to others. Also, what type of leader are you? For example, are you a: turnaround specialist, strategy guru, innovator, generator of growth? While you may be good at many of these, you will likely excel at only one or maybe two – these are often areas you are passionate about and can share success stories.

Have a well rehearsed message

Now that you know who and what you are, you need to be able communicate your *potential* and the *benefits* you can bring to your executive audience. Can you articulate it in one or two sentences?

A common mistake is to be too broad and general when communicating your experience. If so, you will sound generic and be unmemorable.

Hiring executives are interested in how you can grow their business and address their challenges, so make it easy for them. Translate your expertise into a forward-looking picture and show your audience what’s in it for them, emphasizing what you can and *will* do.

If you are on a shortlist, they will be thinking “which of these potential Vice Presidents has the greatest potential for our firm?” (Armon, 2009).

Your message should make it easy for hiring executives to understand that the benefits of having you on board will significantly outweigh the costs.

Build a strong personal brand

A brand is intangible. It exists in the mind of the consumer. A strong and clear brand will help to differentiate you.

Hiring managers are looking for people it will be easy to “sell” to their boss; executive recruiters are looking for candidates who will make an immediate impact with their clients.

In building your brand, ask yourself: “What is my specialty or area of leadership?”, “Are my ideas in print and are they visible?”, “Do people know what I am best at and when to call?”, “What area of my work do I most enjoy?”, “Am I in demand to present/comment on issues affecting my industry or service area?”, “Do I have a verifiable track record?”, “Is my point-of-view forward-looking?”

Most employers want to “hire those who are already experts in their own field” (Careers Online, 2009). High performers are often thought leaders and have a visible point-of-view on how move forward in a crowded industry.

When CEOs and other executives are looking to fill their top ranks, they want to know that the leader they hire “is at the top of his or her game”. These are typically executives who are easily found but “not-looking” (Telemarketing Careers, 2008).

Ensure you are a good ‘fit’

Unfortunately, the best credentials in the world may not be enough. Personal chemistry and trust play a key role in hiring decisions. To make a solid impression you need to be and be seen to be a *cultural fit*. This is easier than it sounds – as it is largely intangible.

It is very reassuring to hear a prospective employer say you will be a good fit, as it implies they believe you will be successful in their company. The opposite means you are very unlikely to get hired. Doing research and asking questions are good tools in helping you understand the values and other characteristics of a peer group or prospective employer. You should critically evaluate whether the environment is one that will enable you to thrive.

Understanding a company’s culture can be improved by asking questions and observing the different ways in which work is planned, communicated and conducted.

Be proactive in your research and learn about different cultural elements, including:

- Values: Does the company’s mission statement appear to translate into practice
- Tenure: Are there many long term employees and what positions do they hold?
- Structure: Do employees work in a centralized or decentralized office(s)?
- Dress code: Find out (before interviews) what the dress code and style is?
- Work style: Are they ‘open-plan’ or have individual offices?
- Flexibility: Do employees spend time working out of a home office or virtual office?
- Leadership style: Does the company govern via lines of authority or more of a matrix?
- Remuneration: Is part of compensation performance based?

Maintain an engaged, active network - seek to help others

Can your network provide help and support you in finding your next executive role? If you have chosen the right network and have given a good deal of assistance to others over the years then you will be well positioned.

“Networking is the process of building and maintaining (mutually beneficial) relationships” (Frishman, 2004).

To successfully network you must constantly create goodwill and forge bonds that develop into close, meaningful relationships. Therefore you have to be selective.

It is never too late to begin building the right network. Ask yourself: “Who are my peers?”, “Who works in my area of specialty or interest?”, “Who can I help on a regular basis?” “Who do I relate well to?”, “Who in turn may be able to help me?” Social networks can also be very powerful, and can be developed from involvement with an individual or group holding a common interest (e. g. community activity, alumni, book club, sporting interest).

Expect to give a lot more than you get, but review and prune your network periodically. There is little business value in a connection with whom you have no interactions over a prolonged period of time.

Be sincere about helping those in your network and understand that any personal benefits may be long term.

Go the extra mile

You rarely hear of someone “getting lucky” who hadn’t put in a great deal of effort - but it needs to be focused effort. Even if you are not successful with one of your selected opportunities, that client may come back to you for a different or future role if you have really impressed them.

You cannot compete for every opportunity. Use a smart approach to finding your next role, applying the 80/20 rule. Figure out your “best-few” opportunities and pursue them with passion and vigor.

Summary

Securing your next role is best seen as a process rather than a project. If you plan ahead and do many of the right things while you are not seeking your next position, the chances of succeeding when you do will be greatly increased. Ultimately, if you stay focused, continue to develop your skills, help others regularly, build a core message around the benefits you can offer, and keep a positive attitude, you will be successful.

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