

## UNDERSTANDING AND WORKING WITH EXECUTIVE RECRUITERS

By John M. O'Connor, BA, MFA, CRW, CPRW, CCM, CECC  
President - Career Pro Resumes and Career Pro Inc.

Are you familiar with the terms "recruiter", "executive recruiter" or the slang term "headhunter"? What are your impressions of the role of the executive recruiter in a job search? Have you ever considered working with one? This article will help you understand how recruiters work and why they may be of help to you in your search. Remember, you must take ownership of your own job search and career. Recruiters often work with you but really their loyalties are to the company who pays them not you! How can you make the most of this relationship? Armed with information from this article we hope to help.

Maybe you think of an executive recruiter is a savvy consultant hired by big companies to find job candidates for high-powered management positions? Or, you have heard that executive recruiters are mostly interested working with job candidates that make over \$100,000 per year and that they focus on placing folks in highly specialized fields such as technology, medicine or academia?

Have you or someone you know worked with an executive recruiter in the past? Was it a positive or negative experience? Did the effort produce real results such as a job interview with the company or organization?

Misconceptions about the role of an executive recruiter may be driving you away from a potential resource that could produce real value for you over the arch of your career.

The purpose of this article is to help you gain a better understanding of the role of the executive recruiter -- whether your opinion of them is positive or negative -- and to dispel certain misconceptions about the field. With this knowledge you will be better able to make an informed decision about how best to leverage the talents of an executive recruiter to enrich your career, whether you are currently looking for a job or not.

### **Misconceptions about Executive Recruiters:**

**Misconception #1:** Recruiters only work with job candidates that make over \$100,000 per year.

While it is true that some executive recruiters -- or "headhunters" -- tend to work with candidates earning above \$100,000 per year, this is an incomplete picture of a broad and varied industry.

One of the leading publications listing executive recruiters, **The Directory of Executive Recruiters, 2004, also known as the "Red Book"** is published by Kennedy Information ([www.kennedyinfor.com](http://www.kennedyinfor.com)) and lists over 14,200 recruiters working at 5,700 search firms across the U.S. Canada and Mexico. While the publishers don't claim this to be an exhaustive list, it does provide a good indication of the large number of firms working in the industry.

Executive recruiters work in a variety of settings from huge executive recruiting firms to smaller boutique firms or even individual freelance recruiter that work on their own. Regardless of the environment in which they work, each executive recruiting entity has its own particular methodology, style, and industry focus.

Some firms tend to focus on a particular industry such as publishing, engineering or medicine. An individual recruiter may have a certain specialty such as filling a particular job position within a certain industry -- for example finding Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) at Internet-based companies. Another may have an intimate knowledge of health care administration, at all levels, and may be particularly adept at filling middle management positions. Other recruiters may have regional expertise, such as developing a rapport with senior hiring managers in number of industries within a certain geographical region.

So you should feel confident that there is a recruiting firm out there that meets your needs -- that focuses on your field of interest, region or job position.

However, just understanding that there is variety out there is merely the beginning. After carefully reviewing your own profile as a job candidate you will need to conduct research to find the recruiting firm that meets your particular requirements. Remember that the firm doesn't have to be large to be useful to you. Proficient smaller

firms and individual recruiters can leverage carefully cultivated networks that put them in contact with a variety of job openings.

**Misconception #2:** I don't need to know how a recruiter works or how they are compensated, I just need them to find me a job.

Gaining an understanding about how recruiters' work and how they are paid is key to leveraging the relationship for your own benefit.

Of all the different types of executive recruiters, each can generally fit into one of the following two categories and are based on how they receive payment from their client company:

- Contingency
- Retainer

In both cases, it is important to understand that the client company (the company doing the hiring) that pays the executive recruiter -- not you, the job candidate. In fact, a recruiter should **never** ask or expect you to pay them to find you a job.

Here is how the Association of Executive Search Consultants (AESC), a New York-based trade group for retained search firm, defines the difference between the two compensation arrangements:

**Contingency** recruiting often is used for:

- Positions that pay salaries of less than \$100,000
- Positions which have many qualified candidates
- Filling multiple vacancies with similar candidates
- Hiring organizations that want more involvement in screening, interviewing and negotiating

**Retained** firms are hired when:

- Salaries exceed \$100,000
- Highly unique or specialized candidates are needed
- A hiring organization wants a third party to screen and interview candidates
- A company wants to persuade an executive to leave an organization and needs an intermediary

Darrell W. Gurney, author of the book, "Headhunters Revealed! Career Secrets for Choosing and Using Professional Recruiters" goes on to define how the way these two different compensation arrangements changes the recruiters relationship with you:

- **Contingency** recruiters are paid only when a candidate is successfully placed -- usually after some period of "guarantee" period during which the candidate must remain successfully employed. The contingency recruiter is focused on the client company (where job candidates are placed) but will be more likely to press them on your behalf.
- **Retained** recruiter is paid for his or services upfront even if none of the candidates is placed. They tend to concentrate on few assignments and a smaller client base. They operate as a "consultant" to their client company and are hired to give advice not just generate résumés. They are looking for the exact fit that the client company has requested and are there for less likely to press the client according to your needs.

How responsive an executive recruiter will be to you will depend on mostly on your qualifications, whether or not they are seeking your skills at the time you make contact and whether they are a contingency-based or a retained recruiter. Since the contingency recruiter tends to work on a large number of searches at any given time, it is more likely that they will have a broader variety of opening available at any given time.

**Misconception #3:** Once I find an executive recruiter, I should expect them to start setting up interviews for me right away. Actually, setting the right expectations is a major factor in how successful your relationship with an executive recruiter will be.

It is wise to step back and take the long-term view of your relationship with a recruiter.

You should make your first contact with a recruiter long before you are in desperate need of a new job. Think of it as a networking relationship in which you have relaxed give-and-take rapport with the recruiter in which you share information. A good recruiter will always be interested in good leads and information. And depending on how comfortable they are with you, they may even be able to give you advice on ways to improve your chances for job placement in the future -- such as what specific accomplishments in your current job will make you more attractive to potential employers. In turn, you should be helpful to the recruiter by providing good job prospects for them. This doesn't mean just throwing names at them but really offering up information that will be helpful. Remember that the executive recruiter is essentially working for the client company -- and they are often working on multiple placements at any given time. If you are not on their radar screen when the job you'd be qualified for comes up, then you'll have missed your chance. And the best way to stay on their radar screen is to offer assistance without expecting anything in return.

**Misconception #4:** You should send a résumé to an executive recruiter and wait for a phone call. Once you have conducted your research and you have found a recruiter that you want to work with, you will need to figure out how to communicate with them. Some recruiters don't expect or want phone calls and will contact you. Others do like you to check in periodically, but when being enthusiastic turn into being annoying?

Remember, you will want to be in contact with the recruiter when you have new information about yourself, keeping him up-to-speed on new information -- such as new contact information, updates to your résumé such as job changes or new accomplishments. You should also establish with the executive recruiter what kind of information they are interested in and what manner of communication is appropriate.

Do they work best by receiving information by phone, fax, e-mail? How often do they want to hear from you? Some executive recruiters like to be informed of all sorts of information about an industry that may not be related directly to a specific job candidate or job opening.

---

*John M. O'Connor is the President of both divisions of Career Pro Inc. (Outplacement Excellence) and Career Pro Resumes. He is available for questions and consultations via phone at (919) 787-2400 or by email at [john@careerproinc.com](mailto:john@careerproinc.com).*

*In 2004, Mr. O'Connor became the first private practice Certified Federal Job Search Trainer (CFJST) in North Carolina. He is also a Certified Electronic Career Coach (CECC). With a unique fiction writing pedigree with fiction publications as well, he obtained a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from Bowling Green State University. With over 14 years experience in professional career transition, resume writing and career coaching, O'Connor applies his considerable job market expertise to career transitioners nationally.*

*He has been featured recently (May 2003 and May 2004 feature) in the Raleigh News & Observer, Resume Writers Digest, The Gladiator, Execunet, Career Masters Institute Monthly Newsletter, Monster Career News and other national publications such as JIST. Additionally his diversified experience includes serving as a college professor.*