

# KinheadPartners Perspectives

## MANAGING A CONFIDENTIAL EXECUTIVE SEARCH

### The Process

Keeping an executive search confidential while still contacting the numbers of sources and potential candidates to prosecute the search fully presents a special challenge to executive recruiters and their clients. The usual situation is the replacement of an incumbent in a key role, when there is a desire to not have the chair empty, or at least not for long.

Some maintain that complete confidentiality is only possible for a time, but not throughout the search, because the only way to ensure confidentiality is for the search consultant to refrain from mentioning the client company name. And it is certainly true that best-of-class executives have limited patience for such behavior from a recruiter who is trying to attract them. These are busy people and the first thing they want to know from a recruiter is who the client is.

But can a search be conducted start to finish in confidence? If necessary it can, with careful handling through several steps of the search process. It is possible to discuss an opportunity without divulging the company name, but how it is handled and by whom matters. A confidential search requires a recruiter's best executive selling skills, because the company story he (she) tells must be compelling enough to engage the curiosity and interest of a candidate, without disclosing the identity of the client. The presentation needs to be specific enough to accomplish that, yet not so specific that it becomes obvious who the company is. In many

cases, the recruiter's presentation will be a twenty-five second pitch to a voice mail, and it must be sufficiently intriguing to prompt a return call from a busy executive.

While the company name often goes into such a presentation, it as often does not, so its absence at this point is not critical. But as the process continues, withholding the company name becomes more difficult and candor with candidates is called for. One can certainly adequately describe the client company and the various aspects of the position and opportunity without mentioning the company name, but the recruiter will need to explain to prospects that it is a confidential search and that he doesn't yet have the go-ahead to disclose the company name.

Executives with hiring experience will understand and have some patience if they find the recruiter competent and professional, and if the recruiter promises full disclosure soon.

While early conversations with candidates are relatively brief, more in-depth discussion is much more time-consuming and executives will not invest that time without knowing who they are considering interviewing with.

The client has control of the timing of disclosure, but in any case, the recruiter will pass the information on to just those few he sees as potential short list finalists. Candidates are specifically asked to respect the confidence, and they have their own reasons for doing so, so the likelihood of word of the search getting back to the incumbent or other employees is extremely low. And at this stage, the recruiter is preparing a slate of candidates for interviews, and is that much closer to completing the assignment.

One more point bears mentioning. While not always true, the nature of a confidential search suggests a problem is at hand, and is being dealt with quietly. Candidates will want to know about the situation and it is reasonable for them to ask, and while the recruiter needn't have full details, he or she should be prepared to discuss the issue in general terms.

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