

Wolves in sheep's clothing

For some individuals, recruiters come a close second to second-hand car salesmen, double glazing or door-to-door salesmen. Generally speaking I would support this sentiment, as it appears to express the rule rather than the exception, although there may well be some professional recruiters who are worth their weight in gold.

The recruitment consultant has two roles: firstly, to sort the wheat from the chaff and secondly, to work hard to identify potential talent when it is not possible to find the right candidates (either due to the specialised nature of the job or to a general scarcity of skills in the market). In both cases there is a good chance that the recruiter will have to earn his/her fee.

Recruiters play a key role in finding talent, as well as in screening applicants, which relieves their clients of an enormous burden. This is no easy task since they need to be sufficiently briefed on the culture of the organisation, the details of the job they are recruiting for and the peculiarities of the work environment. If not, they are liable to waste time in short-listing inappropriate candidates.

Complaints about the cost of recruitment consultants' fees and commissions are not uncommon. However in my experience, companies that are running lean that take on the responsibility of managing the full recruitment process, tend to expend more in terms of man-hours and lost productivity or profitability than the cost of the said recruiters' fees. Having exercised and observed both recruiting methods, I favour the use of specialists.

Nevertheless, there is a caveat to my support of the practice of using recruitment consultants or headhunters: there are more cowboys and cowgirls than gems out there – by a long shot. This applies to the UK as much as to South Africa and Australia. Having functioned as both a candidate and a recruiter in all three markets, I feel well placed to make this observation.


Recruitment requires considerable research and preparation: identifying top talent, keeping in touch and when required, trying to dislodge people from their current positions. In addition good recruiters need to keep abreast of industry and client developments. Ultimately a good recruiter should perform the role of a trusted

business partner and consultant for the client. In order to do this he/she needs to have an intimate understanding of the clients' category and business.


Sadly, I can count on only one hand the number of recruitment companies in each market that do a truly professional job. In SA, I have been impressed by recruiters such as The Connection, Viv Gordon and Anne Pratt & Associates. Internationally, I rate Korn Ferry at the top of the heap and I believe that Hourigan International in Australia is the best of the best. While this is not to say that there aren't others that are worth mentioning, all of the above-mentioned companies seem to go the extra mile for their clients and candidates alike, thoroughly briefing, preparing, researching and screening their applicants.

Sadly, the vast majority in each market seem to rely on the sheer volume of the recruitment game. They use more of a shotgun 'spray and pray' approach, choosing quantity over quality and not screening candidates properly. Despite this shoddy approach to recruitment, most continue to survive, receiving payment for their services and going on to 'place' another day. However the day of the cowboy is almost gone, given the growing use and power of online as a recruitment vehicle, as well as the likes of Monster.com, Seek and Myjobs.com. With online even the smaller companies have a more affordable alternative to using recruiters. When this form of the recruitment business reaches maturity, only the very best recruiters will survive.

The general global shortage of skilled talent (which is particularly grave in SA) means that recruitment across borders is all the more essential. In order to survive in the future and not be reliant on the bread and butter of low to middle level job placements, local recruiters will need to develop alliances with international players in key feeder markets. To supplement its local gene pool, Australia draws its imported talent from the UK, South Africa, New Zealand and the US.

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Richard Duncan

Sydney, Australia

+61 41 154 9791

rduncan@bigpond.net.au