

How HR Can Identify Real Headhunters (and Avoid the Traps)

HR Training Module — 2026 Edition

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How to Choose a Real Headhunter in 2026: A Practical Training for HR Teams

- Understanding the modern recruitment landscape
- Avoiding common traps
- Selecting the right recruiter every time

Why This Training Matters

- The phrase “Executive search” is no longer a guarantee of recruitment quality. It is frequently used more as a marketing term that today is used by good recruiters, bad recruiters, and by firms that have absolutely no idea what proper executive search is about, while using the term to sound worthy of your business.
- Many recruitment firms, including “famous retainer firms,” rely on job ads, junior staff, and offshore teams (“the research department”) to do the actual work of a client’s key recruitment. In the past they might have done executive search almost exclusively, but now often their tool-bag for recruitment openly includes job ads, low-cost remote outsourced firms, AI, and other methods.
- Cross-border searches often involve split fees, poor communications, and slow results
- HR must protect the company from poor recruitment practices

The Core Principles

Hire the Recruiter, Not the Firm

- Firm branding ≠ search quality
- The *individual recruiter* determines the success of *your key search*
- Evaluate that person’s experience, mindset, methods, and integrity

What a Real Headhunter Looks Like

7–20+ years in your industry or closely related sector, *working as a headhunter*.

Important: Although HR recruitment and agency executive search recruitment are related and with seemingly the same ultimate goal, a company's HR department has a vastly more detailed and complex corporate organizational development mandate, while a proper agency headhunter at best is **trained to be very narrowly focused, being both at the service of HR's corporate needs *and* the candidate's career**.

The agency recruiter comes in with a similar but a very different view of recruitment, compared to HR's perspective, where ultimately, the pressure by hiring managers to urgently fill a position can take precedence over many important considerations. The wrong person might be hired in the interest of time, but a good headhunter should be able to spot and identify potential pitfalls in a particular candidate, and s/he should mention such matters in advance of a hire to the client. This is why your headhunter needs to have an ethical compass.

The job of a headhunter is different from that of a sales person, who might be your first and only contact at a recruitment firm, often disguised as a "headhunter," "executive search consultant," "partner," etc. That client-facing person's role is mostly to capture your business, and s/he might have less training or interest in finding the right person for a job that is right for a candidate's career and also your firm's long-term business mission.

The person whom you are dealing with might even have come out of your same industry, but that in itself means little in terms of headhunting training. A person who simply worked in the same industry does not automatically possess the experiences that your firm needs in a carefully done executive search.

The career of a headhunter involves years of directly observing the logical intersection of a person's career path and a client's business mission, with a careful eye on both the client and the candidate being happy together.

An Advisory When Dealing with a “Famous Retainer Firm:

- **Make sure that you are not being “handled” by a “Handle”**

At some retainer firms, certain people are internally known as “Handles.” What is a “Handle?” A handle is something that can turn or move or leverage something larger. In the case of a retainer firm wishing to gain a large guaranteed exclusive advanced payment (retainer) from a potential client, the firm typically will assign a person from that employer's industry, most often a retired industry person from any field, perhaps including a former Human Resources person or Sales person.

That person is called “The Handle,” meaning that that person's role is not to function as a real headhunter – *because s/he is not trained to do so* – but rather to win the client's exclusive retainer business under the pitch that “I'm from your industry or I used to do what you do, so...” Their pitch is to provide comfort and assurance to the potential client. “S/he's from our industry, s/he understands our needs, s/he is so well connected and knows everyone.”

The authorization of a large non-refundable retainer payment is thus won due to a virtual guarantee of success by virtue of perceived common relationships, rather than by results. The winning of the retainer is the reason for the existence of a retainer firm. The placement of a candidate, good or bad or middling, is secondary. The employer that agrees to pay 2/3 of a full fee in non-refundable retainers is then locked into this uncertain fate, and the employer then would need to wait and hope that a tolerably acceptable candidate could be found and placed.

There is nothing wrong about a retainer firm hiring a non-headhunter from any industry and having that person make sales solicitations or marketing presentations to employers in the former industry.

At best, a firm doing so is showing interest in the target industry and is legitimately wishing to capture their business for very lucrative high-cost guaranteed exclusive non-refundable retainers.

If, however, that person is described as a “partner,” “headhunter,” “recruiter” or as “executive search consultant” who would conduct your search assignment, then they are being at least partially deceptive.

Sometimes a small retainer firm will hire a person from an industry that they don’t really know well, in the hope that s/he will bring in business. Typically, such people do not last more than a year at such firms, because they simply are not trained to do headhunting and ultimately, “knowing everyone” really means not knowing how or where to find a specific candidate for a specific search.

At certain “famous retainer firms” the industry person is generally not hired to bring in business personally. Instead, it is the branding of the firm itself that will bring business, and then it’s up to the “Handle” to turn the crank, and convince the employer to authorize payment of the retainer.

If your “Handle” comes from your industry, knows everyone (maybe even you!), why is there a need for a costly and non-refundable retainer to “conduct research into the existence of possible candidates?” If the “Handle” says that s/he knows everyone in the industry, what is then to be researched? Why would that research cost so much and take so much time?

Why indeed is there even a need for a “Research Department” at a retainer firm if their partners and “executive search consultants” and “recruiters” and “headhunters” are themselves competent recruiters and headhunters who “know everyone?”

A Good Headhunter should:

- Have deep knowledge of competitors and potential talent, with an ability to search beyond those contacts
- Use Direct-Approach headhunting (no ads)
- Personally conduct the search
- Be honest, and make candid evaluation of candidates

What a Fake Headhunter Looks Like

- Needs to use job ads to attract applicants
- Outsources research to junior or offshore teams
- Passively accepts the job description that you send, asks no probing questions about the vacancy, about the business mission, about the existing team, about the former incumbent, or about the hiring manager
- The focus is on getting a retainer or on you signing their contract, rather than having a “meeting of minds” between you and the recruiter, in which you and the recruiter devise an intelligent strategy of recruitment
- Pushes candidates to the client to fill roles quickly (and pushes jobs on candidates)
- Avoids answering direct questions

The Job Ad Test

If they use job ads, they are not a true headhunter.

- Ads = lack of network, an admission of having no candidates or other way of finding candidates for your vacancy
- Ads = lack of industry knowledge
- Ads = passive recruitment, relying on mere luck for placements
- Ads = slow, low-quality results

The Research Team Trap: “Our research team will handle that” = Red Flag

- Junior staff does the real work, but often over-worked, under-paid, under-trained
- Increasingly located in low-cost underdeveloped countries where the subcontractor likely has no direct experience in your firm’s industry
- High turnover, low expertise
- Heavy reliance on job ads
- The recruiter you meet is not involved in the actual “search.” Like you, that person might be waiting for candidates to appear asap, but why are you paying that person to sit and wait for their “research department?”

The Global Network of Offices Myth: “Our Partner office will support the search”

Reality:

- Traditionally, inter-offices searches involve the fee being split between the originating office and the remote office that does the search, even if all are company-owned offices. (Note: many are actually franchisees that may share same corporate logo and marketing, but they might in fact be different entities.)
- Distant office traditionally gets half the fee (or much, much less if the search is outsourced to a firm in an underdeveloped country; hence the trend toward using the lowest paid offshore recruiters)
- Motivation drops if the remote office only gets part of the fee. Would you work as hard if you never met the other party and if you were only paid a fraction of what you would be paid on your office's own full-fee cases?
- Junior staff run the search, and if they don’t have knowledge of your industry, or haven’t spoken with you, how do they know who is a good candidate for your search?
- Job ads are used
- Timelines stretch from weeks to months

Why Split Fees Matter

- Half the fee = half the urgency. Small fee = even less concern, even lower quality and priority
- The employer never meets the person doing the recruitment work
- Miscommunication between offices is easy, especially if in different languages
- Lower quality candidates might be offered because the mandate on the remote recruiter is to simply provide *any* candidates. Even if the remote office recruiters are qualified to do some kind of executive search, the reality is that they have no long term direct relationship with you, and that emotional distance might result in less than ideal candidate options.
- Slower results
- Poor alignment with the employer's needs

HR's Role in Protecting the Company

HR must ensure:

- The recruiter has deep experience *working as a headhunter*
- The recruiter does the work personally
- No job ads are used
- No offshore researchers are involved
- No split-fee cross-border hand-offs
- The recruiter can explain their methods and time-lines clearly

A Funny Story about the term “Headhunter”

What is the origin of the word “Headhunter?”

The term was originally coined as a grisly humorous reference to certain tribes who seek out people “for their heads.” In the executive search industry, an executive search headhunter was a person who specifically sought out a specific candidate, as opposed to being an employment agency staffer who only understands recruitment as placing jobs ads and waiting for some candidates to respond.

- Ads placer ≠ Headhunter, but like “executive search,” the term “headhunter” has been mimicked by people doing non-headhunting recruitment (eg. placing job ads), in order to fool the employer
- Originally from the U.S. executive search industry, the word “headhunter” is now used in many languages natively to refer to a recruiter who, more often than not, is mostly just placing jobs ads.
- In some countries, there is a confusion about the borrow-word “headhunter,” which is one word. You might see some people laughingly refer to themselves as “Head Hunters.” But they are not the Chief Hunter of anything or anyone! To such persons, it perhaps sounds more authoritative to describe themselves as “Head” (ie., Manager, Boss), but that only shows their utter unfamiliarity with the role of a true Headhunter. In this case, Head Hunter is just a throwaway title.

The HR Interview Script

Ask Questions to Expose Weak Recruiters

- “How many years have *you personally* recruited in this industry or for jobs like ours?”
- “Do you ever use job ads?”
- “Who will conduct the search day-to-day?”
- “Based on our job description, and on what I’ve told you, what types of candidates do you realistically expect to find?”
- “Will the search be split across offices? How is the fee divided?”
- “Which competitor companies would you plan to target first?”
- “It’s OK if you don’t have any candidates in mind now, but from your experience, what candidate profiles do you expect might be the right fit for this role?”
- “How do you evaluate whether a candidate is truly right for the role?”
- “What are your fees, retainers, and guarantees — and what do *you* stand to lose if you fail?”

Red Flags HR Must Never Ignore

- “We’ll post the job to attract talent”
- “Our research team will support the search”
- “We have a global network of offices” or “we have a partner based in [the same continent, or the same country] where you need the candidates to be found.”
- “We use a mix of methods”
- Is the recruiter forthcoming with ideas regarding possible candidate profiles? Does s/he sound like s/he understands the challenges of the search? Does s/he understand what your company’s business culture is like vs. that of possible candidates?

Cross-Border Search Checklist

A cross-border recruiter must:

- Know the target country’s business style, and if different from yours, s/he should explain what to expect from candidates or from the search itself, because original JD conceptions might not produce candidates
- Receive the full fee
- Do the work personally
- Know local competitors or companies to target
- Never use job ads
- Never outsource research

Decision Tree (Part 1)

- **Step 1: Identify the industry and role**
- **Step 2: Find recruiters with 7–20+ years in that niche**
- **Step 3: Ask if they use job ads**

If yes → reject

Decision Tree (Part 2)

- **Step 4: Ask who will do the work**

If not the person you're speaking to → reject

- **Step 5: Ask if the search is split across offices**

If yes → reject

Decision Tree (Part 3)

- **Step 6: Ask which competitors or types of source companies that they will target**

If they cannot answer immediately → reject

- **Step 7: Ask what they would do if candidates at competitors are not interested or unavailable**

If no ideas → reject

Decision Tree (Part 4)

- **Step 8: Ask how they evaluate candidates**
- **Step 9: Ask about similar searches (this is to see how the recruiter reasons, adapts and how s/he understands your search and company's business mission)**
- **Step 10: Choose the recruiter who:**
 - Knows the industry or market
 - Knows the competitors or potentially good source companies
 - Knows where the most likely candidates work
 - Never uses ads
 - Does the work personally
 - Has integrity
 - Has a proven track record

Fees & Guarantees: The Hidden Truth

- Retainers often guarantee the recruiter's fee, not your results
- Many retainer-focused firms require 50–66% of the total fee to be non-refundable (start search fee + shortlist fee) — even if they fail to make a placement
- “Research fees” contradict claims of “knowing everyone.” If you “know everyone, what’s there to research?”
- Guarantees often promise activity, sometimes quantity, not quality
- Sometimes additional fees might be for “Research Fees” or “Advertising Fees.” So what expertise is your firm really paying for?
- Are you essentially paying a very high fee to a firm that can do what your own TA department can do itself, and with similar or better likely results?

The Retainer Test

Ask:

- **Is the retainer non-refundable?**
 - **Is it due before any candidates are presented?**
 - **Does it cover “research”?**
 - **What happens if the search fails?**
- **What does the agency stand to lose?**

If the recruiter has no risk, they have no urgency. They simply need to send resumes of moderately tolerable candidates to fulfill the contract. An HR Manager that engaged that kind of firm might ultimately be pressured to hire one of their “finalists,” if only because the search went on too long and so much money had already been paid

A Side Note About a Headhunter's "Industry Experience"

We have mentioned that a headhunter should have had experience in your industry. However, what if your industry is a small one or is new? Any long-standing executive search recruiter has seen ups and downs in the industry and it is simply not feasible for recruiters to survive financially if the sector had not been hiring, if it is too small, or if your particular search requirements are infrequently requested. Ideally, slow periods in an industry cause mediocre headhunters to leave the field. The survivors remain with knowledge of your industry, but also bring knowledge of many other industries. That larger understanding of industry, markets and business might be useful to your search.

The question then is this: can a good executive search headhunter do your search properly, even if s/he is not living and breathing your industry 24/7 for years and years? The answer is.... maybe. Everything then really would depend upon the overall training, experience and attitude of the headhunter.

When speaking with a headhunter, then what might matter most is the quality of their thinking and comments and questions about your search need. A headhunter with an engaged, vigorous and active mind can be a fast learner of new industries, because s/he would be applying the well-established methodology of executive search by the direct-approach method.

The method of using a direct approach of candidates does not specifically require the headhunter to start as an expert in your industry, as long as s/he truly applies the same formulas of candidate identification, evaluation and selection that normally work well in other searches, even if not in your specific industry:

- The recruiter should inform you if s/he does not have a lot of experience in your particular industry, but the recruiter should be prepared to tell you within a few days as to their ability to conduct a proper search, by identifying your competitors or company types that might have the right kind of candidates for your need.
- The method of proper executive search does not vary too much from industry to industry, location to location, or job category to job category. An *accomplished headhunter* knows that what matters usually involves the same issues that a person and a company need to ascertain before hire. The accomplished headhunter will know to look for the same factors, even if the candidate search is in a new or different industry or location:
 - Has the candidate done the same or similar enough role as needed by the client? How successfully?
 - If the job is a unique role, does the candidate's work history and attitude show that s/he might be a quick learner? Why specifically?
 - Is the candidate serious about making a job change? Are the motivations found in the opportunity, in money, or urgency due to imminent layoff or disagreements with a current employer?
 - Is the job and company realistically better than the candidate's current situation? Why? Why not?
 - Are the candidate's business style and personal preferences compatible with the business model of the client company and with the direct hiring manager?
 - Will the candidate require more or less support than what s/he typically has had before in order to accomplish this job's objectives with your company?
 - If the headhunter sees problems involving any of the above points, s/he would want to settle them with the candidate and discuss these points with you prior to a presentation to the client.

Summary: The Gold Standard

A true headhunter:

- Is hunting for your future employee in the likely places where one would expect to find good candidates (typically competitor firms or industry-related firms) as well as in little known but very suitable sectors. Hunting has nothing to do with sitting and waiting for a lucky resume to come in. That is not what you pay a headhunter to do!
- Has deep experience as a headhunter using the direct-approach method of executive search
- Has a real network of possible candidates and, more importantly, of industry insiders who trust the recruiter enough to recommend strong candidates
- Conducts direct-approach searches personally
- Never uses ads
- Never outsources research
- Protects both employer and candidate
- Delivers fast, high-quality results

Final Takeaway

- The right recruiter saves time, money, and business outcomes.
- The wrong recruiter costs all three.

HR's job is to know the difference.