

How to Choose a Real Headhunter in 2026 (and Avoid the Traps)

Full Blogpost: [Here](#)

1. Hire the Recruiter, Not the Firm

A firm's brand does **not** tell you who will do the work.

Evaluate the **individual recruiter**:

- 7–20+ years in your exact industry
 - A real network of candidates
 - Direct-approach headhunting (no ads)
 - Personally conducts the search
 - Honest, candid evaluation of your search requirements
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2. Reject Recruiters Who Use Job Ads

A recruiter who uses job ads is admitting:

- They don't know the market
- They don't have a network
- They cannot headhunt competitors

A true headhunter **never** uses ads.

3. Avoid Outsourced or Offshore Research Teams

If you hear:

- “Our research team will handle that”
- “Our analysts will map the market”

...it means:

- junior staff run the search
 - job ads are used
 - the recruiter you met is not involved
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4. Beware of Cross-Border Split-Fee Searches

When a recruiter says:

- “Our Partner office will support the search”

...it usually means:

- the fee is split 50/50 (much less if the research department is in an underdeveloped country)
- the distant office gets less of a fee than if the case was originated by their office
- motivation drops
- job ads are used
- timelines stretch

Split fees = split motivation.

5. Fees & Guarantees: The Hidden Truth

Ask these questions to expose weak firms:

- **Do you require a non-refundable retainer before doing anything?**
- **Is the retainer 50–66% of the total fee — even if no suitable candidate is presented?**
- **If you “know everyone,” why do you need upfront payment to “research” candidates?**
- **Does paying a retainer only guarantee your fee, not qualified candidates?**
- **What does your agency stand to lose if the search fails?**
- **What exactly does your guarantee guarantee — quality or just activity?**

A real headhunter shares the risk.

A weak recruiter transfers all risk to the employer.

6. Five Questions Every Employer Must Ask

1. How many years have *you personally* recruited in this industry?
 2. Do you ever use job ads?
 3. Who will conduct the search day-to-day?
 4. Will the search be split across offices?
 5. What are your fees, retainers, and guarantees — and what do *you* stand to lose?
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7. The Gold Standard

A true headhunter:

- Knows the industry
- Knows the competitors
- Understands the challenges of the search and can suggest possible alternative strategies
- Never uses ads
- Does the work personally
- Shares the risk
- **Has integrity and a track record**

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