

Headhunting: the art of getting someone else to the top

 By [Auguste Coetzer](#)

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We all understand the desire to get to the top, but getting someone else to the top requires a unique set of skills and a mindset many people find difficult to fathom.

Those who choose this career - so-called head-hunters - have great ambition, but the ambition is to achieve the placement of another party in a senior executive post. Headhunting like this (the non-Borneo variety) requires a deep understanding of people, organisations and the dynamics in play at different stages of the company life cycle.

The head-hunter is a profiler, but first he's a presenter. Before going hunting, you need a 'licence' and this is provided by the organisation looking for a leader.

Shoot out

The head-hunter, therefore, makes a presentation to the company concerned to demonstrate the necessary experience, competence, national and international reach and an understanding of company needs. The pitch often entails a 'shoot out' with competitors.

Once you've been hired, you are given a 'wanted list' of essential attributes. Now the search begins. The hunter needs patience, insight and the knack of matching the job profile with the personal profile of potential targets. Top talent is scarce. You have to dig deep for it.

Casting the net

In headhunting's Dark Ages, 'talent' was acquired via the buddy system or old-school-tie network. Not anymore. The net is cast wide. It is rarely confined to a single industry as leadership skills can be transplanted across sectors. The hunt might also cross borders, when an international alliance with a global talent search organisation such as US-based Korn Ferry can be vital.

Encountering resistance

Resistance is often encountered from potential candidates. After identifying targets, the head-hunter must home in and outline the opportunity. Top talent already has a top job and is well remunerated. Why move? They often demur. They may even suggest you need your head read for even thinking they might move. A second or third approach may be needed.

Dealing with rejection

Is rejection deeply felt or will the initial reaction soften? Your judgment will be tested, along with your tact and ability to put a case in terms most relevant for the targeted executive.

Experience helps, but every industry is different; so is every company and candidate. Head-hunters must handle both rejection and ambiguity. A thick skin is needed when being rebuffed, but sensitivity is essential when doubts surface and candidates confront career-defining choices. New challenges create growth opportunities and rewards can be substantial, but staying put is safe.

Once the candidate decides to enter discussions, the job is still not done. The company hopes to interrogate the candidate, but candidates have to be convinced and persuaded, not grilled. Meanwhile, the candidate is eager to interrogate the company.

Spotting the perfect fit

Professionalism is needed on both sides of the desk, and the head-hunter must tactfully communicate the ground rules. When the process is concluded and the successful candidate rockets to the top, what then?

Don't expect compliments. You're not only hired for your talent identification skills, but for your discretion, your ethical standards and ability to keep a confidence. Anyway, when the fit is perfect, everyone thinks the choice was obvious.

Fulfillment comes in spotting the fit before anybody else - and receiving repeat business when the company or affiliates again go head-hunting.

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