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What to Say When a Recruiter Calls

By PERRI CAPELL

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You're happy in your current position and aren't thinking about leaving. So what should you do when an executive recruiter calls?

You'd be wise to learn what jobs are available. "You aren't recognizing your full potential if you don't talk to recruiters," says Izzy Kushner, a health-care consultant with Segal Co. in New York. "It's the main way people move around from place to place."

You never know when a recruiter might present a better opportunity. World-wide demand for senior executives--those earning \$100,000 or more--rose 11% last year from 1994, reports Korn/Ferry International, a New York-based search firm. Another indication of demand is the growth of the recruiting industry: In 1995, there were more than 3,200 U.S. search firms, up from 2,820 in 1993, according to Fitzwilliam, N.H.-based Kennedy Publications, which publishes Executive Recruiter News.

Industries in which headhunters tend to work heavily are high-growth and fast-changing: high-tech, communications, electronics and health care, according to a survey of more than 1,000 search firms by Exec-U-Net, a networking group in Norwalk, Conn.

As openings increase, an experienced executive who earns six figures or more can expect to be contacted. "If you never get a call from a recruiter, you must not be very good," says Angela Herndon, president of Herndon & Associates, a Houston search firm.

Richard Maradie, president and CEO of Protyde Pharmaceuticals in Watertown, Mass., landed his past four senior-level jobs through search firms. "I advise cultivating good relationships" with recruiters, he says.

Employers traditionally prefer to raid the ranks of the employed, especially those working for competitors. Potential candidates come from industry or functional databases, a search firm's resume files and recommendations. About 50 to 200 candidates are contacted for every opening.

Here's how to handle calls so you remain in a recruiter's good graces without jeopardizing your current position:

Always take the call.

If you don't cooperate, chances are you won't be contacted by the firm again. One engineer refused to speak to recruiter Bill Hetzel of Inverness, Ill., when he called about an opening for a vice president of engineering job.

Less than a month later, the same engineer's resume arrived at the search firm. "He'd been downsized out of his job," says Mr. Hetzel. "Guess where his resume went?"

Don Lotufo, managing partner of DAL Associates in Stamford, Conn., says not wanting to talk to a recruiter shows that you lack sophistication--a definite blow to your prospects. On average, three out of 10 candidates won't return calls or say they're too busy to talk, with science and technology professionals being the worst offenders, says Mr. Lotufo.

Find out more about the firm.

Although there's some blurring of the lines, search firms usually are divided into two types--retained and contingency--and it helps to know the difference, says Tom Rodenhauer, ERN's managing editor. Retained firms such as Korn/Ferry, the world's largest in terms of revenue, and Heidrick & Struggles in Chicago, are paid to conduct a search, even if no one is ultimately hired. Contingency firms, such as Cleveland-based Management Recruiters International and Robert Half International in Menlo Park, Calif., get paid only if their candidate is placed. Both types receive about 35% of a candidate's annual starting pay as their fee. Retained firms usually work only on senior-level assignments. Contingency recruiters fill middle- to lower-level posts. No one should ask you for money.

"If a recruiter ever asks you for payment, that's when you hang up," says Mr. Rodenhauer, "because that's not recruiting."

If you aren't familiar with the recruiter, ask for credentials. Find out the type of firm, its specialty, its history and its client list, then ask for a phone number so you can call back to confirm that the company--and recruiter--actually exist. Verify factual information from a directory of recruiters, which can be found in bookstores or the library.

You also can call clients and past candidates for references. Your sleuthing can prevent someone from your firm, or its investors, from posing as a recruiter to see whether you're looking to jump ship, says Mr. Maradie. "Unless I know the recruiter, I always ask for verification," he says.

Read between the lines.

During your first conversation, you won't be given the name of the hiring company, just a brief description of the opening and its requirements. The recruiter will then ask if you know anyone suitable for the job. Be equally discreet in return. If you're interested, don't fire off your resume. Instead, ask for more information so you can evaluate the opportunity. Your next conversation should probably occur outside your office.

"The one time when I was ready to consider things, I said, 'I need more in-depth information to help you network,' " says Wanda Lee, senior vice president of PacifiCare Health Systems. "Then, I asked them to call me at home." Her subsequent conversations with the recruiter 3 μ years ago led her to accept a position at the Cypress, Calif., managed health-care concern.

If you aren't interested, say so, but offer the names of people who might be. You'll be helping your contacts and the recruiter, which can put you on his or her short list to call next time. "The person who says, 'Would you like suggestions that might lead you to the appropriate people?' will end up being a friend," says Mr. Lotufo. "Maybe three months down the road, we'll have an assignment that's appropriate."

Be articulate and positive.

The fact that you've been called means you have the right background for an opening. Don't assume you're just chatting; the search firm will be evaluating whether you have the communication skills and other "intangibles" needed for the job.

"If someone answers my questions with yups and nos, I'll probably look for someone else who answers in full sentences," says Ms. Herndon.

She says a positive, can-do attitude is essential. "If you can say, 'We had some real financial problems and have been in bankruptcy the past two years, but I've learned so much,' I'm more likely to think well of you than if you run your employer down," she says.

Don't exaggerate.

When asked about your accomplishments or earnings, don't embellish. Recruiters check references thoroughly and any lies will disqualify you. "If you fudge on your resume, that will give you a black mark not only with the recruiter, but with all their clients as well," says Mr. Rodenhauser.

If you survive these tests, the recruiter will most likely arrange to meet you. At that time, you'll learn the employer's identity. If you're still interested and continue to impress the search executive, your name, along with other potential candidates, will be submitted to the company. If you're suitable, the next call you receive will be to schedule an interview.

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