TALENT
SEARCH

Behind the desk of an executive recruiter

by Sasha Milam

BREAKING into the C-suite: it can seem impossible and, statistically speaking, most of the workforce never will—some due to a lack of opportunity, others because their interests lie in a different direction. For those who do find their curiosity piqued by an executive-level role, however, who better to talk to than the person hired to hire the executives? To this end, Gustavson asked Dave Namkung, BCom ’05, JD ’10 and senior consultant at Leaders International Executive Search, to comment on some of the trends he’s seeing in the world of executive hiring.

BUSINESS CLASS: Quick definition check: what is executive search?

DAVE NAMKUNG: Executive search firms are hired to source well-matched candidates at the leadership level—typically ranging from the C-suite to directors. It’s important to understand the distinction between executive search and the general recruit function that you’ll bump into, especially early in your career, called contingency search firms. Contingency search firms are only paid if they present a candidate who is successfully hired by the organization. Oftentimes an organization will engage numerous contingency search firms at once, so it can shotgun the market, which ends up being a bit of a horse race to see who presents the final candidate. And that works well at mid-level management. But when an organization is recruiting for a role that is instrumental at a strategic level, that’s when they’ll engage an executive search firm.

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BC: Do applicants know if they are working with contingency vs. executive search?
DN: Generally, yes. Contingency recruiters will be highly motivated to act as career advisors, because they want to be the first person you call if you’re considering a career move, so they can help you get hired and earn a commission. The focus is on getting you any job, and they are often more specialized. I was a contingency searcher for getting you any job, and they are often more

BN: Who is most likely to be shortlisted by an executive search firm?
DN: Executive search is quite risk averse. They are looking for people who have been in analogous roles. There are ways to get more creative with applying the search criteria, but in general, firms are looking at those who are in similar roles and might have just enough incentive to make the move. If you were looking for a dean of a university, for example, you might look for an associate dean of a larger school who has comparable experience but will have the appetite for the elevated credential.

BC: In light of this, how can candidates maximize the possibility of landing their first executive role?
DN: Start by making sure your online presence stands out. There are consultants who specialize in LinkedIn and digital presence, but generally, make sure your documents are really clean and sharp. Then consider how much risk you are willing to take. Let’s say you are a director or manager at a large organization—maybe you can become a VP in a start-up environment. That assumes risk, but it can pay off in a faster escalation to leadership roles.

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BC: The majority of our alumni live in BC. What are some trends you see with searches in this area, specifically?
DN: One of the factors of hiring in Victoria, Vancouver or Kelowna is that employers don’t pay as much as they would elsewhere in Canada, and housing is wildly expensive. The difference in quality of life can be huge—it can be the difference between living in a mansion and, in Vancouver anyway, a condo. So in some ways this area can be a hard sell when recruiting. On the other hand, it is beautiful to live here.

Because BC has a relatively shallow talent pool, we often have to get more creative with our searches here. Whereas other places we might be able to choose among candidates who have done similar work, here we might need to get more creative about what skills, experiences and traits will make a person succeed at the role.

BC: Are there any unusual leadership opportunities on the horizon right now?
DN: Cannabis is one thing happening right now. Every once in a while you see these sectors that are changing rapidly, and all the rules of executive search are suddenly very hard to apply: what’s an analogous role to the cannabis sector? There’s a talent rush and people are coming from all over—from banking, from food and beverage, from mining—to fill the talent vacuum.

BC: You described the executive search industry as risk averse. What does this mean for who gets hired?
DN: One of the problems with being risk averse is that it creates an echo chamber—organizations end up hearing from the same people doing the same jobs. This exacerbates some of the equality issues and lack of diversity that we see on executive teams and boards.

My goal in executive search is to present a balanced candidate list with diverse options reflecting the full range of qualified professionals. Most of us are familiar with the so-called “confidence gap” statistic: that men apply for jobs when they meet 60 per cent of the requirements, while women tend to apply only when they match 100 per cent of the requirements. While it’s important for people to use their judgement when considering whether they are qualified for a role, in general, I’d encourage candidates to enquire, even if they don’t think they meet all the criteria. The industry is taking steps to level the playing field, but it takes time. When minorities and women in particular use that leadership muscle, and take opportunities that are a little bit scary, that’s where the growth occurs—and that’s also how the industry changes.