

HOW TO SELECT A SEARCH FIRM THAT IS RIGHT FOR YOU

Summary: Learn what you should look for in a placement firm when looking for a job on your own isn't working.



Question: I'm currently the managing developer (and minority shareholder) in a small Internet consulting firm. I've built our consulting staff from two to 15 in two years and designed a number of Internet applications for clients and our company. My technical, project management and team-building skills are strong (12 years' experience), but for a variety of reasons, I don't feel the company will grow much more. I'd like to look for other opportunities, such as a senior position with a small- or medium-sized business. I feel that using an executive-search firm is important, but I'm struggling to locate one that can help me. Most search firms I've dealt with specialize in filling technical positions, which isn't what I'm looking for. Do you have any suggestions for helping me select a search firm that has experience placing someone like me, who's halfway up the ladder and looking to move higher?

Answer: The roles of executive-search and placement firms are misunderstood by most candidates. It sounds as though you've worked with contingency recruiters and placement firms that specialize in working with IT folks, and are paid only when they successfully match a candidate with an open position (a percentage of the person's first-year starting salary; usually 20% to 35%, depending on the difficulty of the search). These recruiters are expert at finding and placing job hunters (usually at salaries from \$40,000 to \$100,000), but their primary goal is to earn a fee, which means your ability to fit into the position isn't their primary concern. Some of these recruiters guarantee their work by promising to search again at no charge if you jump ship in six months or less. But it typically takes at least this long for new hires to discover whether the job is right for them or not.

Retained recruiters typically work only at the \$100,000+ level, and are paid whether or not they fill the position. Since they're working at a higher level, they tend to spend more time trying to meet their client's specific needs: hires who match the company's culture, have a strong track record of success in the industry or function, and make a great impression on top management. Thus, candidates often receive extensive guidance on making the best impression in interviews, and may even develop a strong relationship with a recruiter that may carry into future assignments (after a two- to four-year hands-off period).

At both levels of recruiting, search professionals often specialize. A large search firm often has dozens of recruiters in each of a dozen or more offices worldwide. Small firms usually have a handful of recruiters who focus on two or three industries. The trick, therefore, is identifying which recruiters in which offices are working on searches right now that require your skills and background. That's no easy task. The best method is networking with colleagues who can recommend headhunters they've worked with successfully. Some recruiters, especially at small firms, also have a geographic focus, such as New England, and networking to gain a name and phone number can be effective (as long as you ask each recruiter you reach for the names and numbers of other recruiters you might contact). Another way to identify recruiters is through cold-calling. Find a list of search firms that work in your specialty, and send your resume to each with a solid cover letter explaining why you want to change jobs. While you may not receive return calls, your resume likely will be added to those in the search firm's resume database, which is searched thoroughly for each new search assignment. For a list of appropriate search firms to contact, visit your local library or bookstore, or use one of these two directories: the [Most Influential Legal Recruiters in America](#) and the [Most Influential Recruiters](#) (for non-legal recruiters). Both of these lists offer extensive listings cross-indexed by function and name. They also include contact information for many of the recruiters.