

A Search Firm Shares the Secrets of How to Pick a Search Firm That Knows the Career College Market

by Thomas A. Kube

In this line of work, and our niche is in for-profit higher education, we are always working with new and established clients to help them fulfill their staffing needs. Many times, new clients ask us, “What differentiates you from your competitors?” I won’t answer that question here, but I will say that if you have an important position to fill, an executive search firm that knows the career college sector of higher education is the right answer. But finding a good search firm can be a difficult job.

As an established firm, we’re willing to share how career colleges can get the best firm to meet their search needs. Here are some key tips for finding the right search firm and maximizing your chances of success. These tips helped our clients and we’re convinced that they will work for you, too.

Which Search Firm Should You Choose?

There are an incredible number of search firms out there, everything from big international agencies to small, local boutique firms. Before you engage a

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search firm, it’s important to understand whether they can do the job in the career college world.

Are they just “talking the talk” or can they “walk the walk” and help you find the right talent? Do they operate ethically and with high service levels?

Here are some tips for picking a good search firm:

1. Integrity and Credibility is Key

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2. Demand Drive and Perseverance

Pick a firm that has the drive and the energy to find exceptional talent.

If your search firm isn't enthusiastic when talking to prospective candidates, you can bet the candidates won't be interested.

3. Go For Knowledge

Pick a firm that knows the career

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college sector—hands down—and your functional areas intimately. Past search records are important, but even more important are the firm's ability to

navigate the marketplace that is specific to the for-profit sector of higher education.

4. Will They Come Back and "Poach" Your Employees Later?

A big consideration is how many hands-off agreements they've signed. Search firms typically agree to not recruit employees away from a company they previously worked for a specific period of time. Over time, they accumulate a lot of so-called "off limits" companies. Needless to say, this can greatly reduce the universe of talented candidates that they can recruit on your behalf.

Yet, at the same time, once the hands-off period ends, some firms are more aggressive in recruiting from

their prior clients. This means they could recruit staff away from you after the hands-off period ends. Look for a firm that defines their off-limits terms more broadly (e.g. "I won't recruit any employee of yours", **not** "I won't recruit the employee I just placed with you") and have longer hands-off periods (e.g. two years rather than one year).

Getting Started With Your Search for a Search Firm

As you prepare to select a search firm, build your short list of search firms by thinking about career colleges you admire. Who has great executive talent? Then find out who represents them. Try not to do this with your competitors because many executive search firms won't serve two competing colleges at the same time. That's a conflict of interest. Another approach is to ask your friends and business colleagues whom they think highly of.

Once you've got the short list (or maybe you've narrowed it down to one firm that you absolutely know will do a great job for you), pick up the phone and call them. The service you get in that initial solicitation can be quite telling. If they call you back promptly, they probably call candidates back promptly and that can translate into good results for you. If they give you a solid, polished presentation, that's a good sign.



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Kube & Co. is a career college advisory group specializing in contingency and retained executive

search, school acquisition and divestiture services, and management consulting in the for-profit sector of higher education. Operating since 1997, our team

includes a former NATTS/ACCSCT executive director and specialists from a variety of backgrounds and disciplines in higher education that enable us to bring value added solutions to our client constituents.

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Evaluating Your First Contact with a Search Firm

First impressions in your initial contact are invaluable, whether face-to-face or over the phone. The key question is whether they tailor their presentation specifically for you. Did they do their homework on your college? Do they understand proprietary education and have a passion for it? Do they know the questions that potential prospects are likely to ask about your organization and the position? Do they discuss the position and search strategy options at a low level of detail?

If a recruiter gives you a boilerplate presentation that simply provides an overview of their firm, touting their prior search results, broad reach, and a research team that will get up to speed on the career college sector and find good candidates for you once you give them the assignment—*move on*. They don't have what it takes to get the job done for you.

Interviewing the Search Firm

Communication is a two-way street, so be sure you know the right questions to ask the search firm during that initial contact. Here are some suggestions:

Questions That Assess Whether They Will Represent You Well

- How would you describe our needs to a prospective candidate?
- How would you describe our culture and business?
- What benefits do you see a candidate gaining by accepting this position?

Questions That Determine if They Are Competent Recruiters

- What are the challenges in the search assignment and how can/will you address them?

- How will you identify candidates and what do you think is the right profile for a good candidate?
- What questions do you have for me about the company and this position?
- What search assignments have you completed?
- How long did these searches take?
- Have any executives you placed left prior to being with the new company for one year?

Questions as to How the Search Firm Conducts Its Work

- What is your process for conducting a search?
- What are the component steps and when do they occur?
- How long will each step take?
- How extensive is your network of potential candidates?
- When will we see information on potential candidates?
- When will we conduct interviews with prospective candidates?
- Are you willing to adapt your firm's process based on our specific needs?

Questions About Who Will Do the Work

- What parts of the search will you personally handle (or will you hand this search off to somebody else)?
- Who calls prospective candidates to qualify their abilities and interest?
- Who interviews them face-to-face?
- Who analyzes the candidate and writes the briefing documents we will review?
- How many search assignments are you currently conducting?
- How many searches is your support staff handling?

Questions About the Fee

- What is the fee structure?

- When do I pay you and why?
- If I agree to give you more than one search, will you give me a better rate?
- What else can I do to lower the fees?

Questions About Terms of the Contract

- Can I see a contract as soon as possible so I can better understand your terms?
- What is your hands-off policy?
- Are you going to recruit this employee, or any of my other employees, over to another client?
- How long are you willing to promise that you won't recruit my employees?

Questions About Client Satisfaction

- Do you guarantee our satisfaction in some way?
- What happens if the search is not filled within a given time?
- Do we have to pay a fee if the assignment is not completed?

Questions About Billing and Expenses

- What expenses will we need to reimburse you for?
- Based on your experience how much can we expect in the way of expenses [if any]?
- Will you agree to only incur expenses when we have pre-authorized them in order to keep our costs down?
- What documentation will you provide?

Conclusion

Follow these straightforward recommendations outlined above and you'll find a great search firm—for either contingency or retained staff searches. You'll know what to look for and the right questions to ask. You'll soon find you have mastered the art of recruiting a recruiter, and the results will show in your improved ability to find, attract, and retain exceptional talent.