



The Art of Executive Search: It is all about building relationships that endure

by **Debraj Sinha**, Partner, Salto Dee Fe

As I access my LinkedIn account or look at some other sites, see almost daily postings of senior level job opportunities posted by many search partners. While this leads me to question, whether this is a positive sign that in India, we are getting out of the ravages caused by Covid, it also makes me reflect on the search industry and its partnership with organisations to help them succeed.

Executive Search remains an exciting area for firms to operate in. With substantial fees for every successful closure at stake, in India, we have a host of players in this sector. From global players, boutique firms and even contingent firms supposedly engaged in Search. At one level this bodes well for the industry, as it reinforces competition and best practices that forces one to up the ante and continue to enhance service offerings and provide higher quality. But it does make the choice of the 'right partner' a challenge at times.

This is made even more challenging given our 'value conscious' approach to every service leading to at times outrageous client expectations that are not balanced by the fees and service offerings expected. While this is true of any offering especially in the people area, it really gets amplified in Executive Search.

If I leave out a few firms at the top end of the market, the rest from both service offerings and fee perspective, make differentiation next to impossible.

Today, more than before, it has become crucial for search firms to think through their uniqueness and ability to add value that can cut through the clutter. While the process and related protocols, tools used, market access and connect are very important, I believe it is the power of creating and building engaging relationships with clients that will finally make the real difference.

One can buy tools, create a fantastic process but connecting with a client with the objective to addressing a 'business challenge' is not everyone's forte and many may not be interested as it is the short-term financial benefits that outweighs the long-term impact and opportunity.

I fundamentally believe that Search is evolving from a transactional (one-off) to a consulting (partnership) model. Why should it be any different from say, building a performance management framework or designing an organization structure. At its root is a business challenge or requirement that all these initiatives need to address.

➔ Think 'business solution' not a 'recruitment transaction'

Search is about filling a talent gap with the 'right profile' within the 'right time' at a price point that makes sense for the client. That said, for the organization it is all about contribution of the new hire and quicker the better. Leaders make a significant difference to business outcomes, especially when working and supporting each other.

In this context, the right leadership hire makes the difference between organization success and failure. This appreciation is important for the search partner as it means a shift in the partnership model.

➔ Build enduring relationship not a one-off project



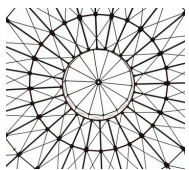
When one focuses on outcomes only, it is easy to let go of conversations that do not convert into a project. But as a firm believer in the power of positive relationships, there is a need to look beyond outcomes and financials when dealing with another human being who could also be a client. Social media has also shown us how important contacts are and how referrals are all pervasive. Remaining connected post an assignment and especially when no-assignment is paramount to prepare for tomorrow. Every action with a potential client leads to a brand ambassador who may not need the solution but can recommend. The reverse is also true when we do not invest the time.

➔ Stakeholder feedback acted upon not 'I know it all'

Seeking feedback formally at every stage is crucial and not only from the firm leaders who are engaged in the search but the team that is working on it. Usually this will be the Talent Acquisition team in HR. Again, this process adds value to a robust relationship and allows the Search partner to get a more incisive and practical insight on what is working well and more important where to improve.

My point being that this cannot be an end of the project exercise but like is being talked about in employee performance management, an opportunity to create and implement a frequent feed-forward model.

→ Appreciate organisation context not one-size-fits-all



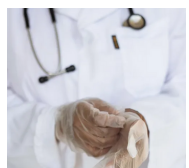
Segmentation and customisation is the motto today. Solutions need to be crafted that make business sense and provide value at the end of the engagement. True for any service or product across consumers. Same is true for Search partners. While operating principles do not change but the proposition needs to be differentiated to meet client needs. Eg. a standard model specifying 2-3 weeks to shortlist – 90 days to closure is standard at senior levels but if the client has an urgent need, how can we bring the 2-3 weeks to 1 week and 90 days to 60. The other area is the typical long list first, then short list, then interviews, again, if the Search partner understands the client needs well, can we directly move to the short list?

→ Simplify not complicate

Finally, the most powerful. Leaders and decision makers, anyone for that matter if asked will surely say that the one thing they need more of is time. Time is possibly the single biggest excuse but that does not hold us back from simplifying our lives and way we work. Simplification also leads to empowerment and quicker decision making.

For Search, this means revisiting the way we operate and looking at ways to optimize the same. The long-list, then short-list example comes to my mind again. If my process allows me to throw up only 4 candidates who are best fit and that is the only list, then I think that I have saved time for my client at an individual level and for the process.

→ Leverage expertise not a mass market approach



With the assumption that appreciation and knowledge of sectors and business models enables the Search model well leading to the right selection, it is evident that it may not be possible for firms to bring 'excellence' to all sectors. In the choice of wide vs deep, in this

case, I will opt for deep. Focus on a few sectors but build the sector awareness as a differentiator. This also strengthens my point on relationships as the Search partner speaks a language that the client understands.

→ Consulting mindset not only delivery

Guiding the client on taking the right decisions, choices for their interest is key. The consulting model in this case begins when the Search partner starts to better understand the internal client context and challenges well at an organization level and buffers that with some smart external market / competition knowledge.

It is easy to take client speak as gospel and act and then later tell the client ... but you told me so. It becomes imperative to toss up options, clarify understanding and ask questions. This at times can lead to the client changing a point of view as they understand better. Typical area this plays up is in candidate profile, previous experience and sectors worked in. I firmly believe as many have said that we hire for attitude and we can train for skills.

We will be happy to partner with clients in addressing their requirements in this critical TALENT arena. You can reach us at Harshdeep@saltodeefe.com or +917838445546

SDF way of Executive Search

At Salto Dee Fe, we are attempting to act on all the 7 aspects above. Our approach to search is client backwards and our intent always is our client's success. Given our firm and individual leader's experience, our expertise in the consumer/retail space stands out because we understand the 'business of scale and distribution' very well.

What differentiates us.

- **Success Profile:** to define what success looks like in the role, defines not just 'what' of the role (JD), it also details the 'how' the knowledge, experience, competencies)
- **List of 4 'right fit' candidates:** Assessments basis Success Profiles - having assessed the candidates on experiences, behaviors and knowledge (role fit and organisation fit)
- **One Page Assessment Report On Each Candidate:** Each candidate's assessment on competencies, experiences, and behaviours on a simple one page report
- **One Page Candidate Comparison:** Competencies, experiences, and behaviours placing all the candidates side by side for reviewing summarily
- To ascertain findings from the Psychometric we conduct Behaviour Event Interview based **Reference Checks**

Search methodology.

- **Success Profile:**
 - Clear understanding of
 - Talent landscape –skills, compensation
 - Industry focused
 - Helps identify passive candidates
- **Market Map:**
 - To quickly and accurately identifies the knowledge, experience and competencies for the role and values needed to fit in the Organization we craft sharp Success profiles
 - Goes beyond "What is the role?" to identify "Who will be successful in the role?"
- **First List:**
 - "Role Fit" screening for all on the Market Map to identify candidates
 - Ready to be approached for interest check and First Round Discussions
- **Short List:**
 - ~10 candidates
 - identified post the 'First Round Discussion'
 - Ready to undergo detailed and structured functional & behavioral discussions.
- **Final 4:**
 - After detailed Interviews & psychometric assessment