

Are you being served (properly)?

Should you engage the services of recruitment agencies and consultancies? What can or should they be able to do for you?

As recently as 15 years ago, if you were a retail manager thinking about changing your job, you would scour the papers and perhaps send speculative letters to employers to see if they had anything to offer.

Not so today. There are no substantive statistics on how managers and professionals in our industry get their jobs. However there is no question that you are considerably more likely to obtain your job through a recruitment firm. Indeed if you are thinking of putting yourself on the market you would be almost insane not to engage with at least one or two agencies. After all, it doesn't cost you anything. But how do you know who to contact? How many of them should you contact? There are at least 30 operating in this sector with new players coming in every month whilst others disappear. Firstly let us look at how the recruitment industry works.

Recruitment agencies and consultancies earn their living by charging their client companies, the employers, a fee for finding them employees. Typically this would be around 20–25% of the first year's salary. It seems a lot, but many employers find this a very cost effective way of recruiting people. Advertising can be very expensive with a decent sized advert in a national newspaper costing anything up to

£30,000. Regional press is not much cheaper. Even our own very keenly priced Appointment magazine (plug, plug) charges over £4,000 for a full page advert.

Recruitment companies, like all others, vary from the professional and ethical to the other extreme. The real problem here is knowing which to choose. The danger is that if you have some unethical cowboys touting your CV on the market it could do your career chances more harm than good.

The real problem arises when you are dealing with an agency that doesn't actually have any clients. These companies generate their income by touting your CV on the market place. If you have been to two or three agencies that do this you may well find that some employers are seeing your CV several times and it makes you look desperate. Bear in mind also, that if the recruiting firm is seen as tacky by the employer, some of that tackiness will rub off on your application.

If you don't know the recruitment market yourself and cannot get recommendations, then a good start is to look for quality accreditations. Investors in People will at least tell you that the company is serious about developing its own people and has been audited externally for this. ISO 9002 (the old British Quality Kitemark

internationalised) will also indicate that the firm has proper quality procedures in place which are monitored every six months. No firm with these qualifications wants ever to suffer the embarrassment of losing them. There is also the REC which is the trade association for the recruitment industry. The REC does police its members although membership of this body really constitutes little more than a promise to be good rather than a guarantee. Most importantly, however, will be your judgement of their recruitment process.

A professional recruiting firm will meet you face-to-face and in a properly equipped interview room. The interview should last between 45 and 90 minutes and be conducted by a properly trained recruitment professional. If you are interviewed by a cheesy salesperson who only discusses where he can flog your CV, politely decline their help and leave the building, with your CV in hand.

If you do live a long way away from major cities you will sometimes meet a recruiter in a hotel lobby or a restaurant. The same rules about interviews should apply, i.e. it should give you a real opportunity to demonstrate your skills. Do not deal with agencies that only deal with you over the phone. This is only acceptable if you live in a very remote

part of the country and you are unable to visit their nearest office. Occasionally recruitment firms are used to do specific telephone screening for a specific client and this would be nothing to worry about.

Do not deal with too many agencies. You are defeating the object of the exercise. Working properly for you, a recruitment agency will take a lot of the pain out of job hunting. The well respected consultants who screen their candidates properly at interview will normally have their interview regarded by the employers as the first stage in the recruitment process. This could save hours, if not days, of your time in not having to travel the country going for first interviews. Work with the people you trust and tell them who else you have been to see.

Remember that your recruitment consultant is the gatekeeper between you and the employer. Treat the interview as if you are being interviewed by the employer themselves. Although good consultants will offer you guidance and counselling, remember that it is their clients they represent. If you start sounding off about how much you hate your current job this will be as damaging as if you had done it in the client's office.

Take control and keep control of the recruitment process. Always insist that consultants never send your details anywhere without your prior knowledge and consent. Agree timescales on when you should hear from your consultant and ensure that they are upheld. If your calls are not returned promptly, complain.

What happens when things go wrong?

As I have said, if your first experiences with a recruitment firm are poor then walk away. There are plenty of others with whom to work. However, if things don't go according to your expectations don't be afraid to complain. Most of the recruitment firms are small enough that you should be able to speak to a Director or perhaps the MD. If you are not

satisfied, get on that phone. If ultimately that still fails, be sure to tell your colleagues and friends, and more importantly any potential employer, how poor your service was.

You have responsibilities too!

In order to make this work, you have to play your part also. The first point to make here is that the recruitment firm cannot guarantee to get you a job. Honest firms will tell you this. They will be restricted to the briefs that their clients have given them. You may be brilliant, but if your particular style of brilliance is not what their clients are currently seeking, it is not their fault if they cannot help you.

The best you can hope for here is that the consultant is honest with you in this regard. Most importantly of all, turn up for client interviews and assessment centres. NEVER NEVER NEVER, just fail to turn up for an interview. You will not only damage the relationship that the consultant has with their client, but your own reputation will be severely damaged also. With computerised memories, your unreliability will come back to haunt you in the future. Nor is it really acceptable to cancel interviews or assessment centres at the last minute. Assessment centres, particularly, cost thousands to set up and rely on a certain number of people arriving. If you cancel the night before it can cause immense problems for the recruiter and the employer. It will be your reputation that suffers most.

Having put your trust in a recruitment firm, allow them to trust you! Tell them which jobs you have applied for and which other recruitment firms you are seeing. You make the consultant and yourself look foolish if you don't let on that you have already applied to a company to which they are submitting your CV.

Listen to the advice that consultants give you and accept it. If you are told to go and visit a store before an interview (in retail this is a pre-requisite) make sure you go. Finally if your consultant and their firm have

treated you well, be sure to tell their clients. If it's right to punish poor service it must be right to reward those who perform well.
"PAUL DAVIES

Listed in alphabetical order below are a selection of consultancies to be found frequently in the pages of The Appointment:

- Daniel Williams Consultancy
Offices: High Wycombe
www.dwc.co.uk
- Executive First*
Offices: London
www.executivefirst.net
- Fashion Personnel
Offices: London and Nottingham
www.fashionpersonnel.co.uk
- Freedom Recruitment
Offices: London
www.freedomrecruit.com
- Fusion Consulting
Offices: London
www.fusion-consulting.com
- Head Office Direct
Offices: St Albans
www.headofficedirect.co.uk
- Menswear & Womenswear
Offices: London and Manchester
www.rossgroup.co.uk
- Meridian Retail
Offices: London
www.meridianretail.co.uk
- Prima Principia*
Offices: Kent
- PSD Group
Offices: London, Manchester and Birmingham.
www.psdgroup.com
- Retail Human Resources
Offices: London, Watford, Birmingham, Manchester, Bristol, Guildford, Southampton, Leeds, Newcastle, Glasgow and Dublin
www.rhr.co.uk
- RPS
Offices: Bolton
www.rpsltd.co.uk
- Star Executives
Offices: London
www.starexecutives.com
- The One Consultancy
Offices: London

* Senior appointments only.