



## **Do You Know How to Plan Your Job Search to Take Advantage of the Annual Hiring Cycle?**

While most hiring managers think their timetable to complete a search is unique, it is subject to the realities of when decision makers have the time to complete the process and extend an offer. There really is a cycle. To be in step with that process and anticipate what you need to do to maintain, and even expedite the rhythm of the cycle, here is what to expect during the year.

The first caveat before looking at the calendar is to do your homework. Be over-prepared to make focused, specific decisions about what you are looking for. Be ready to weigh a new opportunity against your current position—especially evaluate the risk inherent in the opportunity. (See a variety of blog articles on the subject: <http://www.jc-a.com/judith-cushman-blog/> and articles on “[Compensation](#)” and “[Risk Factors in Considering an Offer](#).”) Assuming you have done your homework, you are ready to step into the market.

When is the best time to start? There are two major recruiting cycles to take advantage of to launch job hunting campaigns. The first cycle starts in early January and the second starts during Labor Day week. In addition, there is a brief secondary hiring effort in late spring from vacancies caused by the hiring cycle started earlier in the New Year.

To make matters more complicated, during the late spring there are normally many other searches underway to fill Director and Senior Director jobs. Combine that with the additional vacancies generated by the hiring cycle that started right after the New Year and competition for “A” level candidates becomes intense. These professionals will most likely have several job offers to consider.

There is also a path leading to end of year hires. If an organization has been trying for several months to fill a senior role before the end of the year, they may try to manage holiday schedules for themselves and the finalists. This can mean the difference in extending an offer before Christmas, for example, or having to wait several weeks into the New Year.

### **JANUARY Through APRIL**

**EVENTS:** *Martin Luther King Holiday – 3rd Monday in January, Consumer Electronics Show in early January (Tech Sector), President’s Day – 3rd Monday in February, Easter Sunday and Passover, Spring Break (varies from region to region), Trade Show Season*

### **January 1st, the New Year, time for a fresh start—or are you already late?**

The answer is you are not too late but you need to be ready to respond to opportunities—and that preparation is what you should have completed by mid-January. It could easily have taken you 2-months to carefully define what you are seeking in terms of challenge and total compensation.

The first two quarters of the New Year (January through early June) are the most productive to fill first-round senior-level positions. (There is a domino effect for second round replacement



hires as well, that starts during the second quarter.) In January resignations take effect, senior officers retire and leave during the holiday season, and the hiring team postpones any active recruiting until the New Year. The expectation is that the hiring process will begin the first full week in January. That is not what happens.

More likely, it will take the hiring team several weeks to decide upon a job description and come to an agreement about the qualifications and the ideal candidate they hope to find. They often will retain a search firm that will want to speak with several leaders. Often the job description will be adjusted, and an outline of the project will be written and approved. It is likely that the outreach and external search work will start in late February.

Following the typical pattern, research begins in late February and becomes intense in early March with proactive efforts to identify potential candidates. Some are job hunting and others are “found” through research. Usually this is the work of search firms or mid-level HR executives.

If you are contacted and are interested, it would be good to know how many candidates are being considered for first round interviews and if there is a timetable that the hiring organization has established for a hire. It will take about 4-weeks at least for this phase. No more than 8 candidates and no less than 5 are generally the number selected for in-person interviews. They will have been selected by the hiring team as a result of phone interviews and written recommendations prepared by researchers.

Meanwhile, what research should a job seeker be doing to identify potential opportunities? Pay attention to announcements in the trades, on industry blogs and track sources that quickly report leadership shuffles at major companies. Reach out to senior Human Resource officers there via LinkedIn, note the change and your interest—if you are aggressively looking. Otherwise do your homework and reach out to reputable search firms who handle senior assignments. While a search might begin in February, conducting research to learn about a potential opening should begin as soon as you learn about the vacancy.

We are now into March and these first-round interviews usually wrap up toward the end of March. At that point, the number of candidates is narrowed down to 5 or less. Another round of interviews is scheduled for early April (and perhaps late March) depending upon travel schedules. The goal is to select 3 finalists. During this phase schedules become complicated. If the hiring organization can arrange a day or two when the interviewing team can meet candidates, and the candidates are free those days as well, the timetable will work. Otherwise, delays occur that can mean the final round of interviews occur in late April or early May.

As a motivated and cooperative candidate, you should be anticipating every step in the process and providing as much information about your timetable and interest as possible. You should have a phone number that is reserved for calls related to your search efforts and that should be “at the ready” along with a personal email that you check several times a day. Most contact is via email or phone, but texting is becoming more common. Email is safer since that provides a record of conversations. Thank you notes should be sent to all the people that interviewed you.



Providing scheduling information in writing is considered helpful. You can also ask how many candidates are under consideration as you proceed through the hiring process. That is as far as you can go; any other details are considered confidential. Your objective is to facilitate the screening process and establish a pattern of behavior that is responsible, responsive and trustworthy.

Rule number one is that a search will always take longer than a job seeker expects—and that the hiring manager will always give you the ideal timetable for the process to move along, if nothing delays the process. The research phase is difficult to estimate since it could take 4-weeks or several months.

Usually the week before and the week after Easter Sunday are booked for personal vacations. Spring break varies widely and families usually plan to be on a vacation with school age children. Trade shows take time to prepare for and then attend. It takes careful planning to arrange time for in-person interviews around these events.

## **MAY THROUGH SEPTEMBER**

### **May –June Round 1 Hires & End-of September Round 2 Hires (ideally)**

**EVENTS:** *Memorial Day Weekend (end of May), Informal start of summer and vacations, High School and College graduations. July 4th (If it occurs midweek, the entire week is a holiday; otherwise either several days before or after the date are vacation days.), personal vacations (Occur throughout the summer months and generally August is when recruiting efforts slow or pause as senior officers schedule vacations before Labor Day), Labor Day Weekend (beginning of September)*

We are reaching the final stage of the interviewing process. Hopefully there are three finalists that are under serious consideration. In some cases, one of the three meets the most senior officer; in other cases, two are selected. Rarely will all three be interviewed. Before the final interview(s) references are checked, compensation is verified and a conversation about a potential offer begins. This will enable the final negotiations to move along quickly. It is now mid-May and the interviews have been completed.

A finalist is selected and a draft offer is created as the basis for discussion. After several days of back and forth negotiation, an offer is extended verbally that both parties agree to. It is put in writing with an estimated start date. There is some pressure to have the offer letter signed before the Memorial Day weekend.

The official start date is roughly 4-weeks from the time the offer is accepted. That would put the date at the very end of June or the week after the 4th of July holiday. There may be some delay due to the need for a verification of employment and salary.

It has taken from January through June to complete a search with no major setbacks. Using this framework, it is easy to factor in a variety of issues that can occur which will further extend the timetable for a hire. (Round 1)



As jobs that became available early in the year are filled, a new round of vacancies occurs. (Round 2) Hiring for senior positions continues in the spring. The pace to make these secondary hires is affected by how quickly the leadership team acts to define the position and determine if a search firm should be retained or if the HR staff will handle the project.

Hiring during this season is competitive as new searches occur while vacancies remain to be filled from earlier cycles. In this round, the vacancy may be for a Senior Director, one level below the VP. In addition, there is the normal churn of Director and Senior Director vacancies. Hiring excellent candidates becomes extremely competitive and challenging. Searching for candidates may begin in late May or June with the first round of interviews beginning late in June. In this case the number of first round candidates may be no more than five, eliminating one round of interviews.

Completing first round interviews can wrap up in mid-July as the July 4th holiday slows down the schedule. It will take careful planning to arrange the next round of interviews hopefully reduced to 3 semi-finalists through July and early August. This is the best-case scenario. Candidates as well as the hiring team, take family vacations and finding dates becomes challenging. If the goal is to present only one or two finalists to the most senior hiring officer, that will be scheduled after the three candidates are interviewed by the hiring officer's direct reports. It is most likely the finalist(s) will be invited to interview in September when the hiring officer is available.

Assuming there are no delays in the recruiting schedule and the finalist(s) are suitable, an offer can be extended, negotiated and finalized in a written offer letter. That would be Mid-September with a start date in mid-October. This is a fast track search with no complications. Delays are, for example, the need for more research, candidates withdrawing, scheduling conflicts due possibly to executive travel, trade shows and changes within the hiring organization that impact the search.

## **OCTOBER – END of YEAR and January Follow-Up to searches Underway**

**EVENTS:** *Columbus Day, Thanksgiving, End of Year Rush (Thanksgiving – Dec 31) "Holiday Season"*

This is a short recruiting window for new searches and to allow for completion of searches begun in the spring and early summer. During this period, hiring organizations discover that with other corporate priorities such as trade shows, internal meetings and business travel, they can only expect to complete first round interviews before the holiday season begins.

There is usually time during the first week in December for business appointments. After that the exodus begins with senior officers taking from mid-December through the New Year for vacation. It becomes clear that any hires involving their approval simply won't happen as much as that was the initial intention.

There is another path leading to end of year hires. If an organization has been trying for several months to fill a senior role before the end of the year, they may try to manage holiday schedules and find one or two days when the interviewing team is not traveling. If that is the



situation, a finalist can help by providing a list of dates s/he is available starting immediately after Thanksgiving. It is always appropriate to provide scheduling information as I have said, e.g., vacation travel plans and days when you are unavailable, to help in arranging interviews. This can mean the difference in extending an offer before Christmas, for example, or having to wait weeks.

It is also essential to have all the details about your compensation at your fingertips. If there are just a few days to wrap up a search, you must anticipate what will be needed and have the information immediately available. Instead of giving a finalist a full week to think about an offer and discuss terms, an end of year decision may happen within 2-days.

I have always found that a risky path. Decisions made that quickly often lead to errors or details that were not discussed. Also, distractions and overload due to holiday obligations lead to stress and the potential for conflicts as the offer is negotiated. If it is at all possible to agree to work out terms of an offer once the New Year begins, knowing that both parties are eager to make the hire, that would be my recommendation.

For job seekers, this is the time to attend professional association receptions, contact business associates to meet socially, and prepare to job hunt in the New Year. Do not bring resumes to these events. Exchanging business cards is sufficient and plan to send follow-up notes in the New Year. If there are searches underway, wish the hiring teams holiday greetings and indicate you are looking forward to meeting them in January.

### **Get an early start in the first week of January to arrange follow-up interviews.**

Take the initiative to start scheduling meetings by indicating when you are free. Most senior executives take well into the second week of January to begin arranging interviews.

### **A warning about—a potential paradigm shift in hiring organizations and the status of finalist candidates under consideration.**

If a search is close to being completed at the end of the year but cannot be concluded, there is the risk of instability and a shift in the New Year. That could change the direction of the search or the level of interest the finalist(s) have in the position. Unexpected leadership changes, business priorities, economic shifts can put a search on “hold”.

Finalist candidates may be contacted to consider other opportunities, decide they should interview for them and withdraw from the search. They may receive an especially good bonus with hints a promotion is in offing if they stay with their current employer and put a “hold” on making a move.

If an offer can be made ASAP in the New Year, that may be the best approach to preventing a situation from unraveling. It does not happen that often but being prepared and moving swiftly is the best way to avoid complications.