

FIXING A BROKEN CORPORATE HIRING AND SEARCH PROCESS

Hiring outstanding direct reports more efficiently can have an immediate, positive impact on the CCO's performance. So why is something so important not happening more effectively? Why should it take 6 months or longer to fill a critical job reporting to the CCO or CMO? This issue is never discussed, except off the record.

You can read article after article advising senior-level comms executives about how to navigate the perils of executive level hiring practices. But, to suggest the actual hiring process and behavior of the hiring executive can be improved, seem to be taboo.

There are reasons why searches can be frustrating and unsuccessful. The primary one is that the effort is flawed from the start. That's why I'm tackling this sensitive subject and suggesting that CCOs are missing an opportunity to improve the productivity of the entire team. This new series of posts is an in-depth description of the current recruitment process along with an analysis and recommendations to fix the problem.

If a CCO wishes to tackle this problem, I would welcome the opportunity to consult with the organization to assist with implementing the changes that will become a blueprint for future efficiencies. The consulting assignment is separate from a retained search and can be combined with a search, if appropriate.

Here are the topics I cover:

- Who Is in Charge of the Hiring Process? And Why Couldn't That Be Changed?
- Is Improving the Search Process a Question No One is Asking because No One is Taking Ownership of It?
- How Is the Normal Recruiting Process Organized? What Are the Potential Issues?
- What Are the Benefits and Disadvantages of Using Internal vs External Resources to Search for Qualified Candidates?
- How Can the Job Description Become an Effective Tool for Improving the Search Process and Finding Qualified Candidates?
- Why Should It Take 6-Months or Longer to Fill a Critical Job Reporting to the CCO or CMO? What Needs Fixing to Cut That Time in Half?
- What Are the Right Resources to Use in a Successful Search? Who Should Determine Which Resources to Use?
- What Improvements Can Be Made in the Project Management of a Search to Reduce the Timeline?
- What Recommendations Should Be Considered to Enhance the Quality of Candidates Presented for Consideration?
- How Can Effective Planning and Creating a Project Schedule Improve the Search Process?

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WHO IS IN CHARGE OF THE HIRING PROCESS? AND WHY CAN'T THAT BE CHANGED?

I believe many CCOs think of hiring as HR's job and that they are passive participants. They may think that having a brief discussion with HR about the job and the ideal candidate are sufficient contributions to launching the search. They have met their obligations.

Also, they think the hiring process is good enough as is. I believe HR likes it that way since they take charge and are not challenged to improve their procedures and the results they achieve.

The expectation is that those in charge of hiring are calling the shots and they will continue to behave as they always have. My take on the situation is that the recruiting process has not changed at the very senior levels because there is no pressure on hiring managers to "up their game."

If the head of communications or marketing is making the hiring decision, who will critique their performance? Who will have the temerity to suggest, "You should evaluate your behavior and decision-making process." If I were a job seeker, I certainly wouldn't complain. If I were an outside consultant to help with the hire, I certainly wouldn't criticize my client. If I were an internal HR Recruiter, I would most likely not be at a level where I could have the authority to suggest changes or want to create internal discord.

Or, the CCO might not be aware that any changes were needed, since he/she may assume the way the recruitment process works is the norm and considered effective. (I would guess this is the way companies generally conduct senior level search assignments.)

And finally, why would the hiring manager question his own authority and feel that there is an issue? From all angles there is a built-in bias toward the status quo.

<http://www.jc-a.com/fixing-broken-corporate-hiring-search-process-part-1-charge-hiring-process-cant-changed/>

IS IMPROVING THE SEARCH PROCESS NOT AN ISSUE BECAUSE THE CCO IS SATISFIED WITH THE STATUS QUO?

Busy CCOs are happy to offload an assignment that takes them away from their primary responsibility. I would describe the CCO's level of involvement as minimal and vulnerable to disappointment. I think the potential for delays, loss of quality candidates due to the length of time for a search, gaps in the evaluation process and casual project management all contribute to potentially poor outcomes and postponed decision making.

To read the many articles published about how job seekers can improve their chances of being hired for a position implies a successful outcome is possible because the candidate can improve the process. The way s/he is handling his/her responses to requests from the hiring organization can delay the outcome. The onus is on the candidate.

Articles that study executive level searches, report the search process is difficult and frustrating for job seekers, but the advice is, "Put up with it." The hiring organization is not criticized for creating the initial problem—it simply is a given and accepted that these searches take a long time. Is that really accurate?

In my opinion, there is a case to be made for improving the process and increasing the opportunity to:

- increase productivity and restart initiatives more quickly that have been "on hold" during the search;
- have access to outstanding professionals who can participate in a search for only a limited time-period;
- reduce the risk of competitive offers due to the efficiency of the process and increase the ability to respond to counter offers in a timely fashion;
- confirm a strong cultural fit prior to an offer being made due to the expertise of the hiring team (assuming the recruiting effort is top-notch);
- bring on motivated and appreciative new hires that, due to the efficiency of the process, are energized and excited to contribute to an organization that moves decisively and effectively.

I believe it is in the best interests of the CCO to take on the responsibility for revamping and leading a process. That commitment will require additional time and attention but not "hands-on" work. The internal project management would be delegated to a trusted communications executive reporting directly to the CCO.

Why am I tackling this topic when no one else has? Here is my perspective. If the CCO assumes a leadership role, I believe s/he can succeed in hiring "A" team executives more efficiently than ever before.

I look forward to comments and feedback from hiring managers about these recommendations and observations.

<http://www.jc-a.com/fixing-broken-corporate-hiring-search-process-part-improving-search-process-not-issue-because-cco-satisfied-with-status-quo/>

HOW IS THE NORMAL RECRUITING PROCESS ORGANIZED? WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL ISSUES?

Here is how the normal recruiting process works. The head of marketing and/or communications identifies a need to fill a position that is either a key hire or a direct report. The vacancy may be due to an internal promotion or a new job function replacing a prior role (social media opportunities may supplant more traditional media relations roles, for example.) If there is no need to approve additional headcount, and no job freeze, the hiring manager is ready to move ahead internally to begin the search.

At the beginning of the process, the hiring manager turns the search over to the internal recruiter or HR leader to manage the assignment. Project Management is in the hands of HR. Frequently, the hiring manager will not give a great deal of thought to that decision since that is the standard approach.

The job is posted, and the company complies with all legal requirements. By this time, a decision is made about how to search for candidates. Consideration about hiring an outside search organization is turned over to the HR team or made in consultation with the hiring manager. Decision-making authority is in the hands of HR.

The search is launched, and HR is responsible for executing and obtaining results. There is minimal oversight and accountability by the comms team. The HR contact does make an effort to report progress to the comms group. However, the report is informational and not used as a tool to manage the process. The comms team has very little leverage to change the way the search is executed. Is there a sense of urgency? Is there a primary focus on the goal and less on the process?

<http://www.jc-a.com/fixing-broken-corporate-hiring-search-process-part-3-normal-recruiting-process-organized-potential-issues/>

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS AND DISADVANTAGES OF USING INTERNAL VS EXTERNAL RESOURCES TO SEARCH FOR QUALIFIED CANDIDATES?

A corporate HR liaison, in my opinion, can be very helpful as a source for internal information about the organization, executive staff and teams involved in the process. However, factors to consider when evaluating internal vs external resources include: determining whether the HR team and its leadership are aware of what it can competently tackle, and identifying who makes the decision about retaining additional resources.

Outlining the expertise required to complete an assignment is rarely spelled out by communications leaders but would be extremely valuable. It would form the basis for deciding if there were sufficient internal resources to complete the project. Often the capability to perform sophisticated search work is lacking. In addition, if a goal is identifying qualified diversity candidates, special efforts must be made to tap a broad candidate pool of fully qualified finalists. That research is highly specialized, challenging and generally requires retaining external expertise.

Depending upon the organization and budgetary considerations, there may be a bias toward saving the cost of the fee and attempting to recruit for the position using in-house recruiting staff. In some companies the internal staff regards using a search firm as an admission they are not competent and see themselves in an adversarial role. That is an unfortunate situation. A joint effort where the internal HR staff develops a close working relationship with the search firm can lead to efficiencies and more effective evaluation of candidates.

On occasion the in-house staff has developed an expertise to source and evaluate senior level comms executives, but that is rare.

A key question in the decision-making process is, who controls the budget for retaining outside consultants? Often, that is centralized in HR. If that is the case, I recommend that the decision-making process be shared with the group/department that has made the request for outside consultants. There should be provisions for reviewing/overriding the decision if HR rejects the request. This financial policy reflects the point that project management of a search should be in the hands of the department that is filling a vacancy, supported by HR.

<http://www.jc-a.com/fixing-broken-corporate-hiring-search-process-part-4-benefits-disadvantages-using-internal-vs-external-resources-search-qualified-candidates/>

HOW CAN THE JOB DESCRIPTION BECOME AN EFFECTIVE TOOL FOR IMPROVING THE SEARCH PROCESS AND FINDING QUALIFIED CANDIDATES?

The job description can be a persuasive tool to develop interest in exploring a new opportunity. It can also be an effective tool for evaluating candidates.

However, most descriptions are written by HR staffs that are internally focused and lack the ability and perspective to write for an external audience. Too often, the hiring manager makes a token effort to edit a description and then approves it for external distribution. S/he knows it is not even close to what the job is and what is most important to him/her.

Instead, sufficient thought should be given about preparing a compelling and persuasive job description for external distribution. Writing a realistic and accurate job description should be part of every search and is especially useful if the position is newly created or if it is being redefined. Candidates often discount job descriptions altogether because they are full of jargon and phrases that have no context since outsiders do not know the organization.

A job description for external audiences should assume the reader has an incomplete knowledge about the company and should include a description about the vision, mission and key challenges the organization is addressing. If there are issues such as a major rebuilding initiative, that have been discussed publicly, assume that must be acknowledged and the company's perspective explained. There are so few descriptions that address substantive issues candidly, that a thorough and balanced job description acknowledging issues will stand out. It signals this is a company that sets realistic expectations of what can be accomplished through its communications efforts.

The hiring manager should answer the question, "What are the top 3 experiences and skills sets that are critical in the role?" A well-crafted description is also an excellent tool for a sophisticated recruiter to use in probing for strategic problem solving. It is also helpful in evaluating candidate achievements as they relate to the specifics in the description.

Assuming the description is accurate, when candidates are presented to the client (the hiring officer) by the internal HR team, it is expected they are fully qualified. Based on current practices, that is frequently not the case and the interviewing process continues for weeks longer than it should. The hiring manager should assume responsibility for providing detailed feedback to HR about its evaluation of candidates. HR should be alerted in advance that this level of accountability is to be expected.

The hiring manager can then determine if the recruiters can absorb the information and upgrade their performance. If the HR team can improve the quality of its referrals, that leads to greater efficiencies. If not, then the hiring manager can quickly retain outside experts to present finalists and cut short the screening process.

<http://www.jc-a.com/fixing-broken-corporate-hiring-search-process-part-5-can-job-description-become-effective-tool-improving-search-process-finding-qualified-candidates/>

WHY SHOULD IT TAKE 6-MONTHS OR LONGER TO FILL A CRITICAL JOB REPORTING TO THE CCO OR CMO? WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE TO CUT THAT TIME IN HALF?

Here is my recommendation for an alternate approach to the "normal" search. The fundamental difference is the executive in charge is the one who has the most to gain (or lose) if the search is successful (or not.)

That executive is the CCO or the CMO. (Future references will be to use CCO.) What improvements can CCOs implement?

The CCO is in the best position to decide when the hire is critical to the department and the company. Once that is understood and agreed upon at the highest levels it is the responsibility of the CCO to succeed in making a timely and excellent hire. Most likely the job is a direct report to the CCO. HR executes the search in a supporting role and reports results based on an agreed upon plan.

The hiring manager will be responsible for all strategic decision-making and will set expectations for the support needed from HR. A well-orchestrated search has the best potential to hit a "home run" in finding the strongest candidates. An excellent hire can lead to increases in productivity, creativity, new strategic thinking and, overall, add value to the company.

It is critical to have the project management aspects of a search executed by a senior comms Director who understands the nuances of the communications field. S/he is sufficiently experienced, and by his/her involvement through the interviewing process, candidates understand that the company takes the search seriously.

At the executive levels, it is never appropriate to expect a junior level recruiter in HR to contact potential candidates. It signals to the candidate that the hiring organization does not understand what appropriate behavior is, and that the comms role is not held in high regard.

Establishing at the get go that this approach will be implemented and clarifying the role of HR will eliminate confusion. It also can lead to metrics and a timetable to evaluate the effectiveness of the search process.

<http://www.jc-a.com/fixing-broken-corporate-hiring-search-process-part-6-take-6-months-longer-fill-critical-job-reporting-cco-cmo-needs-change-cut-time/>

WHAT ARE THE RIGHT RESOURCES TO USE IN A SUCCESSFUL SEARCH? WHO SHOULD DETERMINE WHICH ONES TO USE?

The CCO at the outset should be the executive to invest the time to feel confident s/he has selected the resources, either internal or external (search consultants), that can add value and complete the search efficiently.

The hiring executive should decide if there is sufficient expertise in-house to understand and evaluate the candidates' achievements and how that experience can fit the organization.

The CCO should ask if the internal recruiter, within the past 2-years, has been searching for other comms executives, so s/he has a sense of the marketplace. If the recruiter's experience is dated, nuances and market shifts will be missed along with changes in the various communications specialties. Upward shifts in salary ranges can also have occurred and the hiring organization will need to reset ranges or lower experience requirements. All these issues should be discussed, and a decision made either that the hire can be effectively handled in-house or that an outside firm is needed.

One structural drawback about the role of HR is that it generally lacks the authority at critical junctures of the search, e.g. finalist interviews, to insist senior executives make this project a priority. Also, the HR liaison may be burdened with serving several internal clients. As a result, delays become unavoidable.

Once a search is underway, if an outside firm has been retained, many procedures I've described should be part of the normal recruiting process and discussed initially as part of the services provided. On the internal, in-house side, there can typically be less discipline in setting expectations and following up on an established timetable and plan. That will require more attention to keep the search on track.

To summarize, it is the Comms leader who will decide if an outside firm with a specific expertise is needed. If a firm is retained, the CCO will select the organization with the professionalism and track record in comms/marcom search work to justify a decision to retain the firm. That firm will assign a senior comms recruiter (approved by the CCO) who understands the key priorities of the job and will

identify candidates who are fully qualified to fill the position. Establishing clear deadlines and reporting procedures will keep the search on track and avoid surprises. The same care and attention should be expected of an in-house HR manager who is the key contact for the search.

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WHAT IMPROVEMENTS CAN BE MADE IN THE PROJECT MANAGEMENT OF A SEARCH TO REDUCE THE TIMELINE?

A six-month process (or longer) is simply too long for a search. If the hiring manager outlines a timetable at the beginning of the process and adheres to it, that can shave months off an assignment.

I've remarked that the strategic leader of the process is the CCO or CMO who has the most to gain from a well-managed effort.

A search is no more than a complex project to manage. Being a leader does not mean executing the work. It does mean that the leader (who can appoint a deputy) will have oversight, set expectations, establish deadlines and keep the project on an agreed upon timeline. That means having a discussion at the very beginning of the assignment to describe step by step actions.

For example, if a job must be posted internally, can that be done as soon as filling the position is approved (using an existing or slightly modified description?) If a job description must be updated, what is the fastest way to make the changes and route it internally for approval? Are major events occurring, e.g. industry conferences or annual budgets due for submission? The recruiting schedule can avoid being undermined by creating an initial planning document, a timeline, an outline with specific tasks assigned and reporting deadlines.

This process should become the normal way searches are managed. Accountability is the key. The team leader should use the status reports to question the effectiveness of the effort and to determine how realistic the timetable is to generate results. These reports can also be selectively circulated to leaders who will be asked to participate in interviewing finalists. That may be helpful to obtain or confirm their support of the search when their cooperation is needed.

If your in-house or external recruiter is in regular communication with you (or your deputy) as a result of you paying attention to his/her status reports, you can expect the assignment will stay on track. Since the team leader is making the search a priority, the signal couldn't be clearer that obtaining timely results matters.

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WHAT RECOMMENDATIONS SHOULD BE CONSIDERED TO ENHANCE THE QUALITY OF CANDIDATES PRESENTED FOR CONSIDERATION?

The recruiter should be briefed directly by the hiring manager about the characteristics of the ideal candidate and what the hiring manager is most interested in knowing about him/her. Precisely that information should be included in the candidate evaluation memo/report and verbally presented to the hiring manager.

With that level of detail, the screening process can be shortened, saving weeks of interviewing semi-finalists. For example, If the goal is to identify 3 finalists to present to management, and the 5 candidates in the first round are all fully qualified, it is possible to move directly to final round interviews.

Selecting expert recruiters can save time as they have the judgment, insight and experience to find and present outstanding potential finalists. That is why I recommend investing the time to evaluate the capability of internal (or external) recruiters and to question their knowledge and expertise. Since the field is in flux, it is also important that they have conducted recent searches in communications (and related fields.) The recruiter will have a good grasp of current market conditions and the challenges that presents for a search.

I've advised candidates who are successful and open to considering new opportunities to turn down exploring jobs unless they have the patience and time to devote to the many steps and delays involved. That feedback will give the recruiter "ammunition" to ask the hiring manager to consider shortening the hiring cycle. The benefit to the hiring organization is clear. In general, an efficient (shorter) process may allow for a deeper talent pool and excellent candidate who can be extremely selective about exploring new opportunities.

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HOW CAN "PRE-EMPTIVE" PLANNING AND CREATING A PROJECT SCHEDULE ACCELERATE THE SEARCH PROCESS?

Creating a schedule at the very beginning of a search is a management tool to make an educated guess about when candidates will be interviewed. It creates a need for executives to acknowledge and block times for what is a high priority for the hiring manager. The search process then takes on a formal structure with targets for completing the various steps involved. Of course, weekly status reports are issued about progress toward completion of the search.

This approach creates an obligation on the part of the hiring manager to inform the interview team of progress toward final round interviews. It also creates an obligation for the interviewing team members to maintain a “hold” on their schedules. Or, that allows the hiring manager to decide how adjustments must be made, if that executive cannot meet his/her obligation. The hiring manager may either delay or find a replacement.

Since filling the post has the approval at the highest levels, this obligation is more than a courtesy obligation, it is a management priority. Given the weekly status report process, it will be clear to all involved what progress is being made toward completion without creating a contentious finger-pointing situation.

The search schedule is a tool that can be used to place “holds” on executives’ calendars for finalist visits. That can easily shave a month off a search. The schedule is also a helpful tool to share with candidates, so they can be prepared to clear their calendars when they are needed. Adjustments can always be made, which do take time and patience.

The idea is not to wait until you are ready to schedule interviews and then find conflicts. By looking weeks and even months ahead, appointments can be arranged quickly since finalists have already reserved blocks of time and executive travel, for example, has already been taken into consideration and doesn’t scuttle interviews.

This planning process also challenges the hiring manager to determine who will be invited to interview the candidates and in which rounds. There may be a need for two interview cycles, e.g. a semi-final round and a final round. Arranging the timing of the two rounds early in the search process allows, if needed, for changes to the executive team participating. That can also prevent delays in the schedule.

Candidates also find that advance planning is very helpful if they need to take several days off from their job for interviews. I have seen searches delayed by a month at the finalist stage when it is discovered far along in the search that conflicts in scheduling on both sides cannot be avoided. Again, advance planning can prevent these surprises.

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