

The importance of “culture and fit” when making senior appointments

Thought leaders share their views on the HR profession and its direction for the future

Lorraine Thomas

When human resource (HR) directors seek assistance in undertaking a senior appointment search and selection, it takes more than finding an individual with a ream of professional qualifications and experience. Especially at the most senior levels of placement, it is essential to find a candidate who will complement the company's culture.

From my experience, it entails extensive research, tapping into a network of referrals and recommendations and having a thorough understanding of the client organisation's needs, values and growth aspirations.

When this foundation of data is established, then on the counter-side it is important to approach and present the opportunity to a well-researched candidate. With this information in hand, I am in a better position need to make our approaches with the appropriate motivations on offer.

Detailed and explanatory briefs about the recruiting client and the candidates become our guide, influencing all our research and investigations in creating the right partnership.

The components of company culture

To ascertain the facts, thorough research is required on both sides of the assignment. First, when examining the recruiting organisation, it is important to understand what it means to refer to “company culture”. This comprises various elements that paint a picture of a company's profile, beyond the profit and loss sheets.

The process starts simply by briefing about the company and seeking out anything relevant through the media channels and on the corporate website. My preferred methods include approaching my own professional network; what are others saying about this organisation? The opinions of partners, suppliers and clients give insight that a recruiter would not necessarily discover without asking those pertinent questions. So, when approaching the candidate, I can impart some of that intelligence we have gleaned to determine whether they would fit well into that organisation's culture and energy.

Understanding the company's people is a valuable addition to building your cultural profile. What does a successful person in that business look like, for example? Actually, meeting an individual in the company

who represents success and progression will help me manage and inform the expectation of the candidate. With senior appointments, it becomes increasingly important to ensure that I am not merely “filling a space”, but I am making a well-tailored decision so I do not offer a clone to our client, but an appropriate choice.

It is also worth examining how a company displays and reinforces its own brand – by that, I do not just mean good signage. If I were to walk around their office sites, what would they say about the organisation? Style and upkeep reveal something of a brand's emphasis and internal culture. For example, one of the easiest ways to get a feel for a company's performance is to visit a site that it services and engage with its customers and other end-users. It is one way of gauging whether its commitment to a good service is fulfilled on a practical level.

The demeanour of the staff is another good indicator as to whether the working environment is a positive one. Unmotivated staff members are generally not a positive sign that the company culture is healthy.

Should I have a candidate in the process, I always stipulate that they should meet other people in the company, especially other senior managers and directors with whom they may work one day. This often includes the HR director, or the senior line manager, even counterparts in another country to whom the successful candidate would report. This is a two-way process and the candidate must buy into the culture as well; we cannot omit the strength of personal “chemistry” between individuals, even though this is business. In any satisfactory relationship, positive chemistry is an essential factor for success. It is not good enough to like just their new line manager, but the candidate should have the ability to interact

successfully with other key people in the team. When proposing a recruit at a senior level, identifying effective communication and relationship-building skills is necessary; this means being very thorough, even at these early stages before the official job interview.

Furthermore, once you know what a good candidate looks like in the context of a business, then you are likely to succeed in making a positive match.

The candidate's goals

When conducting a search, it is important to remember that there are two parties involved. There are some other considerations to be taken on board, specific to the candidate, that make the difference between success and failure.

When it comes to the candidate, the following questions need to be considered:

- Are they competent and capable to fulfil the role?
- Do they share the same values as the company in question?
- Is there chemistry and cultural fit between the two entities?

Motivations differ for each candidate. Some want to join an organisation with a strong corporate social responsibility (CSR) portfolio. Therefore, one should consider investigating whether the recruiting company has strong CSR engagement – are they putting their money and efforts where their goodwill is? Astute research will determine if this the case. For others, a substantial reward package may be a priority or a desire to explore their professional diversity through experiences, sectors or geographical locations. Some candidates may want to work for a long-established company, and others may want to work for a younger, emerging organisation, maybe even a non-profit

organisation. Whatever professional experience the candidate seeks, we have to discover what they are and match them to an organisation that can deliver on those aspirations.

Sometimes the fit is not right

There are times when even after an extensive and thorough search, the candidate and recruiting company just do not fit. There are several reasons why this may happen. For example, quite often, scope and brief of the job will change. A company may (as part of its natural evolution) decide to change the direction of the business. The knock-on effect is that certain roles may change along with the new profile. This also affects the profile of the candidate you are seeking, therefore the search has to recommence within new parameters. Therefore, the search has to recommence within new parameters.

One of the other reasons highlights the importance of the research requirement. Sometimes, the values and culture of both parties are misaligned. If a company were to portray its culture in one way, but in practice it is different or inconsistent, then this could dissuade a candidate. It is important to consider that any differences from the corporate image may be due to a slightly different regional or departmental culture rather than the desired model of corporate culture. Alternatively, it could become an issue when a business has been bought or sold – things do inevitably change under new leadership.

Start as you mean to continue

Finding a winning match between a company and a candidate should be accorded the time and diligence commensurate with investment in a senior appointment. These are the leaders and shapers of the organisation in question; these are people who look at the bigger picture and make the overreaching decisions

that will affect the staff and success of the company. Therefore, if your team wants to invest in finding such an individual, then much of the onus is on skilled recruiters to start the process as you, the HR team, would want it to end – successfully.

About the author

Lorraine Thomas is the Managing Director of Metzger. Lorraine joined

Metzger Search and Selection, a specialist recruitment consultancy, in January 2007. Originally a Metzger client, she was persuaded to join the team to launch and build their interim division; she then moved on to develop other aspects of the business, focussing on client acquisition, development and retention. Now as the Managing Director, she works closely with clients and candidates on assignment delivery and developing

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