


# How to Identify, Qualify, and Work with Executive Search Firms



**HELBLING**  
& ASSOCIATES, INC.



Today's competitive and fast-changing business environment demands that organizations continually attract and secure talent to achieve and sustain success. As a result, recruitment is a significant issue for hiring and human resources executives, and these professionals are finding that traditional recruitment methods are not effective in fulfilling challenging and critical needs. Therefore, they are turning to executive search firms for strategic and proactive talent acquisitions.

The objectives of this e-book are to educate hiring and human resources executives on:

- how to identify reputable and specialized search firms;
- how to qualify search firms for specific recruitment assignments; and
- how to support a search process to generate a successful outcome.

By understanding the above, hiring and human resources executives can maximize their organizations' return on investment when partnering with executive search firms.



# About Helbling & Associates, Inc.

Helbling & Associates is a retained executive search and talent acquisition consulting firm specializing exclusively in construction, engineering, facilities management, and real estate development.

We proudly represent prominent organizations throughout the United States and Canada including: construction contractors and managers, architecture and engineering firms, public and private colleges and universities, healthcare and cultural institutions, public agencies, real estate developers, and corporations with significant real estate assets.

These types of organizations face common recruitment challenges, including:

- an aging population at the executive management and operational levels;
- a shortage of executives who are multi-faceted and have combined attributes of innovation, technical knowledge, strong business acumen, management capabilities, and important soft skills; and
- an overall lack of effective succession planning.

We assist these entities in identifying and attracting professionals for leadership roles ranging from executive to financial administration, from facilities management to construction oversight, and from human resources to business development.



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# Part 1

## Are You Ready to Engage a Search Firm?

Prior to making a decision to partner with an executive search firm, there are many important questions and issues to consider in order to ensure that your organization is fully committed to working in partnership with a third-party entity. Only after these questions have been addressed can you be confident that retaining an executive search firm is an effective decision.

### Questions to consider prior to engaging a search firm

- Have all internal recruitment methods been utilized including job board postings, online databases / networks, print ads, social media recruiting, and employee referral programs?
- Are the position's objectives and the ideal candidate qualifications clear?
- What is the impact that an ideal professional could have upon the future and progress of the organization? Is filling the role critical to its advancement and success?
- Does the role demand specialized experiences and skill sets?
- Do you need to identify and attract top-tier candidates who may not be actively seeking new career opportunities?
- Could a search firm save your organization time and money?

If the position is senior level, other considerations are:

- Is your organization's executive management and / or hiring managers in agreement that there is not an internal candidate who can fulfill the role and its expectations? Do all team members support the hiring of an external candidate?
- Is your governing board aware of the vacancy and significance of the position as well as the value of securing an ideal professional? Have board members been tapped as resources for potential candidates?



## Part 2

# How to Identify Qualified Search Firms

After the decision has been made to engage an executive search firm, the next step is identifying firms that can best assist you with your need. Regardless of your organization's sector and the function of the role, it is highly recommended that you research firms that specialize in your industry and / or in the role's functional expertise.

## What are the most effective ways to identify specialized executive search firms?

- **Industry colleagues:** The best way to find any professional services firm or consultant is to ask colleagues and clients for their recommendations. After all, what could be more reliable than asking people *you* trust who *they* trust?
- **Management consulting firms within your industry:** Management consulting firms that specialize in certain sectors may have connections with or knowledge of well-respected executive search firms in the same industries. Within our core sectors, these organizations include:

FMI Corporation - [fminet.com](http://fminet.com) - FMI is the largest provider of management consulting and investment banking for the engineering and construction industry. They are headquartered in Raleigh, NC with offices throughout the U.S. and in Korea.

Performance Resource Partners - [prpconsultants.com](http://prpconsultants.com) - PRP represents prominent universities, hospitals, cultural institutions, and corporate clients.

Sightlines Facilities Assets Advisors - [sightlines.com](http://sightlines.com) - Sightlines assists universities to better manage their facilities investments. They provide analyses of campus facilities, including measurement protocols and competitive Benchmarking.



Trascent Management Consulting - [trascent.com](http://trascent.com) - Trascent's U.S. headquarters are in Summit, NJ. The firm operates internationally and specializes in real estate and facilities management. Their capabilities span from operational improvement and optimization to technology strategy and enablement.

➔ **Consult your preferred search engine:** While everyone has their own preferences, our favorite search engine is Google. As we have found with our own research, you have to try various keyword combinations to determine which generate the most accurate results. The more specific you are, the better – because you want to narrow the list of firms to only those that fit your needs. Ideas are:

Industry + “executive search” (i.e. construction executive search)  
Industry + “contingency” or “retained” (choose one) + “executive search”  
Industry + “search firms”  
Industry + “executive search consultants”  
“Search firms in” + industry

Since the majority of our readers are involved in A/E/C, facilities management, or real estate development, some examples of keyword combinations are:

“facilities management executive search firms”  
“construction executive search firms”  
“hospital facilities executive search firms”  
“hospital construction executive search firms”  
“university facilities executive search firms”

If you are only seeking retained executive search firms, try:

“construction retained executive search”  
“facilities management retained executive search”  
“architecture retained executive search”

Some users may try to search for firms by actual role titles, which we do not recommend because this can generate an enormous amount of results to sift through, making the process inefficient.



## ➤ Search Consultant / Recruiter directories:

[academic360.com](http://academic360.com) - Site is designed for professionals involved in any function within higher education. You can find a directory of search firms under the Additional Resources tab.

[headhunters.com](http://headhunters.com) - Site is for employers and candidates, and allows users to post jobs, and find jobs and executive search firms.

[higheredjobs.com](http://higheredjobs.com) - Offers career tools, and the ability to search jobs, and find search firms.

[HuntScanlon.com/industry-media-center](http://HuntScanlon.com/industry-media-center) - Hunt Scanlon Media launched its Industry Media Center to address the need for an online directory of specialized executive search firms. Its site provides functionality to search by geographical region, services provided (beyond executive search), job function, and industry specialization. Please note that the site only includes search firms that have paid to be listed.

[myresumeagent.com](http://myresumeagent.com) - This site is geared towards professionals who are seeking new career opportunities. It is owned and operated by Kennedy Information, a company serving the executive search profession since 1971. While their service has a fee, they are highly networked in the search sector and they organize consultants by location, industry, and function. Therefore, you receive a highly targeted and organized list of search consultants.

[searchfirm.com](http://searchfirm.com) - Highly popular website that allows visitors to filter search consultants by their specialties, search models, locations, and keywords. The site is owned and operated by Cluen, a reputable player in the recruiter software realm.

There are other directories that are more focused in specific sectors. Since one of Helbling's markets is higher education, we are aware of the following directories that specialize in this sector.



# Part 3

## Retained vs. Contingency Search Firms

Recruitment can mean different things to different people, and there are variances in what a hiring organization wants and expects from an executive search firm. In considering this fact, it is important to understand that there are two types of executive search firms: retained and contingency. Each type of firm has certain methods, processes, and advantages. As organizations have diverse hiring needs, both retained and contingency search firms can be effective in different situations. The key is to evaluate which approach is best for your organization. The following chart outlines the key differences between retained and contingency search firms, and when it may be appropriate to engage one instead of the other.

Considerations	Retained Search	Contingency Search
Overall approach	<p>Formal engagement between hiring organization and search firm. Working collaboratively with the search consultant, a strategy is developed based upon the hiring organization’s objectives, the role and its responsibilities, and competencies and characteristics of ideal candidates. Searches are highly consultative with the structure and environment of the organization thoroughly understood prior to initiating search activities. This ensures that the hiring organization and its role are accurately represented to candidates, and their professional mindsets are assessed to determine cultural fit.</p>	<p>No formal engagement between hiring organization and search firm. Because of this, there is no shared commitment and focus. Typically, the search process is not collaborative and job specifications are less structured to allow a greater pool of candidates.</p>



Considerations	Retained Search	Contingency Search
Fees	Fees are typically one-third of the selected candidate's total first year's compensation package. A retainer fee is paid to initiate search activities and installments are due at certain stages of the search process.	Fees can range from 20% - 33% of the selected candidate's total first year's compensation package and the firm is only paid if a candidate is secured.
Candidate identification	Firm conducts comprehensive and targeted research of hiring organization's specific industry and of organizations within similar or related industries that may have talent in the function of the role. Consultants also utilize their firm's network of industry contacts and acquaintances to gather candidate recommendations. Value lies in the search firm's ability to identify candidates who are passive and are not actively seeking new career opportunities.	In general, firms offer candidates who are actively seeking new career opportunities. Firms will source candidates from job boards, and internal and online databases. Because candidates are those who are actively seeking new positions, they may not necessarily be the most qualified candidates who can be identified.
Candidate assessment	Candidates are evaluated thoroughly regarding their leadership, and management and technical abilities, as well as personality characteristics and ideal corporate culture environments. Firm typically conducts initial interviews and professional references. At this stage of the process, a retained consultant's value is in assessing potential candidates' skills, motivations, and cultural fits with the hiring organization.	Firms will evaluate the technical fit of candidates but will typically rely upon the hiring organization to determine personality characteristics and cultural fit. Hiring organization will perform initial interviews and professional references may or may not be conducted by the firm.



Considerations	Retained Search	Contingency Search
<p><b>Exclusivity</b></p>	<p>Hiring organization works exclusively with the firm. The firm does not represent two direct competitors simultaneously and most will not recruit the hiring organization's employees for a period of up to two years following a search.</p>	<p>Searches are not conducted on an exclusive basis. Hiring organizations can work with multiple contingency firms simultaneously. Firms may work with multiple hiring organizations simultaneously (some that may be direct competitors). Some offer an off-limits policy while others do not.</p>
<p><b>When they are valuable</b></p>	<p>When a hiring organization needs / wants:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• dedicated, comprehensive, strategic effort to secure an ideal professional;</li> <li>• partner for talent acquisitions;</li> <li>• consultant who will consider its organizational culture and the dynamics related to the role; and</li> <li>• candidates thoroughly screened and assessed before being presented.</li> </ul> <p>Also appropriate when the role is senior level and critical to the hiring organization, and candidate quality is more important than speed.</p>	<p>When a hiring organization:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• is willing to assume more responsibility for screening, assessing, and interviewing candidates, and negotiating compensation;</li> <li>• has multiple needs for the same position and similar roles; and</li> <li>• views speed as more important than candidate quality.</li> </ul> <p>Also appropriate when there are many professionals who are likely qualified for the role, and the position is lower level and not critical to the overall success of the hiring organization.</p>



# Part 4

## Questions to Ask a Search Firm Before Retaining Them

Partnering with an executive search firm can require a significant investment of time and money. That is why it is essential to ask pertinent questions prior to formally engaging one to perform a search. By taking the time to discuss the firm's experience, its search process, and its capabilities, you can better perceive how well they will represent your organization, if you want to work with them, and how strong the return on your investment could be. It will also provide you and the search consultant with an understanding of what to expect from one another.

An experienced consultant will have questions about your organization, its challenges and opportunities, and the objectives of your specific talent need. The most reputable firms and consultants will be candid about their abilities to perform the search successfully.

From these initial discussions, you will come to understand the firm's and the consultant's abilities to provide comprehensive, focused, and strategic talent acquisition.

### Questions about the firm in general

#### ➤ Do they specialize in your industry?

A firm that specializes in your industry can offer knowledge and understanding of your sector, a strong network of pertinent contacts, and the ability to identify and attract key professionals.

- How well do they understand your organization's sector, its history, challenges, and opportunities?
- Are they familiar with your organization and the markets it serves?
- Do they currently represent organizations that are considered your competitors?
- Do they have off-limits policies or blocking issues that would restrict them from recruiting candidates in certain organizations that would be pertinent sources for the search?



➤ Do they specialize in securing professionals in the role's function?

If they specialize in securing professionals for roles similar to yours, they will have a comprehension of the technical knowledge and experience needed to fulfill your position's responsibilities as well as characteristics of ideal candidates.

➤ How long have they been in business?

➤ Do they operate on a retained or contingency basis?

➤ Do they have client and candidate references you can contact?

By contacting client *and* candidate references, you can learn how the firm operates. Ask clients about: firm's knowledge, responsiveness, integrity and competence, quality of candidates presented, and if they would retain them again. Ask candidates how well the firm and consultant represented their client and presented the opportunity.



➤ Do they have the ability to provide valuable insight of market conditions, candidate talent pool, and knowledge of how to expand search parameters to ensure the identification of all potentially qualified candidates, including those outside of your sector?

➤ What are their policies regarding travel to meet with your organization and with prospective candidates?

➤ Do they offer a guarantee and how is it defined?

Typically, a retained search firm will offer a six-month guarantee if it is determined that the candidate does not possess the desired qualifications as originally outlined.

➤ Do they offer an off-limits policy?

An off-limits policy prevents the search firm from recruiting your employees. Normally, the time period is two years following the engagement.

➤ What are their standard fees?

## Questions about the firm's search process

### ➤ How will they perform various stages of the search process?

**Client Orientation:** A reputable firm and consultant will take time to:

- understand your organization, its culture, its goals, and its current initiatives;
- understand the role's responsibilities and its short- and long-term objectives;
- ensure they completely comprehend not only the role's minimum qualifications and appropriate experience but also its *ideal* qualifications and experience; and
- provide feedback on the dynamics of the position and its salary structure, your organization's competitiveness and perception in the marketplace, and the viability of attracting an ideal candidate.

**Search Parameters:** How will they establish search parameters and perform research and analysis of market conditions, industry and vertical market competition, and talent pool?

**Candidate Identification:** How will they source and identify candidates? What are their typical strategies and what resources will be utilized?

An experienced firm will leverage their industry network and be able to identify your direct and indirect competitors, and the pertinent professionals within those organizations.

**Candidate Assessment:** How will they represent your organization? How will they qualify candidates? What personal intangibles of candidates will be considered?

A consultant's ability to recruit, assess, and attract talented professionals is fundamentally important and will determine the effectiveness and results of the entire search.

**Candidate Presentation:** How will candidates be presented? Will they present candidates as they are identified or simultaneously? Will they submit resumes in a standard format or will they submit the actual resumes candidates developed? Will they provide transparency on candidates such as: strengths, weaknesses, current compensation, career goals, and any personal issues that may affect their placeability and performance?



**Interviews:** How will they manage the interview process? Will they perform the first round of interviews? Will they provide candidate feedback on interviews and within what time frame?

Typically, the higher level of the position, the more important it is for the search firm to interview candidates first. Feedback should be given to you and the candidates within 48 hours of interviews.

**References & Background Checks:** Will they provide written professional references and conduct background and employment checks on final candidates prior to an offer being extended?

Professional references and background checks are highly recommended whether they are performed by you or the search firm.

**Evaluation, Selection & Extending an Offer:** After candidates have been interviewed, will they communicate each candidate's strengths and weaknesses? Will they provide assistance during compensation negotiations?

**Follow Through:** Do they continue to follow through with you after the placed individual begins employment and at what intervals? Do they also continue to follow through with the candidate to ensure their transition is going smoothly?

A committed consultant will continue to follow through with you and the successful candidate for at least up to six months following the placement.



# Part 5

## Commencing an Executive Search

The hiring organization plays a significant part in the commencement of an executive search. Information shared at this stage provides the foundation for the search and will determine its strategy, approach, and overall success. In this phase, the consultant learns about your organization and the role to be filled. Being open and forthright streamlines and strengthens the process, supporting a positive outcome.

### In general,

- Determine and share the specific objectives you want to achieve in hiring an ideal candidate and ensure that these goals are clear among all parties involved in the search process, including members of your team;
- Have a realistic image of your organization, and the types and levels of candidates it can reasonably attract;
- Allow the consultant to share their views on your competition, talent pool, compensation, your company's brand / image, and how they perceive your firm's attractiveness to high-caliber candidates;
- Collaborate with the consultant on the search strategy in determining sources for qualified candidates, how your organization and its opportunity will be represented to prospective candidates, and how candidates will be evaluated; and
- Keep your internal team aware of the search strategy and progress.





## Information to share about your organization

- Its executive team, markets, financial strength, reputation and competition, short- and long-term goals, and planned strategies.
- Organization's structure, culture, and environment, and the same of the department in which this person will be placed.
- Personal and professional characteristics of your organization's high performers so that the consultant can understand your organization's ideal employee attitude, and the personal and professional characteristics of your most successful employees.

## and about the role

- Clearly defined primary and secondary responsibilities, performance expectations, and the experience and technical competencies desired in candidates.
- Short- and long-term objectives.
- Specific challenges and opportunities.
- Employees who interact with the position and their individual work styles and attitudes.
- How the role impacts your organization, which is key information to high performing professionals who want to know how they can bring value and positively influence an organization.

## If your Human Resources department will have involvement

- Introduce your Human Resources personnel to the search consultant at the onset of the search, which will encourage them to work together as a team to achieve your recruitment objectives.
- Explain to your Human Resources personnel the reasons why a search firm has been engaged and the situation's unique circumstances such as confidentiality, market access to candidates, or other issues that prompted the consideration of using an outside recruitment firm.



# Part 6

## Tips for Maintaining Momentum

It is essential to assume your role in maintaining a search's momentum so that you do not risk losing the interest of high-caliber candidates and support a successful outcome.

- Commit to your role in the search process, continually collaborating with the search consultant.
- View the search as a priority and respect the sense of urgency.
- Keep your internal team apprised of search progress.
- Regard the search firm as a trusted advisor and not as a vendor. Respect the consultant's insight and knowledge of the industry and candidates.
- Support the continuous flow of information and respond to the consultant's requests, emails, and voice mails in a timely manner.
- Prepare for candidate interviews by considering how to present your organization and its opportunity to potential candidates. With the consultant, create an interview strategy and prepare for each individual interview.
- Provide timely, substantive feedback on candidates and their suitability to keep the selection process refined.
- Trust the consultant's suggestions during compensation negotiations.

## Part 7

# The Value That Experienced Search Consultants Provide

Specialized executive search firms and experienced consultants can add tremendous value to an organization's recruitment and talent acquisition strategies. Developing a relationship with a consultant who understands your industry, as well as your organization and its objectives, can support you in attracting and securing talented professionals who will add strength to your team, significantly impacting the future of your organization.

### Experienced search consultants bring value to the talent acquisition process by:

- working collaboratively with you, taking time to understand your unique corporate culture, style, and structure before initiating search activities;
- understanding how to develop strategies and solutions that navigate the challenges and limitations of a given talent pool;
- providing insight on your market and your competitors (compensation programs, organizational structures, and corporate cultures);
- advising on the type of candidate you can expect to secure based upon the opportunity, and your organization's corporate structure, objectives, and compensation range;
- helping you to determine how to represent your organization and opportunity to make both appealing to candidates;
- assessing the personal attributes and cultural fit of candidates. Consultants will debrief you on candidates' 'hot buttons', and why they are motivated to pursue the opportunity.
- coaching candidates through their resignations to ensure smooth transitions;
- providing intelligence beyond resumes that includes professional comments about candidates, their backgrounds, career motivations, and family issues; and
- acting as a sounding board for you and candidates, providing a buffer zone to allow communication to flow freely and honestly.



If you are looking for talented individuals who can assist you in strengthening your organization's competitive advantage, and would like to learn more about Helbling & Associates' recruitment and talent acquisition experience and capabilities, visit us at [www.helblingsearch.com](http://www.helblingsearch.com).



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