

# Working With Search Consultants

**W**hen it comes to working with search consultants, one size definitely does not fit all.

Not only are presidential search consultants highly specialized by function and industry, but there must also be a strong personal and cultural fit built upon a bond of trust for an effective working relationship. We've found that once these parameters are met, there are several caveats that apply before proceeding.

## For Institutions and Search Committees

**Consultants represent institutions, not candidates.** Search consultants earn their fees by representing institutional clients. With that said, however, while they screen and present qualified candidates; they do not choose the finalists. The latter must take ownership of the search process; this is crucial to the successful candidate who, if perceived as the "consultant's candidate," will likely not enjoy a long-term tenure. Ethical consultants will present both strengths and weaknesses of candidates, but the final decision must be that of the institution.

**Request and check references from previous clients.** Just as a good search consultant or employer will check references, given and non-given, the hiring institution should also perform due diligence. Check with several listed clients of the search consultant and, if possible, with other member organizations in higher education to which the college belongs that may have inside information about the success or lack thereof, as well as problem areas such as cost, overruns, and so forth with particular search firms. Client satisfaction is important! The Internet offers research opportunities unimagined before the digital revolution; capitalize on them.

We've found candidates who have concealed past criminal records and

falsified and overstated educational credentials — even one that had left an Internet trail of questionable activity. A competent consultant will check all of these, as well as credit reports (these cost extra because an outside bureau is involved), civil and criminal court records, and workers' compensation cases.

**Leave in-depth reference checking to the consultants.** Search committees often believe they are saving the institution money by parceling out reference checks among members; however, in most cases, referencing and due diligence should be included in search fees. There are several reasons to leave this vital element of the search process in professional hands.

- **In-depth checking.** Search consultants possess the time and industry contacts to check both given and non-given references and to track down busy presidents and former professional colleagues.
- **Experience in evaluating responses.** A professional search consultant's extensive phone interviewing skills will enable him or her to probe and evaluate what is not said, as well as what is actually spoken, about candidates.
- **Assessing a pattern.** In the process of interviewing all references, a consultant will be better able to detect patterns or unspoken judgments about a candidate than a committee member talking with just one or two. In addition, references may be more forthcoming and candid than they would be to someone on the candidate's own campus.


**Visiting finalists' campuses.** Many campuses now ask search consultants to visit finalists' campuses to talk informally with faculty, staff, and students there before a final selection is made. Our counsel is to undertake this step only when the search committee has agreed upon one candidate. Not only are three- or four-day visits to

several campuses expensive, but also, they are disruptive both to the institutions on the receiving end and to finalists' careers if they do not receive a final offer. The good search consultant who knows and understands higher education should have numerous contacts in the field to get whatever information is needed about any candidate.

## For Candidates

**Be transparent.** The best long-term marriages between candidate and institution come from mutual honesty. This is where all the "skeletons" — real and perceived — must be laid on the table. Candidates who dissemble do not only their prospective institutions, but also themselves, a great disservice.

No one, least of all a recruiter who has invested a lot of time and effort in your search, appreciates being kept in the dark on important issues that may affect your candidacy. Credibility is your most valuable asset in any search; don't compromise it.

Candidacies undertaken with false pretenses on either side invariably produce poor fits, resulting in short-term presidencies, feelings of betrayal, and poor performance. They do incalculable harm, both to the hiring institutions and to the professional reputations of the CEOs themselves. When it comes to the presidential search, honesty is indeed the best policy — both for candidate and hiring institution. 

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