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The Perfect Match: How to Ensure Successful Hiring Process

By Pilar Gumucio

Mr X was a very successful CEO in a multinational firm in the retail industry in the USA. His achievements included doubling profits, opening new markets and consolidating the company's market leadership.

Six months ago Mr X was hired by an Asian company, with the hope of replicating the same levels of success. However, yesterday he resigned without accomplishing what was expected.

Like Mr X, there are many successful top executives who fail when they change environments. Why is this continuing to occur? How can a company be sure that it is hiring the right executive? How can an executive know if the role offered is right for him or her?

Clients and candidates are both becoming more aware of this uncomfortable scenario, as search consultants must look for ways to ensure a long lasting and perfect match. *search-consult* has interviewed six leading search consultants and one expert on leadership development to explore this issue, and see what they advise to ensure the right fit.

WHAT WENT WRONG?

David S. Harap, Partner and Global Practice Leader for Healthcare & Pharmaceuticals for Stanton Chase International, explains that in today's fast-

paced and highly competitive world, results are expected to be delivered quicker than before. In fact, the quarter-to-quarter mentality is compelling companies to show immediate impact, placing more pressure on executives.

"The need to drive change in an organisation is a real challenge as Emotional Intelligence is fundamental to determine if the new executive can adapt to such a fast paced and dynamic environment," states Pierangelo Favero, Managing Partner of AIMS Italia Management Consulting.

Harap adds: "Board of Directors and senior management teams are putting new

executives on a much shorter leash... There really isn't much patience for a learning curve. They want to see them hit the ground running and make almost immediate results, and sometimes that is simply not possible."

By focusing only on the short term objectives companies are often ignoring long-term solutions, which are equally as critical.

Jan Olsson, Managing Director of Lisberg Executive Search, which is part of IMD, reports how sometimes unsuccessful matches are made when the company, and/or the search firm hired, did not elaborate a proper job profile. As a result, the candidates selected in the final round were not suitable and did not meet the client's expectations.

As the world becomes more international new scenarios are being explored, as new roles must be tailored to meet these new opportunities and challenges. Yet, in this new context, Olsson explains how "CEOs are simply not given enough time to adapt as companies today have high expectations for fast growth and ever-increasing results."

Andrew Walker, Managing Director of Ashley Harvey Associates and founder, Director and Joint President of The International Executive Search Federation, describes how a candidate's success is dependent on whether a client is fully aware of good management practice in the area



Pierangelo Favero

they are operating in. For example, what is considered good management practice in the US might be the primary reason why an executive fails in Asia Pacific or Europe.”

In fact, Kris de Jager, founder and CEO of de Jager & Associates and Vice Chairman of IIC Partners, provides a perfect example of how a company’s cultural environment can affect a candidate’s level of performance.

“We recently placed a CEO in a Korean company,” he reports. “The successful incumbent came from another Asian organisation. We all believed that the cultures were very similar, and nothing was further from the truth. The executive is finding it very hard to understand those cultural issues, which are critical to how people do business and set their expectations.”

According to Penny Ferguson, CEO of Penny Ferguson Limited, there is a greater demand on executives to raise their leadership abilities and broaden their horizons because “the mark of outstanding leadership is not just how good a leader you are, but how many leaders you develop.”

She explains how executives are expected to not only be successful in one area, but also be able to expand their know-how to be able to effectively develop others. This factor is crucial, especially if they haven’t received the proper training to do so.

De Jager describes how mismatches often occur when an executive changes industries. He elaborates: “A classic example is when an executive from an important distribution business (where the focus is very much on sales and marketing) is hired and is expected to perform in the service industry (which is very much focused on client relationships). These executives quite often can’t make the switch because the experience is different” as the skills and mindset required will differ as well.

Another reason why some top executives succeed in one environment but can fail miserably in another is the quality of the team and support structure that is in place.

De Jager explains: “You may come into an organisation having previously had very strong financial support. This new organisation may have a weak financial director and if you are weak in finance this leaves you vulnerable, and can often lead to failure.”



Kris de Jager

Another important problem arises if the new executive does not have the full support of the team he or she will be working with. Sometimes this occurs because internal candidates resent the appointment. The end result is that the executive feels isolated, and therefore, is starting the job with a serious obstacle.

Christine Greybe, Managing Director, Asia Pacific for DHR International, explains that companies, more often than they would like to admit, don’t provide the incoming executives with the necessary tools to integrate themselves better, which may greatly contribute to the executive’s failure.

“In some cases,” she adds, “the executives recruited have been promoted and therefore, have taken a step up without receiving the adequate training to support them.” This issue will obviously affect their performance levels.

LOSING FAITH, MONEY AND A GOOD REPUTATION

In effect, mismatches hinder a company from achieving its desired goals, and have a direct impact on its bottom line as it increases its turnover rate for key roles and can drop the share price as confidence levels diminish. As a result, the company can lose millions, as its reputation and ability to attract top talent can be seriously hampered.

Within this context, Walker explains how a wrong hire can be expensive and disruptive

for the client. At the same time, it can hinder a search provider’s reputation. “If a professional job has not been conducted by the search firm, then surely they will not be asked to do another assignment for the client.”

By the same token, if a client has made the wrong hiring decision despite the search consultant’s advice to do otherwise, then should they be held accountable for this mishap?

Greybe describes how companies are placing a lot of pressure on search firms to take more responsibility for the selection. Nevertheless, she insists that the ultimate hiring decision is made by companies and therefore, they are the ones that are ultimately responsible for making sure that the selected candidate is fully integrated into their business.

“Hiring the right executive is only part of the process as clients often neglect the onboarding process in executive hiring,” reports the DHR executive. “This aspect is fundamental... We can bring in the right people, but we cannot integrate them. This is the company’s responsibility.”

According to Favero, “as companies become more sensitive and aware of bad hires, they are more distrustful and are seeking assurances from their search providers throughout the entire process.”

For Harap, any time there are a series of high profile failures, “it makes a company or board second guess their decision to launch a search, as they will really consider internal candidates more intensely.”

He describes how “companies are launching formal searches to be diligent,” but virtually from the start you can see their inclination to promote an internal candidate because it’s a safer path than bringing in an outsider.

Companies are also broadening their search methods to recruit talent as they look to online recruitment as a means of expanding their existing talent pools, reports Jan Olsson.

De Jager reports that searches are taking longer because the process involves sourcing candidates from a much wider industry base. Globalisation and technology have played an important role in allowing this information to be readily available, and

search consultants must use this information wisely.

Olsson describes how companies are being more meticulous when they select their search providers.

At the same time, search firms are also being more selective with their clients. De Jager strongly believes that search consultants should only accept assignments that they are confident that they can successfully execute and add value. "The ability to say no is just as critical."



Penny Ferguson

ADVISING CLIENTS

Ironically, companies are spending more money on assessments, talent management, and leadership development than ever before. Nevertheless, businesses continue to make bad hires. What should clients do to minimise the risks?

Greybe advises clients to review their selection process, "understand where the challenges in the past occurred, and have in place a clear onboarding process that is regularly reviewed and updated."

"Most companies have a selection process, but it was established a decade ago and therefore, does not effectively reflect today's requirements," she states.

Harap explains that companies are often "too focused on a company's brand, instead of focusing on the actual executive that is being interviewed. Although the name of a company is important, it should not be the

primary criteria in selecting the right candidate for a new role. GE is a classic example. Everyone wanted GE alumni but if you really take a hard look, you will see that it has a mixed track record."

According to Favero, clients should really partner with their search providers, listen to their advice, especially when it comes to assessing candidates since they have a lot of experience in this subject.

KNOW WHAT YOU LOOKING FOR

Harap advises consultants to "make sure they have clarity before they even launch the search."

For him, the client should have a clear understanding of the short term and long term objectives before fulfilling a role. "If you don't know what you are looking for at the beginning, it's hard to assess if the candidate has it when you are in the final selection."

Olsson agrees, as he says that clients are becoming more aware of the importance of the "pre-work" that must be performed so that both parties fully understand the job profile, the skills and the cultural fit that is required.

To be able to effectively obtain this understanding, extensive research must be thoroughly conducted.

Harap reports how the first two weeks have to be invested in talking to the client and making sure that their expectations are in calibration with what the marketplace offers.

He adds: "This is the time when you modify a search, instead of waiting 6 weeks when you are presenting candidates and there is a mismatch."

De Jager describes the importance of spending "quality time in taking a comprehensive brief that covers the industry, the organisation, any issues that the organisation is facing, long term business plans, organisational structures and specific requirements for that role."

Extensive discussions with the client are fundamental, reports Olsson. "Make sure that the conclusions made are written so it is clear for both, the client and the consultant, on the type of executive the client is looking for.

This implies more than just preparing a brief. Ferguson insists that what is crucial is

to help your client fully understand how they "are going to get the new executive really embedded into their organisation."

She also cautions consultants to review who is providing the brief since "that person will provide an accurate brief from where he or she is sitting at that time. As a result, it is vital that you, as a search consultant, do not take the brief on face value."

De Jager notes: "From a management point of view, it is critical that the search consultant needs to understand all the issues the new executive will face: bad, good or indifferent. It is fundamental that consultants also "have a full understanding of why the previous executive left the organisation, and make sure that they are not bringing the same mistakes on board."

Ferguson recommends search consultants "discover what is really happening in their client's organisation by meeting the executives that the incumbent is going to report to, get to know the executive's colleagues, meet the people that he or she will be managing, and even spend a day in the organisation to get a feel of what is really occurring within the business." This will increase the chances of providing a list of suitable candidates.

MATCHMAKING

Once the competencies have been determined and a list of successful candidates has been elaborated, consultants then proceed to match the executives' personal values with those of the organisation's.

Favero describes how clients are demanding that search consultants do more to check that the executive really has the right fit. "Providing CVs/résumés and the right profile on paper is not enough as part of our role is to guide the client and help him make an informed hiring decision. As a result, we have to place more emphasis on a candidate's personality traits, motivations and attitudes since these factors are what can lead to mismatches."

According to Walker, what are often overlooked are: the cultural environment in which the company finds itself, the executive team profile around the incoming executive and the human resources that they will have at their disposal.

He elaborates: “British Airways and Virgin Atlantic both fly long haul, but I think both organisations would agree that they have totally different corporate cultures. It is not just that they both provide good service to their customers – a successful executive joining either or would be joining a completely different cultural experience – some would thrive, some would not.”



Jan Olsson

This is the aspect of the hiring process that search consultants must add value by helping their clients differentiate which candidate would fit better; and thus, be more productive in the short and long term.

Clients tend to focus on evaluating the professional fit, checking the competencies, knowledge, and the experiences required, says Favero. Nevertheless, the executive’s cultural fit, values, and attitudes are what determine if there is a perfect match. This is probably the most challenging part of the job, but at the same time, it is the most critical.

De Jager explains how search consultants are looking at the candidate’s fit. They are not only looking at skills and experiences, but at the cultural fit as well as the Key Performance Indicators of the role.

He describes how consultants should also look at their client’s organisation by looking at the ongoing support, the quality of the team, the prospects in the organisation as well as the ability for personal reward.

“If the candidate’s personal values match

that of the company’s, then you have a perfect match”, remarks de Jager. “If they are not in agreement, then you will have problems. It is vital that you make sure that the competencies are correct, the skill sets are there and that the person has the right empathy that fits the culture of the organisation.”

In other words, it is the softer skills that have to be taken into account. As Harap notes, what is critical and hard to assess are all these issues that won’t show up in a résumé, but are the driving force to their success, such as: What led to the executives’ success? How are they viewed by their team? Did they do well in mentoring?

That brings to the frontline the importance of Emotional Intelligence in the evaluating process. This concept indicates an executive’s abilities to know and work effectively with his or her own emotions, be able to recognise emotions in others and also adapt well to changing circumstances.

Ferguson describes how “everything links into Emotional Intelligence. You recognise its importance and how it helps define the way you work with people, the way you lead and the way you communicate.”

Harap explains how it is of vital importance but at the same time, is also hard to quantify, and therefore, include in the assessment report. Nevertheless, consultants must find ways to measure it and then convey this vital information to their clients.

In the selection, explains Olsson, consultants should use references, interviews, case studies, as well as personality and IQ tests.

Greybe agrees as she explains that the use of certain tools helps quantify the cultural fit so that the information is not only subjective, but complements all the data that you have collected.

This assessment will help to highlight the candidate’s strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, if the client selects the candidate, the client is fully aware of what support the candidate needs from the very start. Having this information in hand can save quite a lot of mistakes and misunderstandings, helping match the client and candidate more accurately.

Greybe states that there are a number of interviewing techniques consultants



Christine Greybe

incorporate to help them in their assessment. The more time you spend with the candidate, probing and getting a better sense of their Emotional Intelligence and their leadership and management styles, the more information you will have to assess if he or she is a good fit for your client.

QUALITY TIME WITH CANDIDATES

According to de Jager, consultants also have to be close to the candidates “since they are just as important as the clients.” This opportunity is essential to obtain a better understanding of the candidate.

In the final selection stage, Harap explains that it is vital to spend quality time with every candidate “because a superficial interview will only get you so far. You may understand some of the hard issues, but you will not be able to really appreciate their softer issues.”

He continues: “You need to be able to put their success in the proper context and to be able to see if the candidates really have a good potential fit with the client. Someone may have an impressive résumé, but you have to probe and understand exactly what the factors that led to that success are.”

During the interview phase, it is fundamental that consultants add value by helping the client make an informed hiring decision.

“The effective interview skills are not always part of the background of managers as they tend to jump to conclusions and rely

on gut feelings. It is our job to already have a good understanding of the candidate and probe further to make sure the best candidate is selected by following a step-by-step process," states Favero.

At times, this may mean pointing out the candidate's strengths and weaknesses, making sure this feedback get across to the client organisation.

Greybe provides an example: "I was performing a search in Japan for a client that had initially selected candidate A. I thought candidate B was a better culture fit so I discussed this with them, and we compared both candidates with the evidence presented. I gave them the facts so that they could make a more informed decision."

Other times, it may mean facilitating the internal discussion among the interview panel that will lead to the final hiring decision. Ferguson remembers that when she was in recruitment years ago, a candidate came in to be interviewed. "He was arrogant and self opinionated. When I asked the client for her feedback, she responded that the candidate was ghastly. I told her to put her feelings aside and to look at the way he answered the questions."

"On that basis, he was the best fit," she explains. "Did the client have difficulties with his personality? Yes. Did the client have concerns with his performance? No, we were both absolutely sure he could perform. In the end, she decided to take a chance and hire him, working with him to change some of those behaviours that were not so attractive. Two years down the line he was considered one of the best executives they ever had."

According to Harap, "you have to drive the discussion forward because that is the only way to ensure long term success with that placement. It's not racing to the finished line and get the search closed as quickly as possible, it's making sure you get the right candidate who will have the biggest impact, both in the short and long term."

IT'S A CHECKING GAME

Along with the interview, clients are placing greater emphasis on reference checking.

"Any issues that the client or candidate raised during the interview process we

incorporate as part of our reference checking," states de Jager.

For Ferguson, reference checking is essential to verify all the information you have collected. As a result, make sure you are proactive. "Don't just write to the referees, phone them up, meet with them and use anything and everything you can in a constructive way to find how the candidates behave, who they are as people, what are their values."



Andrew Walker

According to Harap, "this is very challenging, but probably the greatest tool to use to assess a candidate and their potential fit into a new organisation."

He adds that 3 or 4 references are no longer acceptable. Clients want to see a much broader breadth of reference checking. They demand references not only from their organisation, but also from vendors and suppliers. They demand information not only from the executives that the selected candidate reported to, but from colleagues and individuals that reported to him or her so that they have a better picture of that person's hard and soft skills.

IT'S THE CANDIDATE'S TURN

At the same time, candidates want to know the issues, they want to know why the previous person left and what the client's expectations are so that they can analyse and see if the offer is in their best interests.

Providing candidates' feedback is just as essential as providing feedback to the client.

Greybe indicates that throughout the entire process, it is vital that search consultants not only provide more information to the candidate, but also be able to feed that information back to the client. "We must help them understand what the candidate wants and what his or her concerns are."

Whether the candidate is successful or not, it is important that the candidate gets constructive feedback, explains Olsson. They should at least walk away with a better understanding of themselves, knowing what their strengths and weaknesses were. Did they have the right skills? Did they have the right cultural fit? Did they have the right attitude? This is all part of Emotional Intelligence, which is just as important to them as well as the client.

If the candidate is successful, he or she must understand not only the culture and the environment they will be going into, but also the team they will be managing and what kind of boss or board they have to report to.

De Jager insists on the importance of providing feedback, especially after the placement has been made to make sure that the candidate and client are continuing to have a productive relationship. If there are any concerns, he facilitates meetings to help both the new executive and the client, state their concerns and see the best way to resolve them. This may range from the executive changing certain behaviours, to putting in place coaching and mentoring programs.

If all these steps had been followed, Mr. X probably would still have been able to successfully add value to the organisation that hired him.

As search consultants, it is vital that you have a permanent dialogue with your client and candidate to ensure that in each assignment you are able to obtain the perfect match.

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