

Ticked Off at Tick the Box Mentality

Does your executive search firm know the difference between an MIS manager and a CIO, and if it does, can it explain that difference to its corporate clients?

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Does your executive search firm know its MIS managers from its elbow? Does it even know the difference between an MIS manager and a CIO, and if it does, can it explain that difference to its corporate clients?

Is it more interested in meeting quotas than meeting your needs? Does its tick-the-box mentality see you excluded from roles you should be entirely qualified for without you even getting a chance to tout those qualifications, while being sent to interview with organizations that claim to want a CIO, but really just want someone to keep the network running, the printers from jamming and the data centre lights on?

The majority of true CIO positions are handled by search firms, not recruitment agencies

There are some real cowboys out there in recruiter-land, and if you're currently a CIO-at-large, you'll likely have a host of war stories about the sheer frustration of interviewing for positions today. We've certainly heard a few: Told you have the job in the morning and then finding you no longer have it by mid-afternoon. Sent for five separate interviews before discovering the organization has changed its mind or has the job specs all wrong. Being told an organization wants a CIO for a highly strategic role, then finding in reality the organization has no respect for IT and would rather put a call centre manager on its board than what they laughingly choose to call their "CIO". Being told the organization wants a highly strategic turnaround CIO, then finding its strongest instinct is for no change whatsoever. Getting the job, then finding out the cultural match is disastrous. And so the list goes on.

In fact in a nation where the vast majority of so-called executive search firms have little or no IT experience, even some executive recruiters are complaining about the cowboys out there playing in the IT recruiting space, and there are plenty of CIOs whose job hunting experiences can only be described as exasperating in the extreme.

"I think a lot of people have had bad experiences with recruiters," says one CIO who has had a few bad experiences himself. "There's often a failure to understand what their clients are looking for. Quite often an organization will go to some consultant who will write a really super-duper job description - I have seen a couple of those and they are extremely well written. You think: 'Well this is great position; they've got a really good idea of what they need!' Then you discover that in truth 99 per cent of the job is keeping the lights on, and they don't really want to do anything else."

"There's generally a difference between what companies say they want and what they actually want," says another CIO who knows first-hand the frustrations of being a 'CIO-at-large'. "Quite often they say they want someone dynamic who can lead change, and then you find out that they actually don't want any change at all!"

"A while back there was a position with a finance company that I was interested in. One search firm basically bolted the door on me, saying I was not qualified to talk to anyone in that particular company. I worked with another group and not only did I get through the door, I went the distance and was offered the role. Ultimately I decided it wasn't for me, but obviously it all comes down to how the recruiter positions you, what they're looking for as they tick the box as opposed to considering your cultural match."



"It's extremely frustratingly, because with the exception of the top tier [search firms] you've got all these people that have come from transactional recruiting and who treat the leadership role as the equivalent of hiring a desktop architect," says another. "They haven't got the insight to understand the difference between a MIS manager and the CIO so they waste a lot of genuine CIOs' time by sending them out for jobs that are really just about operational roles."

"I think we need to at least achieve an acceptable definition of what a CIO is about, and then the next thing is educating the hirers of CIOs and educating the people seeking them," says one of our CIOs. "Unfortunately, if you look at the information sources for your CFOs and your CEOs, they tend to defer to the search firms prior to doing due diligence and the executive recruiter or consultant will feed them information about the position that is not always, say we say, spot on. So you get these horrible matches because at the end of the day they might end up putting on a good friend who was a great technocrat but not a good visionary. In other situations someone will be ignored because while the brief is to perform transformation based around the supply chain over the next two or three years, they insist that you know SAP. Now if you've got a JD Edwards background, they say: 'Sorry, you shouldn't apply!' There's an echelon where that is not an issue but certainly if you look at that tier two and some of that lower tier one market, you do get a lot of that."

Reflection of Ignorance

"You can find all sorts of recruiters," notes Mike Schaffner, a senior IT executive with engineering/MBA credentia and author of the Beyond Blinking Lights and Acronyms blog. "Some are very knowledgeable about IT and many less so. In many cases their lack of knowledge about the job specifics is a reflection of their client. Very often the client isn't sure what they are looking for and the recruiter has to cast a very wide net. So if the client says they want a CIO but the job is only lower level, the recruiter can try to steer them in the right direction but probably will have to run some true candidates by the client to convince them."

When it comes to IT, there's no doubt that large parts of the recruitment industry struggle, and the sheer number of recruitment companies touting for work doesn't help. Since the vast majority of people in IT recruitment have no IT experience, they are much more likely to adopt a "checklist" mentality in qualifying candidates. Many will have little experience in recruiting in a particular industry sector, or find themselves working with clients who are vague in defining what is needed for the top jobs. In fact the situation is so bad even some executive search firms are prepared to put the boot into their peers, while arguing the problems aren't entirely their fault.



"I can give you story after story after story about clients who accept the worst level of service possible," agrees Sherborne Consulting managing director John Milce. "Generally speaking, the comments about IT recruitment agencies 'ticking the boxes' are true."

"Mind you, a lot of the hiring managers get what they deserve out of their relationship with their IT recruiters; you get out what you put in."

"There will always be a couple of search consultants that take a cavalier attitude towards candidates regardless of the fancy name on the front door or the impressive views from their office," agrees Amazing Results executive search and consulting group managing director Kylie Hammond.

"There are plenty of cowboys in the industry simply because there are no barriers to entry," says Derwent Executive IT consultant Suzanne Day. "You often find high-billing consultants from large-volume recruitment companies setting up on their own without any real structure or value proposition."

The calibre of executive search firms varies significantly and is typically a function of the maturity and the experience of the organization you are dealing with, says one CIO who has worked with recruiters at both ends of the spectrum. Go with a glorified recruitment agency, even if it tells you it has an "executive search arm", and you're almost certain to find yourself interviewing for glorified MIS roles, he says. On the other hand, he points out, sometimes that's exactly what a "CIO-at-large" wants.

How to Work with an Executive Search Team

The day you started looking for your next job should have been the day you started the job you're in now, according to one Australian CIO. In a profession where high turnover is the norm, and where advertised CIO positions come up relatively infrequently, it makes no sense to wait for the guillotine to come down before you check out the market.

1. Build a relationship.

The rub is that in a crowded market, most CIOs would agree that there are only four or five executive search firms of calibre in Australia worth dealing with. Finding and building a strong relationship with at least one of them can be worth gold to your long-term career prospects.

CIOs should be registered with either boutique search firms, the international search firms or both. They need to ask a lot of questions in order to feel comfortable that their details will be kept confidential, Day says. "At their level, roles do not come up as

often so they need to keep in touch with a recruiter they can trust," Day says. "I have some relationships with people spanning over a 10-year period. I know what they are looking for even if they are not active, but they would still like to hear about opportunities. Often at their level they will be head-hunted."

"A CIO-level appointment is a senior strategic appointment, often instigated by the board or the chief executive. In many instances these opportunities are unadvertised, so having a relationship with a number of high-quality search consultants who specialize in these types of positions is important," Hammond says.

Even in firms that don't specialize, individual recruiters may have a specific background or focus, notes Milce, who used to work in IT at Westpac, and it can certainly help to work with those with specialized IT experience. Above all, he says CIOs should focus on building strong relationships with their search agencies.

"In this business, and having seen both sides of the equation if you like, if you're a senior manager in IT you should maintain a relationship with senior people in a couple of agencies so that when they're looking for senior managers they will pick up the phone and ring you." Maintaining that relationship may involve no more than a phone call or e-mail once a quarter, and lunch once a year, Milce says. He says most recruiters, provided the CIO isn't just trying to "big note" himself or score a free meal every three months, will be happy to maintain a relationship with you.



"I recommend that you schedule bi-annual catch-up meetings or discussions with the search consultants that you develop a relationship with. The key here is to be respectful of each other's time and make the most of these meetings," Hammond says.

2. Master of your fate.

"The relationship that a CIO needs to forge with an executive recruiter depends on the role that they want to play in a company," notes World Wildlife Fund vice president and CIO Gregory Smith. "It's true that many CIOs want to play a strategic and business role in a company, only to find out that the tasks that actually get assigned to them once they've been hired are more operational or tactical in nature.

"Thus - regardless of the recruiters - I think more organizations tend to fall back on their CIOs for technical work and infrastructure types of projects instead of using IT to drive growth, products, and revenue. Unfortunately, the recruiter is caught in the middle as they're expected to serve as the glue between the candidate and the company.

"My advice to CIO candidates is to focus on the recruiter for the right types of opportunities and simply use them as a conduit to the role that they want or feel comfortable in. If a CIO is looking for a company where he or she can play a strategic role, that's great, but they need to assume some responsibility for their fate. During the interview process the CIO should focus on the key executives and see if they mean business or are just talking industry buzzwords. Ask tough questions such as: What types of strategic work did your prior CIO do in the interview process?"

3. Know the difference.

The majority of true CIO positions are handled by search firms, not recruitment agencies. Search firms generally accept only top-level assignments. And C-level candidates also need to understand the difference between contingent and retained recruitment assignments, Hammond says. These two vastly different approaches will have a major impact on the approach that the consultant will take during the recruitment process and in turn, on the experience that the candidate will have during the assignment.

An organization charges a retained search firm to conduct a process to identify and recruit executives with a particular skill set, but pays a contingency firm when it hires their candidate. Retained search consultants will probably be happy to add your resume to their database, but unlikely to want to spend time counselling you about your career. The hiring firm is their client, not you. Less professional organizations often tend to flood the hiring organization with resumes, including those of over-qualified candidates, to help make up their numbers.

A good recruiting firm helps an organization define its needs and then works with it to develop an accurate, detailed job description and a compensation package that will attract the sort of employees it needs. The recruiter then searches for and identifies those candidates with the skills, experience, personality, and character that suit, arranges interviews and frequently negotiates the conditions of employment.

4. Do they take an interest?

The first clue to finding the right search firm, our CIOs and CIOs-at-large agree, is whether the recruiter takes a personal interest in you and works hard to understand what makes you tick and the direction you'd like your career to take.

"Are they treating this as a career move for you, rather than a piece of income for them?" asks one CIO.

There's a dichotomy at work with recruiters, this CIO points out, because the person who pays is the person who is hiring, but it is the recruitment agent or search firm that delivers the service. Search firms that treat you like a customer, rather than a product, and work to maintain a long-term relationship with you, are worth their weight in gold. So are search firms that are capable of truly understanding the needs of the hiring organization. If a recruiter can't tell you where the hiring company is heading, what its key drivers are and the reasons why the position should attract you, it should be fairly clear they don't know their game.

5. Go for quality rather than quantity.

Trust your instincts, protect your resume and only register your details with reputable firms, Hammond advises. Under no circumstances should CIO-level candidates be leaving CV details on job boards or with volume-based recruitment agencies. This is a recipe for career and privacy problems.

Don't try and register with every search firm in the region; you should be selective about who you partner with. While a search consultant with an IT background is preferable, there are very good consultants across all industries who have experience recruiting top talent across many fields. Word of mouth and referral is a good way to identify top search consultants that are well suited to your career goals and objectives.

6. Consult your peers.

Which search firm you choose is important, but partnering with the right search consultants is critical. Hammond says a good search consultant will return your phone calls, take the time to review your resume, and often offer to meet with you even if they don't have an upcoming assignment.

"Keep in mind that there are only a limited number of CIO positions that come up each year, so if you are thinking of a career move, you must be well networked and partnering with several search consultants who understand your background and have a good idea of the sort of role that would match your career objective"

CIOs agree that the best way to find a good recruiter is to ask your peers. Find out who placed them in their current role, or who they would use themselves. Better yet, those peers can also act as a referring source.

If you get little joy from peer recommendations, do your own due diligence on search firms, recommends Derwent's Day.

7. Manage your career.

These days, all candidates have to become their own career manager if they want to stay ahead of the game.

"I interview a large number of CIOs who have become introspective in their careers. Often they are too busy working on various internal IT projects to keep up their business networking and work on their own career development," Hammond says. "Good CIOs are well networked across their industry, and with other CIOs in different industries, so that they keep abreast of developments in other industries and how technology is being used in a variety of situations to achieve competitive advantage."



If you are managing this aspect of your career properly, you should be "head-hunted" or approached about new opportunities at least two to three times per year, Hammond says. If you are not well networked, and you are not on the radar, this can make implementing your next career move very challenging.

"Recruiters get thousands of unsolicited resumes a day. Your chance of being noticed, no matter how good your background, is slim with those numbers. However, if someone they know and trust refers you, it is much more likely that you will have the opportunity to talk with the recruiter," Schaffner says.

"A good recruiter will vet your qualifications to make sure you meet the minimum but will be primarily focused on your 'fit'. How

well you match the company's culture is paramount. For this reason it is good to get to know some recruiters that specialize in your field and keep in contact with them.

"Better yet, do everything you can to act as a resource for the recruiter by helping them with searches. This way your name is always fresh. It doesn't matter if your background is exactly what is needed, if the recruiter hasn't talked with you in a few months they have in all likelihood forgotten about you. That is why you have to work with them even if you aren't looking to change jobs." Hammond recommends CIOs take notice of head-hunters who call about upcoming CIO type opportunities. While the timing or role might not be right or interest you today, it is always a worthwhile investment to discuss upcoming opportunities with an open mind.

It's also worth cultivating head-hunters who are recruiting in your industry. "The CIO role is ever evolving and as such, no one executive search firm in Asia Pacific has the corner on this important job function. A savvy CIO is going to be well networked not only with the larger global search firms, but also boutique executive search firms who are often more candidate-focused and may be working with interesting clients and across a diverse range of industries."

8. Develop a quality CIO resume.

For some reason, the quality of most CIO resumes is pretty unimpressive. Hammond says she rarely sees a CIO resume that clearly presents and translates the technologies that the CIO has worked with into measurable business outcomes. (For tips on putting together a noteworthy resume, see "The Bulletproof CIO Resume", end of story.)

"This is not the area to cut corners or try and put this important document together yourself. Seek professional assistance when developing your resume and keep in mind that the audience who will typically read this document is focused on business outcomes and achievements versus technology and technical jargon."

9. Build your networks.

A mutually beneficial relationship with an executive search firm can be enhanced by using online professional networking tools such as LinkedIn.

"I have been a regular user of the LinkedIn service for the past three years," says one CIO. "I am finding that increasingly the calls I receive from recruiters are more targeted. It is often the case that the recruiters use these tools to supplement their methods to locate the appropriate candidates they need both here and other abroad for senior posts.



"In the last few years, I have consistently been approached by recruiters who use these tools to track me down for potential new opportunities - including ones I had not thought of as possible before. Given the more targeted nature of the calls, I find that the recruiters and I are able to reduce the effort looking at job competency match of the role, instead, we are able to spend more time in jointly identify whether there is a 'close fit' of the role for their clients and for me - after all, it's a two way street when it comes to matching the right person to the right job.

"As tempting as it is to look into every great opportunity that comes my way - and mind you, there are increasingly more opportunities I am hearing through targeted referrals from recruiters - these targeted calls have helped me to become a lot more selective in deciding whether or not to pursue those opportunities further beyond my initial discussions with the recruiters. Whenever I turn down an opportunity to pursue a prospective new role, I always make referrals to the recruiter if I know of other candidates who may fit the bill. This practice has worked well for me and helps a small number of recruiters and me to form strong working relationships over the past few years."

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