



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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# Make the Most Effective Use of Recruiters

by John West Hadley

I remember when I used to get calls from actuarial recruiters on a regular basis. Early in my career I just assumed that any time I was ready to make a move, all I needed to do was to start listening to the recruiters who called me. As it turned out, even though I did go on a number of interviews through recruiters, every move I actually made came from networking. But that's another story.

So let's assume you want to use a recruiter to help you in making your next move. How do you make the most effective use of them? First off, remember that there are thousands of recruiters out there:

- Some focus primarily on a few select professions (such as actuaries), others take a broad brush approach.
- Some are in firms that are national or even international in scope, others are locally based with a clear geographic specialty.
- Some focus on mid-level jobs, others on executive positions.
- Some try hard to help jobseekers position themselves for a potential opening, others spend little time with any one jobseeker.
- Most operate on a contingency basis, while some primarily perform retained searches.<sup>1</sup>
- And as with any profession, some are better than others.

(There are also firms that attempt to charge a fee to help place you in various positions. These

are not the subject of this article ... and I recommend generally avoiding them.)

A company's initial reaction to your resume will be influenced by the recruiter's reputation and by what the recruiter tells them about you. You want to be sure that you deal only with those who operate in a highly professional manner. When I was building an actuarial department, I once agreed to interview an actuary presented by a recruiter working with a firm whose owner was, in my opinion, ethically challenged. Had I realized the connection before I saw the resume, I would never have called the recruiter back. After several discussions, though, I became convinced that she didn't share her boss' philosophy. Still, after I concluded that the actuary was a strong candidate, I had to work to convince my boss to consider her, just because of the firm through which she was presented.

(Incidentally, I hired the candidate, who worked out quite well and remains a personal friend to this day. The recruiter soon left the firm, and I continued to deal with her, but not the firm she left.)

Another reason to be selective about the recruiters with whom you deal is that you don't want the hiring manager to receive your resume from too many sources. This starts to send a signal that there might be something wrong with you, that you might be desperate. Plus, since the recruiter will get a substantial fee for placing you, you will be in a better bargaining position if you reach a company and hiring



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1) A retained search firm is hired to identify, recruit and evaluate candidates for specific openings, and receives a retainer in advance for these services. Generally, as long as they present a certain number of fully qualified candidates, they earn the entire fee for the search even if none is hired. Retained searches are more common for executive level openings.

Contingency fee searches involve the payment of a fee contingent on the employer hiring the candidate the recruiter presents. Typically the fee must be repaid if the candidate leaves the employer within a certain time, such as six months to a year. A fee is generally also due if the employer chooses to hire the candidate for any position within a certain number of months after being presented.

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manager independently via your networking efforts. On at least one occasion, I offered an actuary who did not come through a recruiter a sign-on bonus that I would not have otherwise, simply because I wouldn't have to pay a fee and wanted to make it more likely that the candidate would accept my offer!

So how do you decide which recruiters to use?

First, ask others who they consider the best recruiters in your area, industry, etc. Especially good sources are hiring managers and those who work in human resources. They will be in the best position to evaluate how the recruiter makes the presentation of the candidate, reputation, etc.

Next, interview any recruiter before you agree to have them present you for any openings. Some of the questions you want to pose:

- What salary range do you typically recruit for?
- What is your success rate in placing candidates?
- How often do you work with candidates in my industry? At my job level? In my specific job area? In my preferred geographic area?
- What is your success rate in my industry, profession, at my job/salary level?
- Do you have an exclusive arrangement with certain companies, or do you simply work "on spec"?
- Do you operate on a contingency or a retained search basis?
- Specifically how will you go about marketing me?
- What level of feedback can I expect on the quality of my resume, interview and presentation skills, how I performed in the actual interview?
- How do you submit my resume to prospective employers? Do you mail in the clean copy I send you on bond paper, or do you only e-mail or fax it in? Do you mark up my resume in any way before sending it in?

Only after you have answers that you are comfortable with and have established that the recruiter's philosophy is compatible with yours, should you give permission for a recruiter to present you to any company. And even then, you should insist on giving permission for each specific company to which you will be submitted. (You may even want to follow up with an e-mail or letter from you to the recruiter confirming this agreement.) Keep in mind that if a hiring manager receives your resume from a recruiter, and you independently reach that company via networking, the company may still have to pay the recruiter a fee. And if you come back to the company for a different position a few months later, even elsewhere in the company, again a fee may be due to the recruiter.

By the way, the recruiter may give you career advice, such as how to best present yourself, what should go on your resume, etc. Weigh any advice you receive carefully, as the recruiter works for the employer, not you. Some will give you excellent advice, while others' advice may be tainted by their desire to sell you and gain the fee, even if the position isn't the best fit for you or the employer. And you will likely receive conflicting advice from various sources, so you need to make sure you are following any advice you receive for a good reason.

I'll never forget an interview I went on for a major international role shortly before my wedding. I told the recruiter ahead of time that I would not consider any role that required more than 20 percent travel, and was assured that wasn't a problem. The interview went well, but it became clear that there would be huge travel requirements, often for weeks at a time. When I told the recruiter that afterwards, he tried to



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explain to me why that would be a great thing, and then wanted to talk to my fiancée to convince her why this would be a terrific move for my career. Needless to say, I removed that recruiting firm from my Rolodex!

Many recruiters will also seek to interview you, and you should take this as seriously as any job interview. The recruiter is performing an initial screening of you as a potential candidate. The better job you do of presenting yourself, the greater the chance of the recruiter presenting you to an employer and the more effective they will be at 'pre-selling' you to a hiring manager. And be prepared to explain your salary requirements, as they will almost always expect this information before they are willing to work with you.<sup>2</sup>

2) You should do your own research on the market value of your desired position. A good recruiter can also be quite helpful in validating this.

Often a recruiter is asked to "source" potential candidates to establish their fit to potential assignments. You should make sure that your references know about any recruiters with whom you have chosen to work, and what sort of position they might present you for. This way they will be sure to accept the recruiter's calls, and will be in the best position to present your greatest strengths to the recruiter relative to that type of position.

And finally, now that you have agreed to work with the recruiter, do so ethically—don't try to figure out what company the position is with and then try to get to the company directly. If I as a hiring manager get a sense that you aren't dealing ethically with a recruiter, how am I going to trust you to deal ethically with me? ☐

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3. **Be honest.** Observe areas that need improvement, but don't denigrate yourself. Once you acknowledge your flaws, you can choose to live with them or work to change them.
4. **Reject unrealistic ideals.** Self talk is often negative because people measure themselves against inappropriate ideals. They berate themselves for not attaining the ideal, and their self-esteem slides lower and lower. Whether the ideal relates to professional success, interpersonal relationships or physical beauty or abilities, you may need to reject the ideal rather than yourself.
5. **Override negative self talk with affirmative messages.** Self talk often stems from old tapes in your head that repeat negative comments and messages you've gotten over the course of your life. You can't tune

them out entirely, but you can turn up the volume on the positive talk.

Once you get used to speaking positively to yourself, you will find it easier to use similar language aloud so everyone around you realizes your value, too. ☐

