

THE CONFIDENTIAL SEARCH

by Scott Harrison - Managing Partner, Aquis Search

Confidentiality is at the heart of any search and integrity and discretion are paramount from all parties involved in any hiring process. However, a “confidential search” is when the need for secrecy is of utmost importance and there are wider implications if the details are known beyond a select few. When an executive moves on, organisations need a smooth transition. Having someone lined up to keep shareholder and stakeholders calm, keep the day to day business on an even keel and not display any weakness to competitors becomes the focus for the senior leadership team. The most sensitive of searches is when the incumbent doesn’t know he/she is being replaced. Keeping the details off the grid until the last minute is especially challenging, but completely necessary.

Having established the need for a confidential search, putting the process into practise can present obstacles that need to be considered. For example, to approach and gauge the interest of potential candidates is difficult when one is unable to mention the name of

the hiring company. There needs to be balance between offering enough information to start a serious conversation, whilst protecting the immediate need for anonymity. Early disclosure has a number of potential consequences for individuals and business operations, but complete non-disclosure can test the patience of excellent candidates.

What is the recruiter’s role in the process? Executive search recruiters act as a conduit between the hiring organisation and the talent pool, and by nature of the recruitment process their integrity and tenacity is without question. Their role on a confidential search is doubly important as they operate outside of the organisation’s structure, so the number of people inside of the firm that need to know of the search is kept to the bare minimum at all times. Creating a very small inner circle is an important first step in ensuring the search is a success. The right executive search partner will have the trust of their network, and will be able to make approaches that are taken seriously, even with minimum or no information being imparted in the early stages.

Hiring companies also need to be aware that once the interview stage commences, confidentiality will be weakened. Careful candidate management is imperative, ensuring there is no reason for anyone in the running to spoil the search even if they are unsuccessful in securing the role. Fortunately, most candidates will have a vested interest in keeping everything under wraps for



their own career and personal purposes. There can be cases where candidates will be eager to find out the finer details such as salary, team structure or business objectives, and it is always wise to bare in mind that some could use this information when they go back to their own role. So again, there is a fine balance between what information keeps the conversation alive, and when too much information will cause damage.

There are many examples of the disastrous consequences of a confidential search gone wrong, whether through a genuine mistake such as a CV left on a copier or inadequate consideration given to details such as meetings in public places or the hiring company's premises. The process is not infallible and relies heavily on everyone involved mitigating the risk of a leak at every stage. Whatever the reasons for a confidential search - leadership succession planning, bringing in a team to launch a new product or service to market without a competitor knowing - the pitfalls are the same. Working with a trusted partner on a retained basis, allowing enough time to research and approach suitors slowly is a good place to start.

About the Author



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Scott Harrison is a Co-founder and Managing Partner of Aquis Search. He recruits mid and senior level governance positions across the financial services, commerce and professional services markets.

Within Aquis Search he works closely with an established management team that delivers recruitment solutions across legal, risk, compliance, finance and accounting, human resources and support functions. He also recruits senior level governance roles across both traditional industries and within the financial services community.

Scott began his recruitment career in Sydney in 2000 before moving to Hong Kong in 2003. He is passionate about the delivery of leading recruitment solutions and best practice for clients across Asia. He began his career in management consulting before embarking on a recruitment career in 2000. He holds a Bachelor of Arts (Macquarie University) and a Masters in Applied Psychology and was previously admitted to the NSW Board of Psychology.

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