THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY

WORK AND CAREERS

8 Job-Seeking Tips From a Veteran Nonprofit Recruiter

By Vincent Robinson

JANUARY 11, 2024

GETTY IMAGES

Of the many lessons I've learned during nearly 20 years recruiting for leadership roles for philanthropic organizations, one stands out — every hiring process is different.

While the end goal for each process is the same — landing the right candidate for the job — there is no one set path to getting there. After all, this is a human-centered process that is focused on evaluating and building a meaningful relationship. Job seekers who know and understand this have a distinct advantage.

Even though each search differs, here are some lessons I've learned along the way that can help job seekers navigate the search process.

Don't push it. Patience truly is a virtue when you are pursuing a new role with an organization. Clients typically establish an aspirational timeline to get a new hire onboard. Yet the reality is that searches for key positions invariably take all manner of twists and turns. There are often multiple factors going on behind the scenes that can temporarily — or permanently — shift priorities.

In the face of uncertainty, which can be frustrating, it's important to project restraint, even if you're nervous about the pace of the search. Candidates who repeatedly ask for updates can raise concerns about their temperament and ability to adapt to changing circumstances. It's in your best interest, then, to be flexible in your expectations on timing of a search process.

If you have a legitimate reason to expedite the process — another job offer, for example — you should definitely say so. But never overplay your hand by creating false pressure aimed at forcing a potential employer to make a decision. That rarely ends well.

"Never overplay your hand by creating false pressure aimed at forcing a potential employer to make a decision. That rarely ends well."

Finally, avoid the temptation to go rogue. Attempts to circumvent the process by not following clear guidance or directly contacting someone at the organization without the green light is often a sure-fire way to end up undermining your candidacy.

Every encounter is an interview. It's not uncommon for potential candidates to ask during an introductory call or meeting: "This is not an interview, right?" Technically, the answer is no, but in reality, every interaction throughout the hiring process has elements of an interview, as people are getting to know each other. This applies to conversations you have with representatives from both the organization itself and the search firm.

As search professionals, our goal is to find the best potential fit for our clients, which means every conversation or email exchange helps inform whether you have the skills, experience, attitude, and temperament to be an asset to a potential future employer. With that in mind, the best approach is to communicate in a way that presents your best, most respectful and authentic self at every touch point — and with every person — in the process.

First impressions matter — but so do seconds and thirds. The aphorism about first impressions is true. Subsequent impressions, however, are vital as well, particularly if they may contradict an initial positive impression, or conversely, elevate your standing in ways that demonstrate there is more to you than first met the eye.

The most successful candidates tend to start with a positive first impression and establish a strong foundation that they build on in subsequent interactions. By the same token, candidates can recover from an initial flub or miscommunication. If you happen to stumble in your first interaction, view it as an opportunity to display your self-awareness and emotional quotient by showing up stronger the next time, perhaps even acknowledging that you weren't on your A-game last go-around. Trust me, self-awareness goes a long way.

Follow up — with no strings attached. It's good form to follow up promptly with a thank-you note following an interview, but don't overdo it or use it as a fishing expedition to pry for more information, get a better read on where you stand, or provide an additional "heavy sell" on your candidacy.

A good practice is to send a brief, sincere thank you to the search professional. In some instances, the consultant will forward that along to a client with a brief note that highlights your strengths and follow-through.

Do your homework. Few things turn a recruiter off faster than a candidate expecting us to do their prep work about an organization prior to the interview process. An important part of our role is to share information and context about an organization and the role they are seeking to fill.

However, it's up to you to do the heavy lifting of researching the organization in depth, understanding the external factors that may be affecting them, and getting a clear sense of the opportunities and challenges they face. This should shine through in your interview. Preparation has its rewards.

Don't let your ego trip you up. It's flattering when a recruiter reaches out to you for a potential role. It demonstrates that you have the experience and expertise to make you a potentially good fit for the hiring organization.

“As with online dating, a recruiter’s overture is like an invitation to swipe right, to begin a conversation. Even if that conversation leads to a first date, you still have a long way to go before you’re ready to walk down the aisle.”

Yet as with online dating, a recruiter’s overture is like an invitation to swipe right, to begin a conversation. Even if that conversation leads to a first date, you still have a long way to go before you’re ready to walk down the aisle.

Your ego can be your worst enemy when trying to land a new role. Do your homework, present yourself as confident, but not arrogant, and pursue each role as though there is someone more appropriate for the role than you. In other words, humility is a better friend to you than arrogance or, worse, petulance.

Don’t put too much credence in market conditions. When it’s a buyer’s market for job seekers, some candidates get overconfident, or worse, smug. Conversely, a tight job market can prompt candidates to overreact by trying to oversell themselves.

My advice: Be aware of market conditions, but don’t put too much weight on them when you are going for a specific role. Macroeconomic issues rarely influence the dynamics of hiring for a specific role. Focus on being your authentic and best self, regardless of what is happening in the broader job market.

Learn from rejection. Rejection hurts. Not getting a job you were excited about can be deflating and discouraging, especially if you invested significant time and effort in the process. It’s OK to be disappointed, but it’s also essential to use that disappointment in productive ways.

“View rejection as an opportunity to get better, so the next time around you can land the role.”

Ask the search professional if any specific issues caused the organization to go in another direction, or if you should do anything differently the next time around. The mere fact that you were in the running demonstrates that you have what it takes. Plus, we have seen instances in which a different role emerges at the same organization, which ends up being a better fit for the candidate.

View rejection as an opportunity to get better, so the next time around you can land the role.

Employing all of these tips can help tilt the odds in your favor, but keep in mind that preparing thoroughly and doing your best is all that you can do in any job search.

The truth is: Myriad factors lead to a final decision, and many of them are out of your control. I've seen candidates do everything right throughout the process and not get the job for reasons that had absolutely nothing to do with them. It happens more than you think.

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please email the editors or submit a letter for publication.

FUNDRAISING LEADERSHIP WORK AND CAREERS

Vincent Robinson

Vincent Robinson is the founder and managing partner of the 360 Group, an executive search company that places leaders at nonprofits and foundations.