

## The 'Invisibles' of High Quality Search

A hiring manager needs to fill a senior seat on her team. She meets two search firms. One is a traditional retained house; the other is cheaper and works on a no hire, no fee basis. The price gap is wide, and the cheaper option looks risk-free, so she takes it. Some weeks later the firm produces a candidate who can do the job. She concludes that price was the only real difference between the two, and resolves to use the cheaper route again.

It's an easy conclusion to reach, and a mistaken one. As Harry Beckwith observes in [Selling the Invisible](#), the trouble with any service is that you cannot watch it work: a service is only a promise that someone will do something. A Search is no exception. Most of what separates a good process from a cheap one happens behind the scenes, where the client never sees it.

The mistake is to treat the two routes as offering the same thing at different prices. They do not, and the difference runs along two lines. The first is whether a hire happens at all. A retained firm, paid to map a market exhaustively, is far more likely to find and land the right person than a contingent firm working from a thinner pool: we have closed every search we have taken on since 2019. The second is whether the person hired is the right one. A candidate drawn from a full market map and tested through referencing, behavioural profiling, aptitude assessment, and structured interviewing is more likely to fit better, and to stay in position longer, than one surfaced by mining LinkedIn and waved through on the strength of a brief interview by the agency recruiter. The cheap process can produce a good hire. But it does so less reliably, on both counts, and the reasons are worth setting out.

There are eight of them.

### 1. Mindset.

The deepest difference between contingent agency recruitment and retained Search is not method but motivation. A contingent firm is paid only if it places someone, which sounds reassuring but quietly shapes behaviour: the incentive is to close, not to advise. A retained engagement is paid a fee that covers the research whatever the outcome. That frees us to act in the client's interest rather than our own. We see our job as helping clients avoid the wrong hire, not selling them any hire, and we judge ourselves on how our placements perform over years rather than on how fast we close. Many firms measure themselves by closure rate alone. We watch what happens after the offer is signed: of all the people we have placed in the past decade, 79% are still with the same firm.

### 2. Candidate Evaluation.

Agency recruitment leans heavily on the CV, the LinkedIn profile, and the interview. The evidence says that is the wrong place to look. Most hires that fail do so not for want of technical skill but for want of coachability, emotional intelligence, and cultural fit, none of which a CV reveals. We assess all three directly, through competency-based interviews, referencing, personality testing, and aptitude assessment. A candidate who clears our process has been tested on behaviour as well as on track record, which is the part of the assessment that turns out to predict whether the hire works.

### 3. The Depth of the Research.

Take two firms running the same search. Company A works from LinkedIn and recycled lists from earlier mandates, and arrives at 40 to 50 names through keyword searches and a read of each CV. Company B works from a proprietary map of thousands of professionals in the relevant roles, draws up a long list of 80 to 90, then screens and references it down to a target list of 40 to 50. On paper the two lists look alike; they may even be the same length. They are not alike. One is the product of an afternoon's searching; the other is the residue of real work, and it contains better people, because it has been drawn from the whole market rather than the part of it that happens to be visible on a single platform.

### 4. Reporting that adds Context.

A client invests in a search to secure the best candidate available at that moment, and the only way to know whether they have is to see the field. We share the full research universe, not just the shortlist: the wider target list of 40 to 50, and an account of why particular firms or individuals were included or left

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out. Set against that backdrop, the six or seven people on the shortlist can be judged for what they are, the best of a market that has been properly searched. Without that context the client is choosing in the dark, second-guessing the list, asking for more names, and the search drags on with little form or context. With it, decisions come faster. Last year 90% of our mandates closed within four months.

### 5. The experience behind the work.

In agency firms the title of consultant often arrives within a year. In Search it is the end of a longer apprenticeship: associate researcher doing desk research and market mapping, then researcher running active telephone screening, then senior researcher managing the project and its strategy, then associate consultant leading the execution, judging fit, and pitching the role to senior candidates. That progression takes eight to ten years, and the judgement it produces is invisible to the client but present in every decision about whom to approach and whom to put forward. It is also the main reason Search costs more, and the cost buys something real: experience and judgement.

### 6. Knowing the client well enough to represent them.

A low-cost agency rarely has time to understand a client's culture; it has roles to fill and moves on quickly from one opportunity to the next. It's a high speed numbers game. We spend the time, because we cannot present an opportunity well unless we understand the values and the working culture behind it. A candidate briefing pack that conveys what a firm is actually like does two jobs at once: it helps candidates judge their own fit before they invest in a process, and it leaves them with a better impression of the client, whether or not they are hired. Over time that care feeds back into the client's reputation in the market and makes the next search easier for them.

### 6. How candidates are treated.

Candidates are usually the first casualties of a cheap process. They are called about roles that do not suit them, hear nothing back on the ones that do, and come away feeling like a commodity. This is the direct result of the race to the bottom on fees: a contingent, high-volume model leaves no time for care, however well-meaning the individual recruiter. Our model does allow us the time. Every candidate we handle is given a proper briefing on the role, the culture, and the strategy, and honest feedback at each stage. And every unsuccessful candidate is stood down and offered a wash up meeting, with advice on market trends, what worked well for them, and how they might do better next time. It matters beyond simple courtesy, because every candidate carries an impression of our client away with them, and we would rather it were a good one.

### 7. What happens after the offer.

In an efficiency-driven model the recruiter is gone the moment the offer is signed, on to the next fee. Even a strong appointment can stumble in the first months, when the new arrival is still learning the place and the place is still learning them. So we stay: structured check-ins at set intervals through onboarding, to surface problems while they are still small and reduce the risk of an early exit. The client rarely sees this work, and a candidate who settles well makes it look unnecessary. It is part of the reason our placements last, and part of what the 79% figure is measuring.

None of these eight things shows up in the price comparison the hiring manager made at the start. That is precisely the point. The cheaper firm may well find someone who can do the job: what it cannot offer is the reduction in risk, on both whether the hire happens and whether it is the right one. That comes from doing each of these steps properly, every time. Over a single appointment the difference may not show. Over a career of hiring, it compounds.

