

Introduction: A cup o' joe

There are two kinds of people:

- Those who know what they want and go out and get it.
- Those who settle for what comes along.

There's a joke about this distinction among headhunters. There are two kinds of headhunters:

- Those who know what they want and go out and get it.
- Recruiters.

Recruiters are often mistaken for headhunters. Like fishermen, recruiters bait a hook and wait for a bite to come along. (It's rumored that sometimes they sit staring at computer screens so long that they grow wheels and morph into swivel chairs.)

Headhunters today are like the headhunters of legend. They go into the jungle in pursuit of a rare prize and they don't come back until they have it.

We'll leave that simile alone now or we'll get into trouble. And I'll explain the reference to a cup of coffee at the end of this introduction.

This is a guide to help people change jobs when headhunters are involved. It's not intended to help a job hunter find a baited hook or a recruiter. I want to help you profit from working with good headhunters. That means learning how headhunters operate and how to work with them. It means distinguishing good headhunters from the not-so-good ones—and from recruiters. This guide shows you how to control your experiences with headhunters, and it explains the fallacies about headhunters—the *gotchas*.

Recognize the gotchas

My first objective is to illustrate some of the important gotchas you will inevitably encounter when working with even the best headhunters, to ensure you're going after the right job properly.

Headhunters tend to fill top-level management jobs in the healthy six-figure range. But many headhunters today also search for people to fill middle-level positions that pay \$50,000-\$150,000. There are practitioners calling themselves headhunters who

fill lower-level jobs, and then there are those who don't even fill positions—they're not really headhunters. They are con artists who will waste your time and take your money. That's a big gotcha.

Depending on your job level—and on your aspirations—this guide may help you today, or it may prepare you to deal with headhunters in the near future. It will help you maximize your win when working with a good headhunter, and it may help you avoid the pain that a charlatan might inflict.

Many years of headhunting have taught me this: Success at changing jobs requires deciding what you want, then going out and getting it. There is no set of steps or a prescribed process because everyone's objective is different. So is the path to it.

One of the most common reasons people change jobs is because they took the wrong job to begin with. They didn't pursue what they wanted. They took what came along. And that brings us to the crux of how headhunters operate.

Headhunters don't take who comes along. When working on an assignment to fill a position for a client company, they decide who they want and they go out and get them. That's how you should operate whether you're seeking a job on your own or when working with a headhunter. The reason you might have a bad experience with a headhunter is that the job a headhunter offers might be one that "came along," not one that you carefully chose to pursue. Getting talked into a job is not the way to manage your career. That's another gotcha.

So why bother working with headhunters? *Because a good headhunter can change your life profoundly for the better.* A good headhunter pursues specific people who are exactly right for a job. If the headhunter has done his homework, he has targeted you for good reasons. What remains is to explore the opportunity with you and decide whether you truly are the best person for the job—and whether it's what you really want. A headhunter might boost your career, but only if he's worthy and only if you know how to work with him. That's probably the biggest gotcha.

If you want a road map to your next job through a headhunter, this is not it. I don't believe any such map exists. You need this guide because along the way you will encounter headhunters, and *the conventional wisdom about how to work with headhunters is wrong.* You will encounter obstacles and challenges that you do not expect and with which you have no experience; for example, deciding whether the headhunter who just called you is worth your time. I call these hurdles *gotchas* because they will get you into trouble unexpectedly. I want to help you avoid them.

Learn how headhunters operate

Another objective of this guide is to teach you how good headhunters operate, so that you can make the most of your encounter with a headhunter.

Headhunters are paid a lot of money to find the right people to fill jobs. They aren't paid to run ads, post jobs, sit in front of a computer or sort applications. (That's why sending résumés to headhunters is a mistake.) A good headhunter's time is spent circulating and participating in the professional community in which he operates.

Headhunters don't find jobs for people. They are paid to go find who their clients need. Those people usually are not looking for jobs. Getting their attention requires a lot of effort. That's why headhunters won't take your cold calls or respond to your unsolicited e-mails. They're busy.

The misconceptions most people have about headhunters often lead to resentment because "my headhunter hasn't found me a job!"

There is no such animal as "your headhunter." Headhunters work only for employers. The idea that a headhunter will make it a project to find you a job is simply false.

But if you are the person a headhunter is pursuing, everything changes and you get all the headhunter's attention. A good headhunter will treat you and your career with respect while serving his client's needs. You can gain a lot from this experience if you understand how headhunters work.

How to deal with headhunters who aren't so good

My third objective is to show you the difference between good headhunters and inexperienced or unsavory ones. You should know how to deal with anyone who calls himself a headhunter—so that you can manage your relationships with good ones and avoid getting distracted by the rest.

People seem to get extremely frustrated by headhunters. ("They never call me back!" or "They don't call me at all!" and "They send me to interview for the wrong jobs!") This is where thoughtless reliance on headhunters creates trouble, because not every headhunter is worth working with.

Many headhunters believe that the big problem with our business is that the cost of entry is minimal. When I first started headhunting in Silicon Valley in 1979, the inside joke was that all you needed to be a headhunter was a handful of dimes and a pencil. You used the dimes to make calls and the pencil to take notes—on the phone booth wall. Even today there are great headhunters who rely on little more than that to do their work successfully. It's not about big databases full of names. It's about

personal relationships and credibility. That rule hasn't changed. But the low cost of entry attracts a rolling cast of unsavory characters looking for easy money who quickly destroy their reputations and exit the business to the detriment of the entire profession. In the meantime, they lay waste to the careers of wishful people who trust more than they verify. But a good headhunter is rare. You need to know how to recognize a good one because the lousy ones will find you easily.

(Some headhunters will take issue with that, but the good ones smile knowingly and get on with their work. They don't have much competition, and they know it.)

If you are to profit from working with headhunters, your expectations must be reasonable. Disreputable headhunters create unreasonable expectations. They do what no good headhunter would ever do—pretend they're going to find you a job.

A few words about recruiters

The term headhunter remains controversial in the employment world. Some people find it objectionable or derogatory. I love it. It describes what I do. I hunt for heads—the best heads for the jobs I'm trying to fill. The alternative term is recruiter. I don't care if headhunters call themselves recruiters, but I object to recruiters who call themselves headhunters.

Recruiters are not headhunters. Here's an example of the distinction that makes it clear. The Army has recruiting offices around the country. Agents sit at desks and process applicants who respond to the Army's advertising. That's recruiting, and it works largely the same way in business. Human resources (HR) departments and recruiters run ads and meet people who come to them.

Contrast that to sports recruiting. A team will deploy talent scouts to go find and bring home the best talent. Even though these scouts are sometimes called recruiters, they're really headhunters. They don't take who comes along. (They certainly don't run ads or post positions online.) They go after who they want and they ignore who they don't want—even if the players they don't want pester them.

Recruiters are not inferior to headhunters, nor should you avoid them. Some are quite good. But if you want to avoid frustration, you should quickly determine whether you're talking to a recruiter or a headhunter because you must work with each in different ways. Recruiters come in many flavors. Some work in corporate human resources departments, some in employment agencies and others in job shops. We'll discuss all of them later.

In parts of this guide I will talk a lot about recruiters and headhunters who aren't so good. That'll get the ire out of my system and the details I share will hopefully get

the dangerous misconceptions about them out of yours. In the end, success in working with headhunters (or recruiters) requires that you assert control over your job search rather than permit someone else to manage it for you.

Start by taking control

I encourage job hunters to be assertive. Life is short and every career decision you make is important. Good jobs are not easy to find, but mediocre jobs and the wrong jobs are everywhere. As I've said, I believe that people's dissatisfaction at work and the urge to change jobs often stem from taking the wrong job to begin with. The happiest workers know when to say no. They make it their goal to surround themselves with people who are worth working with. Assertive people quickly reject a wrong job—and a wrong headhunter—and actively pursue only the jobs they want.

Some who read this will quickly declare that they cannot afford to be so assertive or to irritate a headhunter who may have a job for them. This guide is not for the meek. It's for fearless job hunters who want to get ahead—not to go along. A good headhunter will not be offended by an assertive personality. Likewise, he will not be impressed by one who is too quick to say, "Sure I'm interested in any opportunity!" and comply with any request.

The standards of behavior in job hunting, hiring and headhunting are very low today. Job hunters who behave like beggars become losers. Those who raise their standards are more likely to find what they want. In the face of silly Internet job boards that tout "millions of opportunities," employers who profess, "People are our most important asset!" and erstwhile headhunters who shovel millions of résumés into the bowels of human resources departments, assertiveness is now essential on the job hunt. To succeed at getting the right job through a headhunter, you must manage—that is, know how to work with—the headhunter. You must take control.

Manage your relationships with headhunters profitably

Good headhunters don't always explain their methods. But the more you understand how they work with their clients and how they negotiate deals, the more profitable your experience will be. It's important to know what motivates them. For example, many people make the mistake of selling themselves too hard for the position a headhunter is working on right now. *But working with headhunters is not just about getting placed now.* It's about discussing the headhunter's assignment frankly and honestly. It's about building a relationship of trust and cooperation that can pay off again and again over many years. How you handle the headhunter on one deal will determine whether you get another opportunity later.

None of this is rocket science. What motivates headhunters? Headhunters want to close deals. But even more, *they want to expand their influence over the community they work in*. That's where their long-term business comes from.

The strategies and tactics headhunters use to close deals are intended to make their client (always an employer) and the person they place happy *for the long-term*. That's how the best headhunters cultivate and harvest their most valuable crop—referrals to other good assignments and to other talented people. To manage a headhunter effectively, you must focus as he does on the long-term investment in relationships. We'll talk about how you can cultivate headhunters—long-term—for referrals to good jobs *for the rest of your life*.

Be fearless, but judge the risks

Does being assertive create risks? Of course it does. Some headhunters, managers, human resources clerks and others will be taken aback, annoyed or even offended by an assertive job candidate. In my experience, smart, competent managers and headhunters respect people who respect themselves and who demonstrate high standards. The trouble is, you don't always know who you are dealing with. Will a fearless job hunter turn a manager off? Will a job candidate who exhibits high standards be rejected by a headhunter?

In any particular situation, you must judge whether my suggestions make sense for you. Never, ever take anyone's advice—including mine—without question. If you're not comfortable using an idea you find here, don't use it. If you're afraid a certain approach might cost you an interview or a job offer, then decide what's more important to you and act accordingly.

It's your life and your career. You can be fearless and still think and act with care.

Approach opportunity, avoid disappointment

I say negative things about headhunters in some parts of this guide. Obviously, if I thought that working with headhunters were a worthless enterprise, there would be nothing to teach you except how to say no. Because headhunters actually fill relatively few positions, it's simply irresponsible to suggest or believe that headhunters should be one of the main methods you use to land a job. If you rely primarily on headhunters, you are likely to be disappointed.

But if you don't respond effectively when good headhunters approach you with good opportunities... well, you lose. A good headhunter could change your life immensely for the good and I want to encourage you to welcome such opportunities—but intelligently, not blindly. Early in this guide I will explain that only about 3% of jobs are filled by headhunters. So, why bother learning how to work with them under

such odds? *Because some of the very tastiest jobs are controlled by headhunters—* and if you're not going to invest in getting access to those jobs, again, you lose. Exceptional career success is rare because few people know how to achieve it. Never let obstacles stop you. This guide is also about how to deal with those obstacles.

Watch for shifts in my tone in this guide. One minute I'll warn you to back away from certain kinds of headhunters. And the next I'll show you how to advance assertively and confidently. Don't get confused about my message. It is simple: Invest your time wisely, don't waste it. Approach opportunity, but avoid disappointment.

Man, I wish I knew that!

I started Ask The Headhunter online in 1995. I had no idea that the simple advice I shared was so foreign to people. But I quickly realized that as a headhunter I know what I know because it's my job to find great candidates and to fill jobs routinely. I do it all the time, or I don't eat. While job hunters are sometimes under similar pressure, *job hunting isn't their job*. They don't do it often. They don't develop insights, strategies and tactics about matching people to jobs that headhunters do.

Since 1995 I've answered over 30,000 questions from my readers. What keeps me going is that it's a lot more fun sharing *advice* than teaching *process*. I'd rather talk with you about the challenges you face than preach to you about the conventional way to do things. That's why I call what I do *Ask The Headhunter*.

Success in the job hunt is not about following steps. (If it were, getting a job would be routine.) Success depends on knowing how to tackle the daunting questions and obstacles that hit you head-on. Even the smartest, savviest job hunters need help. Each topic in this guide is a lesson based on real questions from real people who turn to Ask The Headhunter for an insider's advice about how to work with headhunters, and about how to make headhunters work for you.

I hope you find the conversational Q&A format easy to digest and that when you're done, you'll feel like we just had a cup o' joe and a long talk—not like you just read a book. Not all the ideas here will be useful to you, but I'll be happy if a handful of them make you slap your head and say, *"Man, I wish I knew that the last time I talked to a headhunter!"*

I wish you the best.

Nick Corcodilos