

Hiring an Association Executive Director (ED) Part I: First Steps to a Successful Search

By

John B. McHugh and Harvey Kane

© 2023 by John B. McHugh and Harvey Kane

To understand the nature of the people one must be a prince, and to understand the nature of the prince, one must be of the people.— Niccolo Machiavelli

Contents

- Introduction
- The Executive Director as Staff Leader
- Requirements of the Executive Director
- Selecting the Search Committee
- Filling the Executive Director Position
- Reasons Executive Directors Fail
- The Consequences of a Poor Hiring Decision

Introduction

This article is intended for anyone interested in the role of the Executive Director at an association or society, whether you are an aspiring ED, an association executive curious about the role, a human resources director, and/or serving on a search committee looking for an ED. The insights shared will help those involved in the talent acquisition process build a decision-making framework for hiring an ED and minimize mistakes in the search process.

This is the first article in a series of two, which can be read in any order, but we recommend that you read them in sequence, as Part I sets the stage for Part II:

- ED-1, Hiring an Association Executive Director (ED) Part I: First Steps to a Successful Search , 2023, 4 pages
- ED-2, *Hiring an Association Executive Director (ED) Part II: Where to Find Candidates, Search Committees, and the Best Candidates*, 2023, 4 pages

These articles intend to help you by:

- explaining the responsibilities of an ED
- providing search guidelines, helpful insights, and helping to identify and avoid potential land mines in the search process.

The Executive Director as Staff Leader

When looking for a new ED, many boards and search committees focus on the outward-facing responsibilities of the role. That is, they look for someone who would be a good spokesperson for the industry/field, with a proven record of accomplishment in providing strategic direction and proper financial management. We agree that these are important qualities in a leader, but too often the *typical board of directors-driven executive search loses sight of the fact that the ED is the link between membership, the board of directors, and the organization's staff.*

The ED's ability to lead the staff is key to the organization's success. The right ED creates a positive staff morale, which inspires staff to be creative, innovative, and stay with the organization. On the other side, an ED who does not engender loyalty among the staff will have a demoralized group of employees who put in the bare minimum and are most likely to leave as soon as they find a better position. The ED's time then must be spent making sure that the work is being covered while any open positions are being filled, and dealing with the lower productivity while the new hires learn the organization and their new roles. Staff turnover is costly. During times of low unemployment, the ED must be a strong, thoughtful, inspiring leader.

Requirements of the Executive Director

"Most organizations identify their chief executive as the ED: the individual, who provides leadership and guidance to the governing board, administers and manages all aspects of the organization, and speaks on behalf of the organization as delegated by the president and governing board." (Smith, Bucklin, & Associates, *The Complete Guide to Nonprofit Management*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1994, page 46)

On page 58, the authors point out

"The executive leader works to:

- Understand the organization — inside and out.
- Provide policy guidance and leadership for the board.
- Establish and maintain effective communications systems.
- Educate board regarding board and staff roles and responsibilities.
- Maintain fiscal control.
- Encourage and support involvement of volunteers.
- Strategically manage all aspects of the association."

The ED must be a businessperson and not only placate but please and be accountable to board members, some of whom believe they can do a better job. Additionally, the ED has to manage a staff — some of whom have longevity, or ambitions, or who are resistant to change — and, equally important, each staff member has a hidden agenda.

For those reasons, the ED must first be a master politician and maintain a trusting and supportive relationship with board members and staff. If one relationship is out of kilter, mostly likely that ED will fail.

When it becomes necessary to fill the ED position, the search committee must take into account not only the business acumen of the candidate, but also their standing in the community that the organization represents. However, good standing in the profession and sharp business acumen may not go hand in hand. This is the committee's Gordian Knot. The new ED must have strong business expertise, as well as political and leadership skills.

Selecting the Search Committee

Who should be on the search committee? *We suggest the search committee have a one-page charter defining its scope and responsibilities.* The committee should have a chairperson. In many cases, the chairperson will be the current president of the organization. A clear description of the review and selection process should be described in the charter.

The search committee should have between five and seven members, and should be comprised of three to five board members, one mid-level staff member, and the HR director. The staff members are nonvoting members, but should provide insights into the organization's operations and staff morale.

Filling the Executive Director Position

The most difficult position to fill in your organization is that of the ED. However, most search committees are comprised of people who have never hired an ED. An ED prospect may be able to impress the search committee but still not have the leadership ability for effective staff management. Most likely, anyone interviewing for an executive position will tell you they are a "people person." Other well-worn corporate-speak clichés are: "It all starts with people." "People are our most valuable asset." "We invest in our people." "People come first." *One important question to ask is: Can the new ED connect with the staff, and be an effective staff leader?*

We recommend that anyone involved in recruiting a new ED ask the following questions even before the search begins:

- What will be the recruiting process for your next ED?
- Who selects the new ED? Who will make the ultimate hiring decision?
- Who should be on the search committee?
- What are the possible pitfalls in the recruiting process?
- What are your expectations of your ED?
- Is the ED's position job description up-to-date? Who should revise it?
- What are the top priorities for the new ED?
- How will you evaluate the ED's performance?

Reasons Executive Directors Fail

Making the wrong decision when hiring an ED can be costly. EDs make six figures plus and many sign multi-year contracts. Your organization might be "on the hook" to pay an underperforming ED hundreds of thousands of dollars while watching the organization fall apart. Disgruntled staff will leave; members will be disappointed in the level of service, and so on. While there is no one-size-fits-all formula for how to hire the right ED, the following list shows

many of the reasons that EDs fail. It is our hope that by keeping this list in mind, boards can, first and foremost, select the right people for the search committee, then determine how the ED candidates will fare regarding financial management, political prowess, and staff relations.

- Lack of skill in managing board relationships
- Negative politics on board and with staff
- Lack of total skill package to succeed
- Lack of attention to financial performance
- Lack of understanding needs of members and marketplace trends
- Mismanagement of staff relations

The Consequences of a Poor Hiring Decision

Your organization will pay a steep price if you hire an ED who does not succeed:

- *Your organization will lose opportunities without competent leadership.* If your new ED is not the right person, there will be a net loss to the organization. Successful organizations are people-driven. If the new ED does not recognize this important point, the organization could lose partnership opportunities, product development momentum, budget adherence, and forego new market development.
- *A poor performing ED leverages his/her damage throughout the organization.* If you have hired a poor leader, chances are that person will damage the performance of the entire organization. The search committee needs to get the choice right the first time.
- *Everyone's frustration level will increase dealing with a "high maintenance" boss.*

The ED's staff leadership is, in our opinion, as important as their ability to serve the board. An unpopular and inept ED is sure to lower the morale of staff, resulting in a much weaker organization.

We wish to thank Liz Novak for her review of this article and Bev Kolz for her editing of this article.

LINKS

Free Articles Also of Interest

- Avoiding Nepotism when Hiring an ED, 1 page, <https://tinyurl.com/yajr5a8m>
- Finding Your Next ED, <https://tinyurl.com/upvx3m6y>
- Association Culture: Breaking Barriers to Organizational Progress, 3 pages, <https://tinyurl.com/zph8zm8s>

Reviewer Acknowledgment Victor Van Beuren

We wish to thank long-time **McHugh Advisor**, *Victor Van Beuren* of the American Diabetes Association for his critical review of the entire manuscript. A scientist by training (geology), Vic has been actively involved in scholarly publishing for over 30 years. Having worked for both society and commercial publishers (e.g., American Association of Petroleum Geologists,

American Diabetes Association, Springer-Verlag, Elsevier), he has direct experience in STM book publishing, journal and magazine management, and marketing to academicians and professional practitioners. Vic's specialties are managing STM acquisitions, editorial production, and marketing to scholarly researchers.

Liz Novak, MBA, CAE

Liz Novak is the Deputy Executive Director for the American Association of Feline Practitioners (AAFP), a professional association dedicated to improving the health and wellbeing of cats through high standards of practice, continuing education, and evidence-based medicine. She previously held various roles with the International Association of Plastics Distribution (IAPD), including Deputy Executive Director, Director of Advocacy and Publications, and Director of Marketing and Communications. Prior to discovering association management, Liz had a successful career as a magazine editor. Liz holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Psychology from Loyola University of Chicago and an MBA from the Pennsylvania State University Smeal College of Business. She earned her CAE in 2018.

Contact: www.linkedin.com/in/lnovak

About The Authors

John B. "Jack" McHugh is a 40-year veteran of the publishing business. Jack has worked as an executive for Houghton Mifflin, Wadsworth, and Saint Mary's Press. Jack is also an experienced association publishing executive. For seven years, he was Publisher and Director of Programs at the American Society for Quality and for a two-year period, he served as the Interim Publisher at the Project Management Institute. He is a member of the ASAE Advisory Board for Publishing, Communications, and ED Issues and Practices.

Jack's specialties include association/nonprofit publishing, book publishing, executive recruiting, journal publishing, rights and permissions, new ventures, organizational design, and social media strategy and policy. Mc Hugh is also the manager of the LinkedIn™ group, **Association and Nonprofit Publishing**.

About Harvey Kane

Harvey Kane is a semiretired STM publishing executive, having worked for American Pharmacists Association, American Chemical Society, Springer, Academic Press, and CRC Press, now part of Taylor and Francis. Early in his career, he worked for Macmillan Publishing Company and acquired college level textbooks in various fields. Harvey has collaborated with me on a variety of assignments. He is a top contributor to our LinkedIn™ group **Association and Nonprofit Publishing**.

In his career, Harvey has held these positions: Director, Book Publishing ACS; VP Publishing, American Pharmacists Association; Publisher, CRC Press; Consultant, American Home Builders Press, and Senior Editor at Humana and Springer. Harvey has published books, journals, newsletters, e-books, and a free circulation newspaper. Lastly, Harvey has extensive experience in the electronic delivery of scientific information. Harvey shares his high-level experience at leading STM publishers in this paper.

McHugh Recruiting Services for Associations and Societies

© 2023 by John B. McHugh

John B. McHugh is an experienced executive recruiter for associations and societies. He recruits publishing executives and executive directors. McHugh has worked as an executive in associations and societies. He specializes exclusively on associations and societies in his consulting practice. He possesses a deep and incisive knowledge of how these organizations work.

McHugh offers a menu of services to his clients. This means that you can select those services that meet your needs and let your staff do the rest. McHugh's approach offers flexibility and saves valuable staff time. Best of all, McHugh's approach will save you substantial money over the traditional percentage of the executive's first-year salary charged by most executive search firms. Client fees are transparent.

Services

- Review position description and recommend revisions
- Screen applicants' resumes and recommend best qualified candidates
- Prepare custom interview questionnaire adapted to the client's needs
- Interview those candidates in "best qualified and high potential" category and prepare comprehensive written report
- Interview client's staff
- Recommend finalist candidates with a rationale for each recommendation

Contact Jack McHugh, 414-351-3056

Email jack@johnbmchugh.com

Website <http://www.johnbmchugh.com>.

LinkedIn <https://www.linkedin.com/in/john-b-mchugh-21651811/>