

Hiring an Association Executive Director Part II: Where to Look for Candidates—and What You Might Find

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Contents

- Candidate Pools for Executive Director Recruiting
- Finding the Best Candidates for Your Organization
- The Consequences of Poor Recruiting
- Conclusion

Candidate Pools for Executive Director Recruiting

“Our new ED should be one of our own, namely, a board member.” This thought pervades many associations and societies, particularly search committees charged with finding and hiring a new ED. Are there more qualified ED candidates you can recruit than a board member? We think so, as there are a number of good potential candidate pools. In alphabetical order they are:

- Associations and societies
- Manufacturing and industry
- Military officers
- Scientists and engineers
- University professors and/or administrators
- Your own organization: promote staff from within

Our labeling of each pool is arbitrary and overlap will occur. Our goal is to help you focus your recruiting efforts in order to find the best-qualified ED candidates. We offer the potential strengths and weaknesses of candidates in each pool.

Associations and Societies

Associations and societies are logical places to start your search. EDs from this pool understand the cultures and different environments of nonprofit organizations. Look for an incumbent ED, or perhaps an up-and-coming senior executive in a similar organization.

The richest geographic areas for nonprofit organizational talent are Washington, D.C., New York, and Chicago. Note, however, these three areas have a high cost of living. Therefore, if your organization is outside these areas, your candidate may currently make more than your organization can offer. Be prepared for “sticker shock” when discussing expected salary and benefits because qualified candidates living in pricey metro areas may expect considerably more money than you can afford to pay.

Manufacturing and Industry

The manufacturing and industrial sector is a good venue to search, particularly if your organization is a trade or industry group. Top business and industry executives have a strong grasp of industry issues, pertinent legal issues, and generally know many of the leading figures in that industry. Also, private sector executives have an understanding of financial management, marketing, and experience leading industry-focused staff.

Most nonprofit trade organizations operate on budgets that are small compared to the industrial firms they represent. So, a major impediment in recruiting industry executives is the large disparity in pay, bonuses, and perks between commercial enterprises and nonprofit organizations.

When recruiting an ED from the manufacturing and industrial sector, it is important that they understand the service-focused responsibility of your organization to its member companies and individuals. Consider whether an ED candidate with this background will be able to adapt their leadership style to manage boards, finesse prickly volunteers, and inspire staff. If the candidate is accustomed to issuing orders rather than having open discussion and building consensus, then that person may not be cut out for the dynamics needed for the position.

The new ED must view the bright, talented, and creative staff as an asset on the balance sheet, not a cost. Staff members are the organization's most valuable asset. The Search Committee must place the ability to deal with talented, independent-thinking creative people as a top attribute when looking for the new ED.

Military Officers

Many organizations look to retired military officers, especially generals and admirals, as possible candidates for their ED position. Retired military officers have many pluses, as they are accustomed to dealing with complex organizations; have extensive post-graduate education and leadership skills. They are also goal-oriented, understand tasking, are political experts, possess mentorship skills, understand the need for flexibility, and have a commitment to mission.

However, one must ask: "How is the culture of the association or society different from that of the military?" Does the ED candidate understand the civilian environment of your organization and the challenge of managing civilian staff unaccustomed to military discipline and the need to follow orders in a military organization?

Also, the military culture demands an adherence to the chain of command. Although most association staff understand their responsibilities and can complete projects on time, the military is a rigid bureaucracy supporting quick decisions by its leaders to replace incompetent personnel or personnel who let personal commitments override mission. Successful associations and societies often have attributes and values opposite those found in the military.

One of my advisors, a long-time ED, had this comment about hiring retired military officers: "In the military senior officers have no top line responsibility in terms of making a sales budget each year. An ED must ensure that membership dues, conferences, publishing and advertising sales, professional development and other businesses earn a sufficient margin to keep the organization solvent and contribute to the reserve fund, usually 10 % of budget. This is the

paradox of a nonprofit 501(c) (3) organization, namely, they don't pay federal and state incomes taxes as a nonprofit yet must earn a profit to stay in business."

Consider also that we are now a nation predominately of nonveterans because of the end of the military draft over 50 years ago. With an all-volunteer military force, some experts estimate less than one percent of the U.S. population has served or even knows someone who has served. It is common to find many organizations with no military veterans. *Therefore, because the culture of the military is foreign to most of those who work in societies and associations, they may not readily accept the leadership of a retired career military officer.*

Scientists and Engineers

One school of thought in recruiting says that having a background in the organization's specialty is a plus. Many times, STEM organizations assume a distinguished scientist or engineer is qualified for the ED position. For example, if one has an engineering background, one is considered qualified to become the ED of an engineering society. Academic training in the field of the organization and its members helps a potential ED understand the context of the society, but it does not guarantee that person will completely understand the complex role and responsibilities of the ED. (See ED-2, "Hiring an Association Executive Director (ED) Part I: Planning Your Hiring Strategy")

University Professors and/or Administrators

Some search committees are attracted to candidates from academia. Deans and provosts may have strong administrative skills, and that's a plus. However, many universities are inefficient organizations with too many layers of costly administration.

Universities also have myriad layers of political camps that are difficult to navigate. Universities for the most part are hidebound in tradition and resistant to change. The academic ED candidate might unwittingly bring that mindset to your organization, so it is critical to ask the candidate for opinions and ideas about transparent management styles.

Your Own Organization: Promote from Within

Search committees should consider current staff members when looking for a new ED. Most likely, there are several well-qualified candidates on staff. The advantages of considering an internal candidate are many.

An internal candidate has knowledge of the organization's strengths and weaknesses, along with knowledge of volunteers and staff who, in turn, know the internal candidate. Another plus is that the internal candidate has experienced and therefore understands the nuances of the organization's culture. Usually, it takes about a year for a new ED from outside the organization to be acclimated to their role in the organization. The learning curve for an internal candidate is much shorter.

There's a risk that an outsider coming in as the ED may have a background not attuned to the organization's culture and may want to superimpose an alien culture on your organization. *Organizational cultures are powerful and difficult to change. We have seen this phenomenon repeatedly and when it happens, it can be devastating to the organization.*

In addition, a talented staff person with aspirations to become an ED will be looking for an ED position. If they leave for another opportunity, the institutional knowledge and the relationships they've built over time will leave with them.

However, promoting an internal candidate can have its pitfalls. The internal candidate may assume that the organization is incapable of growing or changing because many past attempts have failed. The internal candidate may be close friends with some of the staff and may find it awkward to become their boss. The internal candidate may fear change, or hastily dismiss confrontation. Plus, if an internal candidate is interviewed and not hired for the position, there may be conflict with the new ED.

Finding the Best Candidates for Your Organization

Candidates from each of these backgrounds bring strengths and weaknesses to the table. Search committees should ask first, "What kind of a person do we need?"

However, it is not the candidate *type* that the nonprofit organization should initially address. Hiring a new ED presents an opportunity to address the strengths and weaknesses of the organization. When search committees start with a gap analysis, they will have a much better idea of the type of person who can lead the organization to success. If the organization has a strategic plan in place, the search committee should study it and determine how the various candidates will help the organization achieve its strategic goals.

After figuring out who you are and what you want to be as an organization, you can address what type of person will best fill the role of ED.

Conclusion

Hiring a new ED is a critical task for your organization. A good choice can help build positive momentum; a poor choice will cause your organization to grind to a halt. First, the search committee has an important responsibility to identify the mission and mandate of the organization. With eyes wide open, the committee members must take a deep look into the organization's structure, listing the strengths and weaknesses of the membership and the organization's management.

Second, the committee must conduct its search with a clearly defined list of ED responsibilities and expectations. This will allow each candidate to be reviewed consistently and be compared fairly, so the right candidate can be hired the first time.

And third, the search committee should work with the board of directors to help the new ED lead the organization, following the clearly defined mission outlined at the beginning of his or her tenure.

We have explored the responsibilities of the ED position itself from two stakeholder perspectives: the board/membership and the staff. The ED must be versatile, inspiring, fair, and have plenty of business and political acumen.

We have weighed board/member expectations of the ED position in the context of *staff leadership*. Far too often, however, the ED meets the board's expectations but falls short in their staff leadership role.

Many times board members ignore the staff leadership part of the ED's job until it is too late. It is not until staff morale, performance, and productivity deteriorate that the failure of the search committee becomes evident.

We hope this article and the previous article in this series provide guidance on how to avoid pitfalls in the hiring process. The search committee should have a clear goal in mind and take into consideration the various constituents who make up the organization and the environment in which it survives. If but one committee member reads this paper and uses it for part of the decision-making process resulting in a successful hire, we will consider our thoughts and insights a success.

LINKS

Free Articles also Interest http://www.johnbmchugh.com/publishing_articles.htm

- PM-85, *Finding Your Next Executive Director*, Co-author David Beacom, 2020, 2 pages
- PM-86, *McHugh-Beacom Executive Recruiting Checklist*, 2020, 1 page
- PM-89, *Avoiding Nepotism when Hiring an Executive Director*, 2021, 2 pages

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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.

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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 in associations and societies in his consulting practice. He possesses a deep and incisive knowledge of how these organizations work.

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