



# McHUGH EXPERT INTERVIEW

## McHugh Interviews McHugh on Executive Recruiting

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### INTRODUCTION

Over the years I have been asked what makes for successful executive recruiting? I too, have asked that question in my roles as an association executive and executive recruiter. Conversely, I have also asked, "Why do organizations get it wrong so often in the hiring of new executives?" The purpose of this interview is to answer these questions and also to provide information on my recruiting techniques.

### QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

**Q** Who should be in charge of the recruiting process?

**A** Ideally, the hiring executive and Human Resource Manager (HRM) should collaborate. One viewpoint is that the hiring manager is the customer of HRM and should, therefore, at a minimum define what expectations the manager has for the person being hired.

**Q** Why is the executive recruiting process so important?

**A** It's all about hiring top leaders. First-rate leadership is the key to successful organizations. Strong leaders get results working through people. Ask the converse, "What happens when you hire the wrong candidate?"

**Q** What are the consequences of poor recruiting?

**A** Your organization will pay a big price when you hire executives who do not succeed. Here are the reasons.

- *Your company will lose opportunities without competent leadership.* If your new executive hire is not the right person, then there will be a net loss to the organization. It comes back to successful organizations being people-driven. For example, you could lose partnership opportunities, product development momentum, experience lack of budget adherence, and forego new market development.

- *Your credibility suffers from poor hiring decisions.* If you are the hiring executive who made a bad decision, then you look bad because you are paid to make judgments that benefit the company. Hiring people who fail in their positions always hurts you and your organization.
- *A poor-fitting hire leverages his/her damage throughout the organization.* If you have hired a poor leader, chances are that person will damage the performance of his/her department. The peers of the wrong hire will be affected. Most likely your workload will increase because you will have to cover for your subordinate's poor performance.
- *Your frustration level will increase dealing with someone who is high maintenance.* Hire someone who is cantankerous, demanding, and with inadequate people skills and you personally will be frustrated. This unnecessary frustration could hinder your performance

**Q** What questions should one ask prior to starting the recruiting process?

- A**
- *Do we need to fill this position?* Is there a need for this position? Have the responsibilities of this job been identified? Can the responsibilities be consolidated into other staff member jobs? How much of this job can be assumed by the manager without hindering that

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person's performance? Is this position redundant? Should this position go the way of attrition?

- *Have you reviewed the position description?* Does the current position description need a revision? If you have revised the position description, has it been approved by other executives including your boss and HRM? If the position description is revised, does the salary grade need to be reviewed?
- *Have you established the outcomes you want to achieve with this position?* What are the key drivers (goals and objectives) for success in this position? What needs to be accomplished by the new executive? How will success be measured?
- *Who will mentor this new colleague?* Who will ensure that this individual will be provided daily direction and counsel so that he/she succeeds? Who will be involved in integrating this person into the culture of the organization? Avoid the hire-sink-or-swim syndrome that afflicts so many organizations. Your responsibility is to invest the time to help the person you hired succeed.

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**Q How have recent economic conditions affected executive recruiting?**

**A** For the most part, it's been a buyer's market for those hiring. You may find that for every position under recruitment you could have hundreds of applications. So it's important to have precise job and experience criteria to screen out those lacking the requisite qualifications. Take your time as you will have many qualified candidates to consider. Executive recruiting is labor-intensive, so give yourself enough time so that you can be deliberate.

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**Q Can executives from commercial publishing companies be successfully recruited into associations?**

**Inherent in this question is another one: What are the differences between association publishing and commercial publishing?**

**A** Commercial publishing executives generally work out well in associations once they learn the dynamics of nonprofit publishing. Publishing in a nonprofit organization has a number of "wrinkles" one doesn't find in the commercial publishing business. Sometimes the publisher's job in an association is to simply make money, but this is rarely the case. The publishing division serves as the "communications link" with members, various constituencies and the world at large. At other times, the publications division provides publishing and graphics services to other departments; for example, membership or education or certification. Also, association publishing differs from commercial publishing in that associations

- are risk-averse.
- take longer to make decisions because of volunteer involvement.
- may lack a clear mission for their publishing business—or even fail to think about their publishing program as a business needing investment of human and capital resources.
- can be hindered by volunteer micromanagement.
- lack some of the employee financial incentives of commercial publishing; for example, bonuses and pay for performance.

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**Q How long will it take to recruit someone for an executive position?**

**A** So many variables are involved in recruiting that it's impossible to suggest absolutes. However, assume it will take about twice as long as you expect it will. Recruiting top executives is an art. It is labor intensive and a highly inefficient activity.

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There are many false starts and stops. Candidates express interest but are not really interested. Reference checking takes longer than you think. Scheduling interviews with candidates and your organization's staff is cumbersome and time consuming.

*Take your time. Be thorough and meticulous in your screening and interviewing.* Make sure you take the time to understand the "human connection" between your organization and the finalists. The stakes are high, so don't rush.

*Set milestones.* I recommend a six-month window maximum for recruiting any executive. A three-month window to recruit and hire a new Publisher would be above average in getting closure.

**Q** What are your suggestions for screening resumes and cover letters?

**A**

- The more long-winded and obtuse a cover letter, the more likely the candidate is not qualified for the position.
- All resumes are inflated to an extent. All candidates pad their accomplishments and present their experience and credentials in the best possible light. The inflation of accomplishments is only a matter of degree.
- In most instances, the majority of the numbers contained in the resume are unverifiable. For example, how do you verify statements such as "I increased sales by 250 % to \$12 million in a two-year period"? Ask yourself, "Do these numbers sound reasonable? Is the entire resume bloated with unreasonable numbers?"
- The more inflated the resume, the less desirable the candidate.

- Smart candidates tell you what you want to hear. This is basic salesmanship, but be sensitive to this behavior dynamic during the interview process. Carefully filter everything a candidate tells you.
- If a candidate exhibits a consistent pattern of less-than-direct answers and long-winded, evasive answers, then this candidate is not right for you.
- Top candidates always acknowledge what they don't know in an answer.

**Q** How do you develop an interview strategy?

**A** For every hour of an interview, spend at least one plus hours planning an interview strategy. First, ask yourself, "What do I want to accomplish in this interview? What specific duties of the position are of critical importance?" Then, move on to the resume and look for the matches between the candidate's experience and the needs of the position. Next, develop specific questions to probe what is stated on the resume.

**Q** What should your interview goals be?

**A** Your interview goals will depend on your interviewing strategy. However, there are certain things you want to accomplish in an interview with a potential finalist for the position. Put another way, you always want to come away from the interview with answers to the following questions:

- What do I feel about this candidate personally? What is our chemistry?
- How will my colleagues relate to this candidate? Peers? Subordinates? Higher-placed executives? Volunteers? Authors? Customers? Vendors?
- Does the candidate answer questions directly and succinctly?

**John B. McHugh, Publishing Consultant**

PO Box 170665 • Milwaukee, WI 53217-8056

414-351-3056 • jack@johnbmchugh.com • www.johnbmchugh.com

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- Does the candidate dance around the questions? Does the candidate obfuscate habitually? Can the candidate quickly organize his/her thoughts in a logical, cogent manner?
- Does the candidate say, “I don’t know”?
- Does the candidate smile? Have a sense of humor?

### **Q** How should you document the interview?

**A** Immediately write down your impressions. This is vital. Document how you view this candidate as a potential hire for your organization. As you write, think of yourself as a newspaper reporter stressing the accurate and objective recording of your impressions of the candidate. Don’t censor yourself. Trust your instincts and intuition about this person. Be as precise as possible in recording what you observed during this interview.

When you get to the finalist stage, you might be considering five or six well-qualified candidates. The candidates you interviewed will likely blur together in your mind. Distinct impressions are needed to refresh your memory. Sometimes there is a hiatus in the recruiting process. You may not get back to recruiting for a month because of some other organization priority. You need to review interview documentation to be able to pick up where you left off.

### **Q** Should other staff colleagues interview executive candidates?

**A** In addition to interviewing the candidate yourself, your boss should interview the candidate. Also, it is a good practice to have a couple of peers and subordinate staff members interview this person.

Why? The more looks at the candidate the better. We all have different abilities when it comes to judging the potential of candidates who could become our colleagues. Plus, it is vital to pick up any tell-tale negative

signs when interviewing candidates, and with a number of interviewers, most likely you will be able to identify any danger spots.

### **Q** Should you ever hire friends?

**A** No. As a general rule, it is bad policy to hire friends. Even worse, if your friend reports to you, you may be suspected of favoritism and your friend most likely will expect special treatment. This will create resentment within the organization. Sometimes hiring a friend is unavoidable, but usually there are many other well-qualified candidates available.

### **Q** Should I promote from within the organization?

**A** It is always smart to try to promote from within your organization. Some organizations even have a policy to recruit within the organization in addition to external recruiting. Make your search competitive for both internal and external candidates so that you hire the best candidate available whether that person currently works for your organization or is employed elsewhere. Be sure that you have clear requirements for the position so that if you hire someone who is not a staff member you can justify the hire based on objective criteria. Make the process a transparent one to ensure fairness.

### **Q** Can you summarize the process for recruiting executives?

**A** A summary is provided in *McHugh’s Executive Recruiting Checklist* (PM-6), which is available free at my website.

### **Q** What other advice do you have?

**A** First and foremost, always be polite and courteous to all candidates as it is the right thing to do. Second, prepare for the interview as per my comments above. Third, always be on time for an interview.

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Always have at least three qualified candidates, one primary and two as back-up qualified candidates. Reason: You never know when your primary candidate will accept another job. Or the top candidate may try to bid up the offered starting salary by an unreasonable or unaffordable amount. Also, you may have selected a candidate who falsified his resume and therefore must be removed from consideration.

Finally, ask when you are down to finalists, "What are the risks with this candidate?" "What could go wrong?" "What is the worst that could happen if this candidate fails?"

### MCHUGH EXECUTIVE RECRUITING SERVICES

John B. McHugh is an experienced executive recruiter with a specialty in commercial and nonprofit publishing, including college, business, technical, professional, religious, and association publications. He has written extensively about the field of effective publishing management, drawing on his expertise as a successful executive of both book and journal programs.

Tap into McHugh's extensive knowledge of the information industry to find top executives to profitably manage your publications program. Save on recruiting costs since McHugh charges a fixed fee instead of the costly retainer percentage used by most executive search firms.

McHugh's full service for publishing executives offers these advantages:

- Save expensive staff time involved in advertising, screening, and recruiting.
- Get an expert evaluation of prospects and final candidates.
- Save money by paying a flat fee vs. typical 33 1/3% of first year salary charged by executive search firms.

Call McHugh now at **414-351-3056** or e-mail at **jack@johnbmchugh.com**. Visit his Web site **www.johnbmchugh.com**

### ABOUT JOHN B. MCHUGH, PUBLISHING CONSULTANT

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 Media 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.

McHugh and Liz Novak, of IAPD, are co-authoring a series of papers on Networking Techniques. Jack McHugh is also the manager of the LinkedIn™ group, Association and Nonprofit Publishing.

#### Contact

John B. "Jack" McHugh, 414-351-3056

Email

jack@johnbmchugh.com

Website

<http://www.johnbmchugh.com>

LinkedIn Page

<https://goo.gl/pV7dlx>

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**John B. McHugh, Publishing Consultant**  
PO Box 170665 • Milwaukee, WI 53217-8056  
414-351-3056 • jack@johnbmchugh.com • www.johnbmchugh.com