Is it Parachute Time?
When to Rescue Yourself from A No-Win Search
By Jon Bartos

"It has been my observation that most people get ahead during the time that others waste."
--Henry Ford

In recruiting, time should be a closely guarded ally, one that is treated respectfully and with care. Because wasting time is more than a productivity issue: it strikes at the very core of what we do. It can put a career in free fall.

We have all found ourselves engaged in uphill battles, attached to a bad job order. We can't or won't admit defeat, end the search, and move on to another assignment. This is not simply about our paychecks, because to undervalue this most precious commodity can cost much more than money. It can mean an end to a promising recruiter's career.

Recently my office concluded a search that took nine months. Looking back, the moment we heard the numerous, exacting search requirements we should have declined. Because things only got worse from there. The interview process was arduous and frustrating. The pay was sub-par. And gradually, as our best efforts yielded no viable candidates, we realized we were engaged in a losing battle. There were less than a handful of qualified candidates in the entire Northeastern United States.

Since this was a retained search, we were committed to doing whatever it took to make it happen– no matter what. Life or death (and at times it seemed the latter was more likely.)

By the end of the search – we did finally place an individual – the casualties were heavy. Two of my recruiters were so frustrated with the search that they resigned. They had earned no money and we had burned 1,000 hours—that's 125 eight-hour workdays—on one search. For what? A $25,000 fee. I vowed that this was never going to happen under my watch again. As a manager, I let my people down. I didn't parachute in to save them. The opportunity costs make me cringe just thinking about it. Taking bad search assignments and working too long on bad searches costs our industry hundreds of millions of dollars annually. But as an account executive, manager or owner, how do we determine the parachute time or when to stop working on a bad search?

I heard the term *parachute time* from Lil Rushing Roy, a longtime MRI Network Vice President who has helped some of the largest recruiting firms in the business reach their potential. Throughout modern history, paratroopers have parachuted in to assist ground forces struggling in battle. They are truly lifesavers. In recruiting, it is up to those in positions of authority to parachute in to rescue other recruiters. As Rushing Roy put it, parachute time is the time it takes a manager to realize a recruiter is working on a bad search, and the time it then takes for the manager to parachute in to save a recruiter from the search itself. Parachute time is ideally within 2-3 weeks – but realistically it is way to often *months.*

Signs it may be parachute time:

- Candidates you submit are already in process
- Candidate acquisition process taking abnormally long
- An internal candidate surfaces and is suddenly in process
- You discover other recruiters are engaged in the identical search
- You aren't working with the hiring manager directly but HR
- The interview process is too lengthy
- Very specific, tough, almost impossible requirements to fill
- Inflexible hiring managers
- Client is slow to return calls
- The job specifications repeatedly change
- The client experiences repeated fall offs and turndowns
- The client rejects candidates for less than sound reasons
- A change in hiring manager or hiring process
- Merger or acquisition taking place

These are some potential indicators that it could be time to make a very tough call. Any one of them may mean you need to quickly stop working on the search and start working on a higher priority position. Remember: value your time over everything else!

As difficult as it is to cut ties with a client, the costs of clinging to one can be higher. I lost two promising recruiters to my own nine-month IT search. However, I have implemented safeguards to substantially minimize the chances of anything like that happening again.

Have the client sign off on the search profile or search requirements
A good first step in any search is to get job specs in writing. A better step is to put down on paper exactly what the customer is looking for including background, skill sets, track record of success, and work history. Have the client sign this detailed search profile to verify both parties understand and agree what you are looking for. This helps you prevent the scope or specification creep that cripples so many searches. If something changes after the client has signed-off on a search profile, it really is a new search and should be treated that way. That means asking for more upfront money because the specs have changed and many times your work has to start all over again.

Test Poejo the job order
I like to evaluate the validity of a job order or search assignment right away. Once the customer has given you the job order or search assignment, try something like this: "You know, I think I may have the perfect candidate for you right now. I worked with an individual about a month ago that fits this profile almost perfectly. I don't know if he/she

is available but could call and find out quickly. Do you have time to interview this candidate on Thursday or Friday?"

I know of no better way to save time and effort than this simple statement. It quickly determines whether or not the client is truly motivated to hire. It establishes the real interest level and priority placed on the search. What you want to hear after that question is anything that sounds like he wants to expedite getting that candidate in for an interview. Like, "Absolutely! Let me see, let's book a time right now." What you don't want to hear is any type of delays, excuses or hoops they want you to jump through first.

Set interview dates up front
Getting interview dates on the calendar when you take the job order tells you the hiring manager is interested in moving this process along. She is putting some real skin in the game, and that increases your odds of success.

Agree upon expectations at the onset of the search
Don't allow confusion or misunderstanding to steal your precious time. Always set expectations up front. Agree upon communication methods, timeframes for returning calls, interview timelines, hiring processes and the roles you each must play for a successful outcome.

Be real
Ask yourself this all-important question: based on everything I know, can I successfully complete this search in the next two weeks? This is the average amount of time a typical recruiter should spend on a given search. If you can't envision yourself, for whatever reason, getting the job done in a reasonable timeframe, you may need to consider refusing the search. If you are in the midst of a lengthy search, reassess the situation. Are client constraints causing the delay? If so, perhaps a call to the client for clarification is needed.

Do a timeline of recruiting (working backwards) Use it as a commitment
It's always good to talk to the client about a timeline of recruiting. Here is what that sounds like, "You would like the candidate on board by May 15? Let's see if that follows our recruiting timeline. From May 15, the candidate will have to give two-weeks notice, which works back to May 2. We need to allow a couple days for the offer, which brings us to the end of April. The interview process we agreed upon will take two weeks, which brings us to April 12. We need at least two weeks to do a comprehensive search, which brings us to April 1. In order for us to have a candidate start by May 15th we would have had to start on the search a few weeks ago. But we may be able to knock off a couple weeks if we work together on it. Can we agree to go forward in trying to speed up this process on both ends

Set a time in the future for a search assignment evaluation
Every office should set up a time in the future to do an evaluation on a new search assignment with a new company. This could be an arbitrary time – say – three weeks in the future. After that initial search period a formal evaluation gives you a chance to look at the search to see if it makes sense for you to continue. This evaluation should be done

with the individual(s) working on the assignment as well as someone who is not in the heat of battle with the search. Often times it takes an outsider for you to realize you are wasting time on a bad search. During that evaluation the topics should include expectations being met, changes in search, time to close, customer communications, sense of urgency and realistic forecasted close date. The bottom line question is "*Based on what I know today, does it make sense to continue?*".

Discuss any issues with a client – to agree on changes

If you begin to have conflict or issues with a client, call them on it. Immediately pick up the phone and address it. New clients are notorious for not telling you any less-than-positive information about a search – just to get you to work on it. They may "forget" to let you know there are other recruiters working on the same search. They may leave out that the offered compensation is 25% below market value. Or you may not learn until too late that the position has remained unfilled for a year and a half.

If there are issues with compensation, hiring time line, unrealistic requirements, etc. talk to the client about rectifying the issues. The result is a win-win recruiting situation. When you help a client create a successful hiring culture, you increase client loyalty and your own business. If a client disregards your advice or refuses to budge on an issue, you may need to start looking around for your parachute.

Recruiting can be like a battlefield where integrity is prized, valor rewarded and time is an ally to be guarded. The best way to win in our industry is to value your time by spending it only on search assignments that will yield real placements and put dollars in your wallet.

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