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Make the most of your hire powers

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Words **Adam Bernstein**

Buy **RIGHT** *or* *buy* **TWICE**

Bringing in a new leader is one of the most important decision-making processes a company is likely to make and the costs of getting it wrong are high

New technologies may have found their way into the world of print, but ultimately, it's people that make any business in the sector work. And this applies especially to leadership roles where 'getting it right' can make all the difference between success and failure.

Of course, as we've seen, not every large organisation hires correctly and indeed, some have hired without adequately checking on claimed skills, qualifications and experience.

Nick Adderley is a perfect example. The former Chief Constable of Northamptonshire Police from 2018 to 2024, he was dismissed for gross misconduct after embellishing his military service in the Royal Navy and fabricating the receipt of Northern Ireland and Falklands medals.

So, how can print firms best recruit for a CEO role? How do they establish the truth behind applicants? And what can third party consultants do for them?

Defining the role

George Thompson, joint managing director at Harrison Scott Associates, a recruiter for the print sector, reckons that the task begins by firms defining what it is they are looking for in an individual, a process that varies depending on what the firm does. Acknowledging that packaging firms tend to be larger organisations, he thinks that the board will be involved in recruiting a CEO. But in print, however, they're smaller so "most of the time it will be the owner or owners of the business who will oversee the process".

Regardless, he says that the key step is the construction of a detailed description of the role. As Thompson explains: "It is important to outline organisational goals, both short and long term, and then then lay out the pathways which will help achieve them." He adds that "some organisational goals are more sales oriented; others focus on the operational side of things". Understanding this will, he says, determine the profile of candidate required and the process thereafter.

Michaela Stachini, director of Mercury Search & Selection, a print and packaging recruitment specialist, takes a similar line but specifically draws a distinction between the job description and person description noting that "a CEO is the pinnacle leadership position in an organisation, reporting only to the board and with very much a strategic function rather than anything operational". In contrast, in a smaller organisation, she says that the managing director will be both strategic and operational. This is why she says that "the first steps are very much about creating a person specification which is distinct from a job description and is rooted in purpose".

It's essential, from her standpoint, that "the board agrees on the broad purpose of the company, the threats and opportunities it faces and an idea of where they'd like to go or be in the future". By looking at the gaps and changes necessary the board, she reckons, "can pull together an idea of the kind of person they need, the person values, approach skills and experience that person is likely to have".

And this is the point at which she would advise companies engage a professional recruitment consultant.

DIY or professional recruiter?

But do print sector firms need to use a professional recruiter or can they do the job themselves?

Not unsurprisingly, Thompson knows of recruitment companies that have a vested interest in saying that firms should use their services to achieve the best successful results. However, over the years he says that he has advised many smaller firms to try placing an ad first or using their own resources to fill certain roles.

Using the DIY analogy, he says: "If the approach to other vacancies is like building a shed, then recruiting a CEO is like building a house. You could try it yourself, however, there is a chance the house might fall down." In other words, DIY could work for some positions, but he wouldn't recommend it for senior roles.

But as to how should firms choose a recruiter, Thompson says that it is important to look on the vacancies section of that recruitment company's website



to see if they are already handling senior appointments – and “make sure it is the MD or a director of the firm who will play a key role in assignment. Top-level candidates such as CEOs much prefer to deal with people at a high level, and they can better relate to such seniority, so this allocation will facilitate a more harmonious relationship”. It follows that firms need to also look for highly credible testimonials, both on the company’s website and the consultant’s LinkedIn profile.

And where a specialist recruiter is used to complete the search, then Thompson is of the view that they should visit the company’s offices, tour the factory, meet key managers and directors “to get a feel for their culture and how they currently operate”.

Stachini also knows that choosing the right recruiter can be challenging but suggests that firms don’t go it alone and instead hire a professional recruitment consultant – “a partner in the process not a subordinate; a consultant with the knowledge skill and experience to be able to challenge the board and the brief”.

For her, one of the key pitfalls of going DIY is that it might lead to a blinkered approach: “People from within will, not exclusively but largely, be indoctrinated in the existing mindsets, perspectives and culture. If the board decide that the purpose of the new CEO is to continue as before, this may work. It’s an echo chamber and you will get more of what you already have.”

She feels that “a top-flight consultant will have sufficient knowledge and credibility to challenge the preconceived ideas of the board, to make suggestions and highlight outside the box opportunities”.

Of course, like Thompson, Stachini considers industry knowledge crucial – “the real value of extensive industry experience is in understanding how skills will be

transferable for candidates not in direct like-for-like roles and, sometimes more importantly, that industry knowledge will extend to understanding the culture within different organisations”.

It’s relevant to say at this point that experience is, in Stachini’s view, two-way – that it applies to recruiter as much as it does to the candidate. She notes that “a consultant who has been operating at a high level for a significant period will have observed, monitored and

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George Thompson Harrison Scott

tracked the careers of many of the current and potential C-suite level candidates for relatively junior or mid-level positions through to their current roles”.

And that helps them find the right candidates, quickly.

As to getting an individual to consider joining, Thompson makes an interesting observation: “If a candidate has to be in any way shape or form persuaded to join an organisation, the appointment will not be as successful as might have been hoped.” He highlights a ‘horror story’ to illustrate what he means.

“Most will remember at one time Polestar were one of the largest print groups in the UK. They had a hybrid approach to recruitment in that some key appointments were handle internally and others between us and another recruitment firm. One senior appointment, where they sourced the candidate directly, only lasted six months. The →



company put the failure down to the individual having no knowledge of the print sector and therefore lacked credibility with his management team.”

In terms of what a recruiter can do, beyond the initial search, Stachini says that “a professional recruiter will add value to the process by giving both parties an insight into the other’s, their values, objectives and motivations. This avoids any mis-match of expectations and makes the process a lot more productive”. They also help with organising meetings between candidate and client, psychometric testing to provide some objective insight into the candidates. And then, when agreement on a successful candidate is reached, the recruitment consultant can formulate an offer which is tailored to the individual.

And from Thompson’s perspective, recruiters have market intelligence. In particular, he says that firms such as his are able to “offer guidance on the market rate when it comes rewards packages and additional benefits”. Beyond that he adds that market intelligence can help print companies looking to expand their service offering by entering into another sector – such as large-format or packaging – a view on the move’s viability.

Watch for recruitment mantraps

Referring back to the Nick Adderley example, it’s fair to ask how can print firms ensure that the person they hire is who they say they are?

Here Thompson says that “it is of the upmost importance to be thorough in the establishment of the candidate’s abilities and track record”. He continues: “The printing industry is incestuous, so it is difficult for a lie to slip through the net, especially at CEO level.” To make the process more foolproof from his perspective, he recommends hiring a recruiter that uses a system which is objective rather than subjective so as “to glean information on a candidate’s background, character and track record before an approach is even made”.

“The talent pool for a CEO role will have been in high-level roles for a number of years and so will have been effectively in the public eye”

Michaela Stachini Mercury Search & Selection

Fortunately, Stachini considers Adderley-like situations to be rare. She too sees the right candidates having a good profile. As she says, “the talent pool for a CEO role will have been in high-level roles for a number of years and so will have been effectively in the public eye”. Even so, she recommends that organisations use the interview process to probe a candidate’s track record and look for verifiable evidence of performance. Candidates should be able to back up their claims. Even so, an employer must take up references – by picking up the phone and having a conversation.

Another thing that Stachini highlights is the risk that delays can bring to the process. On this she says that “delays at any stage of the process are potential killers. Having candidates drop out because they lose interest, don’t think you’re serious about them, don’t want them enough or feel you’ve mis-represented the opportunity by changing the parameters are costly and incur costs in wasted time, resource and employer reputation”.

Costs

Naturally, hiring a CEO is going to take longer than trying to find, say, a machine minder. Firms must be aware that

the process isn’t instant. As Thompson comments, “from the moment of instruction to presentation of shortlist, the process can take two months if the client wants candidates only from print and up to four months if they also want to include candidates from other industries”.

And finding the right CEO isn’t going to be inexpensive either. As to what it might cost, Thompson’s experience tells him that for the level of service required to appoint a CEO, recruitment firms are likely to charge a fee ranging from 25% to 35% of the candidate’s annual salary.

Stachini refines this a little, explaining that “this means paying a third at the outset, third at interview and the balance on start date”. This formula, she notes, not only spreads the cost, but also gains a consultant’s exclusive focus – that “they’re not fitting you in around other work”.

Indeed, she advises firms to not put a vacancy out to multiple recruiters at the same time as it’s counterproductive – “each one will know they are in a race to put candidates in front of the client and even then their chances of placing and being paid are reduced – at best it leads to quick rather than thorough search and vetting, but it’s more likely to lead to a half-hearted approach fitted in around ‘paying’ work”.

It should be said that Thompson considers that “salary doesn’t be as high as what you perhaps may think, and you shouldn’t need to pay over the odds. If you get a candidate motivated to join your organisation, they won’t be too demanding. This will of course keep costs of the one-off recruitment fee down, as well as annual outgoings”.

That said, for Stachini, “while an offer package will have a number of elements, cash is king”.

At a CEO level the benefits will be taken for granted – pension, healthcare, car or car allowance, insurance and so on. She says, however, that “the structure of the cash element can be nuanced, and most CEO’s have a large element of the package as performance-related bonuses”. She adds, though, that performance-related incentives must be realistic and must be achievable, especially if they’re long-term, between two and five years.

Thompson emphasises the point by noting that his firm has just filled a CEO vacancy with “a candidate who could have secured a higher salary with a larger organisation, but who, instead, chose to join our client’s team, a smaller organisation but with a culture more in line with what he was looking for”. Money isn’t everything.

Ultimately

At the end of the day, there is more than one way to recruit a new CEO. However, every method has similar attributes time, cost, and the widest possible search for the best candidates – candidates whose claims are tested and verified.

As the phrase goes, ‘buy right or buy twice’. Finding a CEO doesn’t deviate from this maxim. **P**