

# Recruiting Top Talent: Another Way to Contribute

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## INTRODUCTION

**H**ave you ever encouraged someone to go into nursing by emphasizing all the options the profession has to offer? If so, you probably mentioned the wide range of clinical specialties, the variety of work settings, and the array of work schedules. You might have also mentioned teaching nursing or doing nursing research, but chances are you didn't mention being a nursing executive search consultant. When I entered the world of healthcare nearly four decades ago, I didn't give it a thought, but then again, I doubt many people in healthcare had even heard of it at that time.

According to The Amrop Hever Group<sup>1</sup>, "Executive Search emerged about 60 years ago as a new way to proactively recruit senior managers and executives. The majority of its early practitioners came from management consulting or industry. Their specific business knowledge and client management experience allowed these consultants to understand and relate to the strategic goals of their clients. Quite often clients would hire these management consultants in an executive capacity to implement newly de-

veloped strategies or ask them to recommend appropriate senior executives to do so. Eventually, recommending appropriate executives became the exclusive focus of a small number of consultants who, by adding structured research to their own networking, became the pioneers of Executive Search."

I didn't consider executive search until 4 years ago when I acquired Kirby Bates Associates, an executive search firm operating exclusively within the nursing domain. As a nursing leader who came up through the nursing management ranks and served as a Chief Nursing Officer, Chief Operating Officer, and Healthcare Consultant on both US coasts and in several countries abroad, there have been many twists and turns in my career. Throughout the journey, however, I have always sought ways to support and promote my colleagues, the nursing profession, and quality patient care—and my current work is no exception. The objective of this paper is to share how I believe my current work serves both nursing clients and candidates and contributes to the broader nursing profession and patient care.



## SERVING THE CLIENT

Most of my work is with healthcare organizations, including academic medical centers, healthcare systems, teaching hospitals, and large and small community hospitals seeking a chief nursing officer or nursing director. Other clients include universities and schools of nursing seeking academic leaders or program directors. The hiring manager is typically a CEO, CNO, or Dean.

*The Process.* As a retainer search firm, we are engaged on an exclusive basis to fill a specific position, and we are paid from the beginning of the search. We serve as management consultants, evaluating the work environment and the organizational needs and politics. We assist the client to delineate clearly the requirements of the role, the qualifications, and the personal characteristics of the ideal candidate. This is a very important step for both the client and potential candidates. The outcome is a Position Profile that is used to promote the position to potential candidates, but equally important, it makes clear to potential candidates what the organization wants and needs.

Once the Position Profile is agreed upon, we conduct extensive research using our own database and professional networks, as well as multiple other sources to identify both passive and active candidates. Often the best candidate is already in a position and needs to be encouraged to consider the opportunity. As Sherman, Stone, and Thornton<sup>2</sup> point out in their April 2006 paper titled, "Why Take the Call? Working with Executive Search Firms," if you get a call from a search consultant and you respond by saying you are happy with your current position and then hang up—reconsider. You may be eliminating a powerful networking opportunity or leaving a negative impression about your interpersonal skills that may affect you in the future.

Throughout the process of sourcing candidates, the search consultant updates the client by regularly discussing potential candidates. Once the top candidates are identified, the search consultant submits a presentation on each candidate, including a resume, candidate profile, and references. The search consultant may also assist the client in establishing the interview format and provide guidelines for behavioral-based interviewing. Once the ideal candidate is selected, the search consultant generally makes the job offer and assists in negotiating the compensation package. The search consultant also follows the candidate for the first year, checking in with him and his new supervisor to be sure the transition is going well.

*Elements of Success.* Effective collaboration between the search consultant and the client is critical to completing a search efficiently and effectively. It is also important that the client put the right level of emphasis on the

search and that the hiring manager be directly involved. Selecting a senior leader is time consuming, but making the wrong decision is even more time consuming and costly. Practically every leader says making the right hiring decision is her most important responsibility, but too often, other things get in the way. In an attempt to get the client to give the right level of attention and set realistic expectations, we emphasize the following six points.

1. **Realistic Expectations.** It is increasingly difficult to find top leadership talent in all areas of healthcare.

Nursing is certainly no exception—it is the rule. Executive search dramatically increases the chance of finding the right leader—but the candidate pool is finite. As the requirements for the position go up, the number of potential candidates goes down—so it is imperative to be clear on the most important requirements for success. It is also important to understand that more candidates are not necessarily better. A smaller number of candidates

can mean the search consultant has a good understanding of the requirements and it ultimately costs the organization less in interviewing costs.

2. **Clear Position Specifications.** Pulling out an old job description to recruit a senior leader will not suffice. To attract the right caliber of candidate, professional recruitment documents that include specific first year objectives, key functions, relevant qualifications and characteristics, and information about the organization are essential. If these documents fall short, so will the candidate pool.

3. **Thoughtful Interviewing.** It is important to allow sufficient time to get to know the candidate during the interviewing process and vice versa. Interview questions should be prepared in advance and be behaviorally based to ensure fairness and a thorough evaluation of each candidate.

4. **Effective Selling.** Clients who understand the importance of selling their organization and job opportunity are far more likely to attract the best possible candidate. Candidates are just as interested in making the right decision as the client; they want as much information as possible, they want to feel welcomed when they interview, and they want to know they will be properly supported if they accept the position. An organization that goes the extra mile to arrange a nice hotel, a driver, a real estate agent to show the candidate the area, and also takes the candidate and spouse to dinner is far more likely to attract top talent.

5. **Timely Decision Making.** Many top quality candidates get frustrated with haphazard or lengthy recruiting processes—and for good reason. Long delays between interviews and decision making can make candidates wary. They assume there is little interest in them or that the organization is too disorganized to warrant going further. Setting up a recruitment timetable, and sticking to it, can help to avoid some of these problems.

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6. **Competitive Compensation and Benefits.** In this competitive marketplace, it is essential to know what the competition is offering in terms of compensation and benefits. Clients who want the best possible candidate must also be prepared to make the best possible offer. Compensation must also be consistent with the requirements of the position, taking into consideration the level of experience, education, and other key qualifications.

## **CASE STUDIES – THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY**

The following are three examples of search engagements. The first example (The Good) is a search that was completed quickly and successfully. The second and third examples (The Bad and The Ugly) illustrate failed search engagements. They are the types of situations that can be avoided if the client is appropriately engaged in the process and there is a strong working relationship between the client and the search consultant.

### **Study #1 – The Good**

I was asked to conduct a national search for a Chief Nursing Officer for a community teaching hospital in the northeast. This position had been open for well over a year due to a prior failed search by another search firm. I had a prior relationship with the Chief Administrative Officer to whom this position reported, and I was able to determine quickly the requirements of the role.

Within 2 weeks of beginning this search, the site visit was conducted and the Position Profile was approved. There was substantial interest in this position, and multiple candidates were screened. Five weeks following the approval of the Position Profile, three top candidates were discussed with the client. The client conducted telephone screenings with all three candidates within 10 days and selected two candidates for internal interviews. This was being done in July and August, which led to some scheduling delays due to vacations, but both candidates completed the first round of internal interviews within 3 weeks of making the decision to go forward. The top candidate was then identified and returned for a second round of interviews within 2 weeks, despite being on the other side of the country.

This search was completed with an offer accepted approximately 14 weeks following the start of the search. Both the client and the candidate were very happy with the outcome, as well as the process. The keys to success in this case were a strong working relationship between the client and the consultant, a strong relationship between the candidate and the consultant, and a motivated client. The client was responsive, was effective in selling the opportunity, and was able to make decisions quickly.

### **Study #2 – The Bad**

I was asked to conduct a national search for a Chief Nursing Officer for a mid-Atlantic community hospital. At my first meeting with the client, I covered all the ele-

ments of success noted above and shared what I considered the minimum base salary for this position. The CEO wanted the base salary to be \$10,000 lower than recommended, but still awarded me the contract understanding the salary might need to go higher.

Two months later, six candidates were presented and discussed with the client, including their salary requirements. A decision was made to bring four candidates to an in-house screening. The in-house screening was challenging. The organization was going through a variety of changes, and the CEO had to cancel two interviews at the last minute. Candidates were not taken to dinner, and they were asked to stay in less than adequate hotel accommodations. Despite all of the challenges, one of the candidates quickly moved to the top of the list and arrangements were made to have her return for the second round of interviews. This candidate was offered the position and was prepared to accept the offer provided her salary requirements were met. She was seeking a modest increase over her current salary due to the difference in cost of living, and the proposed salary matched that recommended at the beginning of the search and that which was quoted when a decision was made to move forward with this candidate.

Everyone considered the selected candidate an ideal fit. She exceeded expectations—an experienced CNO with a doctorate, outstanding references, and just the right personality to make the changes needed. The candidate wanted the position and all the ingredients for success were there, except one. The CEO and key leaders still wanted to offer a salary \$10,000 below the candidate's requirement. Ultimately, the candidate accepted another position. The candidate made it clear that salary was a major issue, but her final decision was also based on difficulties during the interview process, and inadequate selling by administration.

This client engaged another search firm and finally filled the CNO position approximately 1 year later with a candidate who had no CNO experience. The total expense far exceeded the \$10,000 difference in salary requested by the previous candidate.

### **Situation #3 – The Ugly**

Our firm was engaged to conduct a search for a CNO at a Midwest community teaching hospital. This CNO position reported to a Chief Operating Officer, who was also a nurse. The search continued for 14 months with numerous delays of 2 weeks or more due to the COO being away or unavailable. Over the course of the search, over 26 candidates were discussed with the client, and nine candidates went forward for internal interviews.

Although the CNO position reported to the COO, the CEO was very involved in the final decision making. The COO liked several candidates, but the CEO insisted on calling multiple people to get his own references on each of them. One candidate in particular was given every

indication by the COO that she was a top candidate, but was then devastated to learn that someone in her past (never to be named) gave a negative reference and that she would not be going forward. When the ninth candidate was rejected by the client, we reached a mutual agreement with the client to discontinue the search. Shortly thereafter, the COO resigned her position and the CNO search continued through another firm.

## **SERVING THE CANDIDATE**

To be successful in a nursing executive search, serving both the client and the candidate is critical. Many candidates serve as a powerful network for identifying the best person for a particular position. Learning as much as possible about the candidate is also essential. Identifying a candidate with the right personality fit is as important as finding one with the right experience and qualifications. We have all seen CNOs who have excelled under one CEO, but who have failed under a new one. The CNO didn't change; the personalities and the fit are what changed.

As pointed out above, a nurse executive might be foregoing a future opportunity if she hangs up on a search consultant. The opposite is also true. It may not be possible to spend time with every potential candidate, but we sure try. A candidate might not be the right fit for a current job opening, but she may be perfect for the next one. As Valentine<sup>3</sup> shared in her poignant paper, "Taking the Road Less Traveled: Lessons Learned in a Mid-Career Employment Transition," *"Surveying the marketplace takes time and effort... Taking a broad brush approach took even more effort, but I learned about the marketplace from many angles, learned a lot from the sharp recruiters, and stayed away from those who simply broker people and fill job slots."*

Our candidates are our colleagues and our future clients. We feel a collegial obligation to support our candidates in finding the best fit for them. It isn't easy telling a long-time colleague or friend that they are not the right match for a position, but it is far better than having them end up in a position that doesn't meet her needs or the needs of the organization.

## **SERVING THE PROFESSION AND THE PATIENT**

Although search consultants fall outside the norm for a nursing leader, we are no less committed to furthering the profession and supporting our professional organizations. It is important that we remain abreast of all the new trends within healthcare in general and contemporary nursing practice in particular. Our consultation expertise must include effective and emerging models for organizational structure in patient care services and major clinical specialties, knowledge of critical competencies for successful clinical leaders, trends in market demand and talent supply, competitive incentives and compensation packages, and on-boarding support.

We also remain committed to quality patient care, and we believe we have a unique opportunity in that regard. When I started as a staff nurse many years ago, I made a difference in the lives of those patients I cared for. When I became a nursing director, I made a difference for a larger patient population, and when I became a CNO, I influenced the care of even more patients. As an executive search consultant, I can make an even bigger difference. We influence multiple healthcare organizations and nursing leadership teams by the nurse leaders we help put in place. In turn, we can make a difference in the lives of a large number of patients and nurses. It isn't traditional, but it is another way to contribute.

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