

McKinsey Career Network

Engaging with Executive Search Firms and Recruiters

A Pragmatic Approach



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When engaging with an executive search firm or a recruiter, it is crucial to recognize that their primary allegiance lies with the organization that has enlisted their services to identify a suitable candidate for a specific role.

Typically, focusing on VP+ and Board roles, the job specifications are meticulously outlined in collaboration with the client, and unless an individual perfectly aligns with specified criterion, they may not receive consideration from the search firm or recruiter.

In this context, clients are the focus for executive search consultants while candidates become a focus only if they are a plausible answer to a search opening. Additionally, it is important to bear in mind that only a small fraction of available positions are filled through this method. As such, we recommend that while it’s important to get on the radar with the executive search firms, you can think of it as a “check the box” move to get into their databases so that you show up in relevant searches going forward (i.e., allocate most of your time leveraging your internal and external networks).

Below are a few boutique firms along with the 5 major global firms (also known as the SHREK firms). Each firm provides a directory of consultants that you can sort through by industry, function and geography that can be helpful to identify consultants to reach out to directly. Alternatively, each firm also allows jobseekers to submit their resumes online.

Search Firm with Focus on Former Consultants



Click the logo to open consultant directory



“SHREK” FIRMS (large global firms)



Additional Firms to Consider*



* Additional firms can be found on these lists: [Top 50](#), [PE Recruiting Power 100](#), [Global 40](#), [PE London Power 50](#), and [Top 50 EMEA](#)

Lastly, below are a few tips on how to strengthen your approach to engaging with search firms and recruiters:

Leverage Past Interactions: If a search firm has previously reached out to you, that may be a great starting point to initiate contact with that consultant as they possess some familiarity with your profile. Maintaining records of past communications, including the firm’s name, the individual who contacted you, and the position discussed, can be advantageous now and throughout your career. You may initiate a conversation by referencing a prior encounter and then provide an update on your current situation.

Inquire About Visibility: Upon having contacted a consultant, after narrating your career trajectory and specifying your current objectives, inquire about the most effective way to enhance your visibility within the firm’s database. Ask the consultant how they prefer to receive your resume, as the optimal method can vary depending on the circumstances.

Express Willingness to Assist: Demonstrate your willingness to be a resource to the firm by saying something along the lines of, “If you come across opportunities where I may not be the perfect fit, please do not hesitate to reach out. I might have suggestions for candidates who are better suited to the role.” This step can be pivotal, as it often leads to your information being tagged as a “Friend of the Firm,” granting you preferential consideration in future database searches.

Use Your Network to Identify Suitable Search Firms: In cases where you haven’t previously interacted with search firms, tap into your professional network to identify potential partners. The most robust connections often emerge through individuals who have engaged these firms for talent searches within their own companies. Reach out to your contacts who have had such experiences and inquire about their recommendations.

Cultivate Your Professional Brand: In today’s digital age, your online presence matters significantly. Ensure that your LinkedIn profile and other professional social media accounts are not only up-to-date but also reflective of your expertise and aspirations. Share industry insights, participate in relevant discussions, and connect with professionals in your field. When search firms or recruiters research potential candidates, a well-crafted online presence can make a lasting impression.*



