



C-Suite Executive Search Strategies

Avoid common pitfalls with these tips.

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Hiring for the C-suite is an investment that requires diligence and commitment on the part of the organization and the selected executive search partner. Getting it right should always be at the forefront because it ensures not only performance aligned to goals of both the position and the organization but also the fit culturally and within the community.

Lack of consensus on the process and candidate requirements can cause costly delays and missed opportunities. Consider the following strategies to support a successful search.

Align with the right executive search partner.

Hiring a CEO or any member of the C-suite begins with the selection of a partner to represent the organization in the marketplace and provide objective insights. This consultant should be seasoned and both knowledgeable about the industry and well-connected in it. Skilled consultants have a proven track record of success, know the candidate pool and understand the market dynamics. Given that strong C-suite candidates are often not actively seeking new opportunities, a good search partner fosters strong relationships and trust for candidates to commit to exploring a new opportunity.

Strike a balance between launching an executive search too soon and waiting until the last minute.

Though timelines can vary, the typical CEO search is three to six months. Once candidates enter the selection process, delays can create scenarios such as candidate search fatigue and their potential withdrawals for employment consideration. Managing the cadence of the search is critical for a seamless process.

Build consensus on search process and candidate requirements.

The search committee should mesh candidate requirements with the organization's status, purpose, vision and plans for turnaround, transformation, merger or expansion in the years ahead. The organization's strategic plan should be front and center as its North Star for aligning the right leader to ensure success. The due diligence phase is foundational to the process to gain consensus on the ideal candidate profile.

Determine the desired candidate profile by addressing these questions:

- How would you describe the ideal candidate's background, skill set, experience and credentials?
- What skills are needed to excel in this position, from consensus building and technical expertise to strategy development and dealmaking?
- How would you describe the ideal candidate's leadership profile in terms of qualities such as agility, resilience or empathy?
- How should the candidate complement the organization's culture?
- How is the organization constrained by financial performance, layoffs, government scrutiny or a former executive's mysterious departure?
- How do the marketplace and media view the organization and its board and leadership team?
- What are the business and performance expectations for the newly hired executive's first year? How will you measure success?
- What attitudes, beliefs and values motivate and inspire each candidate to accelerate performance and growth?

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- How do short-listed candidates compare on skills, experience, leadership and cultural fit?

Answering these questions will form a profile of success that organizations can easily align with each candidate's background, experience and credentials.

Create the optimum search committee by keeping the following steps in mind:

- Include board members and key stakeholders (typically five to seven members).
- Exclude direct reports from participating in the search for an executive who could become a future boss.
- Strive for search committee diversity, expertise and ability to objectively evaluate candidates.
- Clarify the search committee's charge to present a single vetted candidate—or a short list of two to three candidates—who is eventually forwarded to the full board for final approval.
- Appoint a chair of the committee who is diplomatic and equipped to guide, counsel and prevent committee discord and disruption.
- Insist that outside consultants provide frequent updates on the search process, as well as market feedback pertaining to candidate development, perception and interest.
- Connect with internal candidates early in the process to explain the timeline, process and expectations.

Commit to a search process with dates, accountabilities and guidelines on confidentiality.

Be sure each search activity is scheduled, including stakeholder meetings, candidate presentations, and first- and second-round interviews, in advance. Aligning the calendar upfront will minimize delays in the process.

Search committee members need to clearly understand their role, the time commitment involved and the importance of confidentiality throughout the process. For instance, members who perform “off-the-cuff” or unauthorized reference checks could

jeopardize a candidate's current position and compromise the search process. Candidates want to make sure they are protected, and the use of nondisclosure agreements may even be necessary to ensure accountabilities for all those involved.

Evaluate candidates carefully. A long list of candidates will be presented for consideration, from which the search committee will select the top five to seven for interviews. Video interviewing allows for flexibility and the ability to accommodate candidates and committee members in disparate locations. Use a candidate's resume to pinpoint previous roles, responsibilities and accomplishments, but rely on predetermined questions to discern a candidate's motivation, purpose, career aspirations, cultural fit and leadership attributes.

Background checks and in-depth referencing are a must. The search partner should complete these using specific questions derived from the leadership assessment and the competencies outlined in the candidate success profile. In addition, a review of social media activity should be done by the search partner in advance of candidate interviews. Final on-site visits should convey the organization's commitment to hiring the right candidate. Spending time in formal and informal settings allows for calibration of cultural fit and builds a coalition of support for the selected candidate.

Ensure the success of the newly hired executive. After on-site interviews, deliberation, selection and negotiation, it is important to create an executive-level communication and onboarding plan that zeroes in on expectations for the first 90 to 180 days of the executive's tenure.

Hiring for the C-suite is a journey, not a destination. Successful performance hinges on avoiding the executive search pitfalls that can create confusion, distrust and loss of economic opportunities. Some say executive search is both an art and a science; in fact, it is a combination of wisdom, experience and commitment that identifies and aligns talent for future success.

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