

Executive Search in the Digital Era: The Impact and Importance of Building Client Relationships

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There is no denying the fact that we live in a fast-paced world where businesses have been forced to adapt and evolve to ensure their sustainability. A key factor of this change has been the accelerated pace of digitisation brought about through new technologies. As the digital era ushers in faster, more convenient and initially cheaper solutions, AltoPartners explores the role of Executive Search and Leadership Consulting during these times and the impact and importance of maintaining interpersonal client relationships, with unique insights into specific market factors from across our global markets.

Digital Era Executive Search : A time for evolution

The digital era should be viewed as an enabler to the retained executive search industry rather than a threat since there is great value to be born out of the insights and reach of technology. The role of the search consultant is becoming even more important today as clients are often faced with information overload and the option of engaging a clear minded, intelligent consultant who can break down the approach to finding the right individual, can prove invaluable.

Retained executive search has been enhanced through the digital age through the access to information about the market, organisations and ultimately talent. The emergence of social media, digital tools and more advanced databases and tools to analyse the data are impacting the way executive search is conducted. Sami Zouehid, Lead Consultant at McArthurMurray/AltoPartners UAE, strongly believes that technology provides options to the search team in accessing an endless pool of information and acting as an additional resource in verifying information. Technology has the ability to transcend borders; provides accessibility to candidates and streamlines the ability to execute searches across different markets.

The digital era – new value-add opportunities

The potential for executive search consultants to add value in the digital era is significantly higher now than it has been in the past. Jean-Philippe Saint-Geours, Managing Partner Leaders

Trust/AltoPartners France, is optimistic about the future of executive search, where new technologies have made the executive search industry more exciting and interesting.

Twenty years ago, traditional research was a key component in building up extensive databases; now, with the advancement of technology, research has become faster and easier as researchers have instant access to professionals through tools like LinkedIn. This, according to Jean-Philippe Saint-Geours, shifted the added value of Executive Search professionals to a higher level with a better understanding of the client, culture, their needs, their organisation and their industry. Sonal Agrawal, Managing Partner Accord India/AltoPartners India, concurs stating: *“The main change that the digital era has brought on in executive search is that the search time has reduced, so now it is about evaluation and conversion. We provide the value add of evaluation of each candidate, we assess their fit and we provide advice to clients and candidates.”* Jan Bouwer, Director at Search Partners International/AltoPartners South Africa believes advanced analytics tools can be used to better map a complete picture of potential candidates by analysing trends and patterns across various databases.

Technology has disrupted how executive search professionals look for people and how candidates are assessed. In many ways, it has levelled the playing field because it is no longer just about the firm’s research capability. Now it is about the firm’s reputation, their ability to successfully close an assignment (their completion rate) and the personal relationships and networks that the clients and the firm have established. Regardless of the search tools used, the key to success is ensuring that the search is not hampered by restrictive off-limits, that you are able to find the best in breed candidate and that as a search consultant you consistently deliver high quality work which limits the risk for your client.

Sonal Agrawal advocates the case for technology in executive search but still maintains the need for the “human factor”. Technology is an enabler tool for assessment and it can assess competences. Smart consultants have been able to use technology to maximise time. Technology can support the search, it can capture data, it can be used as an outreach tool and can help you filter data. But, what is important to note, technology cannot convert the data into a viable candidate. Technology can’t get to the DNA or personality of the candidate. Only the human factor and the role consultants’ play is critical to the ultimate success and completion of the assignment.

The personal relationship : A key success factor

The ability of a retained search firm to reach and approach individuals professionally and discreetly and engage them in an intellectual debate about a career opportunity, and the trust that is built within that, will be extremely hard to replicate and replace by a digital tool.

Jan Bouwer does not think that digital tools will replace traditional executive search in South Africa, but it will become more important to embrace these tools as they will aid and enhance the performance and effectiveness of the search consultant. The same is true in India, where Sonal

Agrawal believes that disruption from technology is felt more at the lower and mid-levels of the recruitment industry; whereas the executive search industry is about in-depth assessment and consultation. India is a value conscious market, and executive search is a 15-20 year old market which means there is still learning for Indian corporates regarding the understanding and value of executive search. Reflecting on the Middle East, Sami Zouehid reveals that there has been a shift over the past five years to embrace the digital era and utilize different types of digital tools when it comes to recruiting in general.

However, a potential pitfall is that these tools, due to their wide availability and low cost nature, give some clients a false sense of belief that they know everything about everyone in the marketplace, and therefore they don't need the services of Executive Search consultants. Jean-Philippe Saint-Geours is of the opinion that in the short-term, a digital only approach is often perceived as a cheaper option, which can be run from within the organisation. But, the long-term impact of the digital only approach is a negative and expensive one due to the higher failure rate and the many associated risks. Our partners in the Middle East and France have found that there is an over-reliance by some organisations on portals such as LinkedIn to attract and approach senior talent. This produces mixed results as it is difficult for the incumbent in-house recruiter to verify the information and ultimately reach certain individuals. In France and India, executives are realising that the in-house recruiter team connected with social networks is not enough and that the outcome is that not enough qualified talent has been retained due to the gaps in the assessments of the individuals. They need the third party professional advice that Executive Search consultants can provide.

The power of the search consultant is in the relationship and trust they build up with the client. No amount of technology, software, databases or digital devices could ever replace the value that a true search consultant can bring to their client. In the Middle East, the human relationship is paramount to the success of an executive search consultant. Without the ability to gain considerable insight into the dynamics of a client and the unique environment that exists, the ability to find and attract the right executive talent is minimal. Jan Bouwer firmly agrees, stating: *"Executive Search consultants will still play a role key in identifying the client's requirements and in mapping the search process. The face-to-face interviewing of the shortlisted candidates remains a critical step in the process."*

While there is no doubt about the positive impact that the digital era has on the executive search industry, the fact of the matter is that it is the interpersonal relationships that search consultants build with their clients that lead to the greatest successes. Trust, credibility, professionalism, the in-depth understanding of the client's business and the ability to successfully complete an assignment are only achieved through the hard-work and the "face time" that executive search consultants put in to their relationships and levels of engagement with their clients.

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Note to Editors:

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