EXECUTIVE SEARCH RFP DEVELOPMENT GUIDELINES

Search Firm Options Overview

Searches for superintendents are most often conducted by:

- *The District*: This may be a function of limited funds, availability of internal expertise and time, and few if any concerns with perceived objectivity, i.e., there is a high level of trust with the community.
- *Individual Consultant*: This is typically a retired educator/superintendent and is often a low-cost flat fee. Scope is narrow re: geography, e.g. a single state.
- *Regional Search Firm*: Usually multi-state and staffed by retired educators, but fees are higher than that of the individual consultant and based on the number and scope of search activities it is engaged to provide.
- *National Search Firm*: Will have the largest staff and geographic scope. May have a larger candidate pool – which is not a plus if they don't employ a rigorous pool screening process. They charge the most by far, i.e., use the same fee structure as business search firms (see below). They demonstrate the least flexibility in fees and the search process they employ. Unbundling of services may not be an option, e.g., only doing a subset of search activities, such as sourcing candidates or gathering community input.

Fees

Large firms charge 1/3 of the first year's salary plus cash bonuses. They also charge for travel costs, specific administrative costs such as copying and telephone expenses, job posting fees (online and newspapers) and a general administrative fee that can range from 3%-20% of the first year's salary. For example, if the first year's salary is $200K with a $10K bonus potential, the base fee will be $70K. Add to that travel costs, administrative costs, a general 10% administrative fee, and charge-backs for job postings, and the fee will be well over $80K.

Smaller firms often have more flexibility in fees, which are usually lower. It takes research to determine if the capability/competence of the different size firms is comparable or not. Since many of the smaller firms charge a flat fee versus a fee contingent upon salary, there is no conflict of interest when it comes to engaging the firm to assist with compensation negotiations.

Guarantees

When you engage a retained executive search firm (large or small), you are paying for their expertise for a set period of time. There is no guarantee that you will have found and signed a candidate for the position by the end of the contracted period. The rate of successful searches (signed contracts with qualified candidates) across all sectors runs from 40% to 90%, with the average being around 60%. While this may sound harsh, there are a host of reasons why this type of firm does not make a guarantee, such as:

- The performance criteria are so demanding that the candidate pool is too thin to generate enough candidates with the needed capabilities.
- The search committee and/or board are overly stringent in what they will accept in a candidate. It's important to realize that no one will be a perfect match for the established performance criteria, and some flexibility is required.

- You find a qualified candidate ...
  - but by the time an offer is made he/she has accepted another position.
  - but he/she does not feel they fit your requirements.
  - but because of district or board dysfunction, he/she feels the position is not attractive enough to put up with what he/she feels are the hassles that go with the job – some leaders like briar patches, and some don't.
  - but due to changes in personal circumstances, he/she drops out, e.g., a parent falls ill and the candidate does not feel he/she can move.
  - but the candidate lets his/her current district know he/she is looking to move and the district comes back with an offer he/she can't refuse.
  - and while the candidate feels the position fits him/her personally, he/she doesn't feel the district is a good fit for his/her family.

RFP Development

The following guidelines make the assumption you have decided to go outside and hire a retained executive search firm. The first thing to keep in mind is that research has shown repeatedly that role clarity is the best predictor of job productivity and satisfaction. This is the case for internal district positions and teams, as well as for external providers/consulting firms. The guidelines give all parties a high level of role clarity with regard to search project needs and parameters. Done well, the result is less time needed in the creation and evaluation of proposals, and better decisions when it comes to provider/firm selection. It facilitates the comparison of capabilities across providers, i.e., apples-to-apples. RFP development process steps:

1. *Number of Providers*: Decide if you have the option of engaging more than one provider, i.e., each provider selected will be engaged to conduct different elements of the search process.
   - This approach is worth considering if you are convinced your needs will be best met with the particular expertise, fees, and/or accessibility of different firms with regard to different search process segments. If you go this route, you need to build in more coordination time and costs.
   - Effective logistics and smooth flow of search activities are more likely with a single provider.

2. *Search Process Elements*: Define what you see to be the key elements of the search process (see item 3 below), and ask firms to provide the following for each major search element:
   - A clear description of the activities to be conducted as part of the element.
   - Evidence of their capability to execute element activities successfully.
   - The timeframe required.
   - The time commitment required of the search committee.
   - All fees associated with segment execution.
   - This type of information will be useful in consulting firm selection, regardless if you have a single provider or multiple providers. It also facilitates comparisons across providers.

3. *Major Process Elements*: It is possible to have a different provider address each of these major elements. The more detail you can give providers with regard to the activities expected for each element, the better. Sample sub-elements are provided where appropriate.

(1) Building a high-performing search committee (SC) and project foundation
- Refining project parameters.
- Finalizing search process steps.
- Creating a search timeline.
- Identifying team roles.
- Creating a clear project governance and communication structure.
- Creating a team charter (sample team charter template attached).
- Removing perceptual biases when it comes to candidate assessments.
- Creating a clear and effective communication and buy-in plan and structure – that encompasses the whole search process.

(2) Creating measurable position performance criteria (qualification requirements)
- Gathering community input – interviews, focus groups, forums, surveys (to the degree possible, provide the firms with the type and scope of community input expected). Note: wherever possible, it is recommended that students have a clear and meaningful role in the search process. With training and guidance, students can conduct the majority of the data gathering activities in this step. It's a definite win-win, as students really help with buy-in, and if structured appropriately, they can receive credit for their contributions – community service or as an extended learning opportunity. If you are contemplating going this route, providers will need to know.
- Employing leader capability research, combined with community input and the results of SC priority setting exercises, to generate the selection evaluation criteria (qualifications).
- Creating a candidate evaluation form that is used with all key screening activities.
- Creating a formal superintendent job description based on this work (often optional, but providers need to know if it is a requirement).

(3) Sourcing candidates
- Creating and placing the job posting – to include clear application requirements
- Putting the posting on the home website and providing a description of the district that shows it in the best light possible – to motivate high-performers to apply.
- Identifying the type of sourcing options the firm can provide.
- Conducting the sourcing (Note: *If your process doesn't allow for sourcing to start in early fall (the height of the search season and availability of the better candidates), then you want to be sure the firms can conduct deep candidate research, i.e., calling prospective candidates who are not actively seeking a new position.*
- Letting firms know the scope of the sourcing you seek – local, regional, national, or all of the above.

(4) Evaluating Candidates - where possible, provide your expectations for desired screening vehicles and outcomes, for example:

- Application screening (getting down to 6-8 candidates – quarter finalists)
- Short interview (getting down to 2-4 candidates – semi-finalists)
- Long interview (getting down to 1-3 finalists)

(5) Conducting site visit, reference checks, and background checks

- Arranging “meet and greets” with key stakeholders groups.
- Conducting work sample exercises, which is simple for teachers, e.g., creating a lesson plan and conducting a class. However, with leaders this is more difficult. It is possible to conduct leadership simulations that include the participation of key stakeholders – let providers know if this is an expectation.
- Arranging a visit to the candidate’s home site to meet with key stakeholders.
- Providing stakeholders with a simple evaluation form based on the performance criteria to be used for meet and greets and any simulations.
- Conducting reference checks.
- Conducting formal background checks.

(6) Conducting final evaluation and making board presentation

- Synthesizing all evaluation data for the finalist/s.
- Analyzing fit with key people, teams, and stakeholder groups.
- Conducting an asset-deficit analysis re: fit with the leadership team – no one has all the right stuff, so how can strengths and limitation be managed within the context of the leadership team.
- Ranking of finalists (if more than one).
- Creating a recommendation for the board with supporting data/ documentation. It may be the case that none of the finalists makes the cut, and another round of candidate sourcing will be required. Is it your expectation that the provider will conduct more than one round of candidate sourcing (within the contracted time period)?
- Making the board presentation with the SC (may be optional for the consulting firm – the SC may feel this is not necessary).

(7) Conducting onboarding and leadership transition activities

- Having the firm provide this is often viewed as optional, but is strongly recommended, as it can be very beneficial with regard to assisting the new superintendent get off on the right foot, e.g., creating clear mutual expectations between the board and superintendent. It can shorten the transition process and facilitate everyone getting up to speed as quickly as possible.

(8) Conducting ongoing communication and buy-in process – project start to finish

- This goes beyond the initial gathering of community input at the start of the project. Typically, this includes work with the media, posting updates on the website, and conducting community information sessions on the search process status at different times during the project.

- It might also include the establishment of specific stakeholder vetting groups, e.g., students, parents, and/or faculty, who are provided with search process updates on a regular basis, and asked for feedback where appropriate, e.g., input on the final set of superintendent performance criteria.
- This is often the responsibility of the SC communication lead and/or team. However, it could be the responsibility of the consulting firm.
- It is important to let the firms know if they are overseeing an activity like this, versus conducting it. As with the community data gathering, this type of activity can be conducted by students.

(9) Providing overall search project planning and coordination

- This is usually done by the SC, but may be passed off to one of the providers in those situations where multiple providers are employed.

Other Points of Note

- Activities that were not included above are background checks and contract negotiation guidance, as relatively speaking, they usually are not time intensive or costly. However, if you are expecting the consulting firm to provide either or both, please let them know this.
- In addition to the above, ask firms to describe what guarantees they provide.
- If the firms are going to provide you with an accurate fee and timeline, the district must be clear on what the level of engagement of the SC (and other district parties) will be in the search process. On one end of the spectrum, the firm conducts almost all of the search activities and provides the SC with updates and the final 2-3 candidates for evaluation. On the other end of the spectrum, the SC wants to get its hands dirty, build its skills, and be an active participant in all the major elements of the search process, e.g., community data gathering, application screening, short interviews, long interviews, site visit, etc. If this is the case, the firm then becomes more of a trainer and facilitator than deliverer. A firm's level of effort and fee will differ based on the SC level of involvement.
- Are you are using the search as an opportunity to do community building to enhance working relationships with key organizations and stakeholder groups such as the school boards association, or budget committee, or elected officials? If yes, do you have an expectation that the provider will help facilitate the relationship building process?
- Finally, provide options for providers to get their RFP questions answered.

Summary

All of the above is certainly a lot to think about. However, a really clear set of RFP expectations goes a long way to ensuring the costs, level of effort, and timeline are accurate, and allow for easier comparisons across providers. It also significantly reduces the chance of unwanted surprises once the project has started.