



# Handling Headhunters

**S**OONER OR later, it's bound to happen: You're sitting at your desk when you get a call from a headhunter, who says he or she is conducting a search for someone with a particular background or expertise in training and human resource development.

"Do you know anyone who might be suitable for me to approach? We're prepared to offer a starting salary of...with the potential of a sign-on bonus. So-and-so suggested that you'd be a good person to talk to."

That kind of exchange is replayed countless times each day in phone conversations across America, between recruiters and the people they target as part of executive and managerial searches.

The call you get may simply be an information-gathering call. Or, the headhunter may be interested in sounding you out about *your* interest in a particular position. He or she might have heard you speak at a conference or seen an article you published somewhere. If you're at all visible in our industry, chances are that you will get a call someday from a recruiter, so it's important to know how to respond. The last thing you want is to appear as if you're someone who has never been asked out on a date: "You're calling me? Oh, OK."

How should you respond? You'll want to give that some forethought, because such calls usually come out of the blue, when you're focused on something else and not thinking about a job or career change.

Here are my "rules" for responding with the right mix of interest, sophistication, and forthrightness.

**Take the call!** Unless you're in the middle of your performance review, on the way to the hospital to have a baby, or being feted by your company's senior vice president for bang-up work on a big project, you're a fool to say, "I'll get back to you." Recruiters make hundreds of canvassing and information-gathering calls each week.

They won't play hide-and-seek with you unless you're the only prospective candidate for a job they're trying to fill—which you aren't.

**Do some fact checking.** Fact check before you divulge too much. If you get a cold call from someone whose name and affiliation sound dubious, check the person out before spilling your guts. Get the firm's name, find out what kind of searches it does, and ask how it heard about you. If the caller says he or she is with Korn Ferry, Russ Reynolds, or another firm you know is legitimate, relax and listen to what the recruiter has to say. If you're unsure, say, "I'd like to talk to you, but this isn't a good time. Can I call you back?" Ask for the number or ask the recruiter to call you back. Then, check out the firm by calling the industry's trade association (212/398-9556) or see whether it's listed in the *Directory of Executive Recruiters* (Kennedy Publications, Fitzwilliam, New Hampshire).

**Retainer or contingency?** Find out whether the firm works on a retainer or contingency basis. Most retainer firms work on upper-level management assignments paying \$80,000 and up. The firms get paid regardless of whether their candidates are hired. You may be one of several candidates a firm is proposing to a client. Contingency firms handle mid-level executive assignments. Typically, their candidates earn less than \$75,000.

Retainer firms work on exclusive assignments. That means if you submit your name as part of a job search, it's unlikely that your resume will be distributed elsewhere. With contingency firms, you have less control, and less confidentiality, regarding where your resume lands. A contingency firm may distribute it to many clients.

**If you're not interested, say so.** But say that you appreciate being contacted and suggest that you would like to stay in touch. Headhunters will appreciate your honesty, and they are always looking for good contacts. They also tend to keep meticulous notes about the people they talk to. That means that one day, you could

get a call back about a position that you are interested in.

**If you're interested in the position, say so.** Then, take a deep breath and talk about your qualifications. Include recent experience that makes you an appropriate candidate for the job. Don't inflate your educational background, work experience, or salary because most recruiters do scrupulous background checks. After the call, fax your resume to the recruiter. (That's yet another reason to keep your resume up to date!)

**If the call goes well...** If the recruiter thinks there is a potential match, he or she will give you a follow-up call after reviewing your resume and will ask to see you. If all goes well in the interview, the firm could pitch you as a prospective job candidate to a client.

Remember: In dealing with recruiters, you're not the client; you are the prospective product. They work for someone else, so they tend to be in a transaction mode with you—sometimes to the point of brusqueness. Don't take that personally. In addition, don't think of recruiters the way some actors think of agents, as makeover artists. Though recruiters can open doors for you and give you good counsel about a prospective employer, they probably won't coach you on interviewing techniques or help you pick out a new suit.

For more information about handling headhunters, pick up John Lucht's book, *Rites of Passage at \$100,000+* (Viceroy Press, 1996). Don't be put off by the book's title. Even if you're not in that salary range, the book is full of sage advice.

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**Richard Koonce** is a speaker, a career coach, and the author of *Career Power! 12 Winning Habits to Get You From Where You Are to Where You Want to Be* (AMACOM, 1994). Phone 703/536-8568; e-mail [cpower@astd.org](mailto:cpower@astd.org).