

This executive search consultant gets between 10 to 15 unsolicited resumes and calls a week, from all walks of life – MDs, right down to secretaries, retrenched workers, and anyone who is frustrated in their job.

Nevertheless, she never throws a CV away, and makes a point of returning all phone calls, even if it takes three minutes to say “Sorry, I can’t help you.”

Besides being polite and obliging, Ms Cheng is also discreet – while she speaks of a black list of difficult candidates with a mischievous smile, she never mentions any name.

No wonder that the hiring criteria for search consultants include, besides tenacity and energy, qualities like empathy.

After graduating with an accounting degree, she started off with accounting firm Price Waterhouse and qualified as a certified public accountant with them, before moving into IT via financial software.

Before going into the search industry, she spent five years with Singapore Computer Systems, working her way up to regional business manager.

Today, she helps IT organizations find suitable candidates for top positions like managing directors.

“Technology is moving very quickly. Where I am today lets me talk to a lot of candidates and clients, and allows me to have a helicopter view of the trends and directions of the IT industry,” he says, explaining her move.

That’s quite a long way from accounting.

It is she agrees, but adds: “I’ve no regrets taking up the degree in accounting. When I search for a finance director, I know what candidates and clients are talking about.

She makes 15 to 18 placements a year. If this doesn’t sound like a lot, it’s because it involves more than just arranging interviews.

As executive searches are charged on a retainer basis rather than upon success, clients become very careful about choosing their search companies.

So even though TASA is the sixth largest search firm in the world and the fourth largest in the US, Ms Cheng puts a fair bit of energy into business development.

Once that pays off, and a search is commissioned, that’s when the sweat begins.

“Clients are demanding – they want results, and they want them fast. Obviously, if a company needs to fill a position, they need good candidates. And they want to be able to choose as well,” She says.

A Who’s Who database

To facilitate the search, the company has a database of candidates which it updates regularly.

"Even if we don't have their CV's we are constantly doing research on who's who in the market."

Then there are background checks on potential candidates.

"You need to find out about qualities like leadership," She explains. "Everyone will say they have that, but how do you know for sure?"

Discreet phone calls to former underlings, done on a confidential basis can yield "really powerful information – a lot better than interviews. If the guy has a terrible reputation, there's no point approaching him."

After the background work is done, contact with candidate is made, sometimes through a gauntlet of secretaries.

"Some people think that the moment they receive a call, it's a job offer," says Ms Cheng "it's not that simple."

Indeed, before anyone signs on the dotted line, there will be a few interviews.

"The best candidates can be interviewed in 45 minutes because they are very focused and results-oriented," she adds.

After the client signs their choice of candidate, Ms Cheng has one more task, which she terms "the art of rejection" – telling the other candidates they were unsuccessful.

Her fastest placement was done in just a few weeks, but it can take two to three months. With 15 to 18 placements a year, the ability to multi-task is a must.

So with her combination of qualifications and qualities, was she headhunted for the job? Miss Cheng laughs and maintains a discreet silence.

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