



The Executive Search Buyer's Guide

Everything you need to assess, compare, and select **the best recruiting partner** for your business.

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The Problem With Too Many Choices:

Hiring the right executive is high-stakes. The pressure only grows when your inbox is full of recruiters, each promising the perfect candidate. The truth? Most companies don't struggle with finding a search firm. They struggle with choosing the right one.

What This Guide Helps You Do:

This is a practical guide for founders, CEOs, and HR leaders tasked with executive hiring. If you're unsure how to vet search firms — or have had mixed results in the past, this will help you:

- Clarify what kind of search support you actually need
- Build smart evaluation criteria
- Spot red flags (and real differentiators)
- Know what to ask — and who to ask it to
- Engage with confidence and transparency

There's no one-size-fits-all solution. But with the right framework, you'll find a partner who aligns with your priorities, your timeline, and your expectations.





Get Aligned Internally Before You Go External

Before you evaluate search firms, get clear on what you're actually hiring for — and what success looks like. The best searches start with internal alignment, not external outreach.

Define the Role

Ask yourself (and your team):

- What role are we filling — and why now?
- Is it a net-new hire, a replacement, or a backfill for someone exiting soon?
- What's the business objective tied to this role?

Document the title, function, reporting line, and success metrics — not just the job description.

Clarify the Timeline

- How fast do we need this filled?
- Do we have internal support or interim leadership in place?
- Is there flexibility on start date if the right person needs more time?

Speed affects everything — pricing, search type, sourcing channels, and recruiter bandwidth.



Understand the Market

- Is this a common role or highly specialized?
- Are there regional talent limitations (e.g., on-site requirement)?
- Have we benchmarked compensation against market data?

The more niche the role, the more important it is to work with a partner who has experience in your vertical or function.

Set Internal Expectations

- Have we aligned on comp, title, and reporting structure?
- Is our interview process structured, or are we building it on the fly?
- Are internal candidates in the mix — or is this 100% external?

Clarity here saves time later. It also ensures the recruiter isn't navigating shifting goalposts.





Build Your Evaluation Criteria

Not all search firms are created equal. Knowing what to look for, and what to ask, helps you cut through the noise and avoid costly missteps.

What to Look for in a Search Partner

Search Methodology

- Is there a repeatable system in place — or are they winging it?
- Do they offer visibility into candidate pipelines and progress?
- Is feedback part of the process or an afterthought?

Search Strategy

- Are they actively headhunting or just posting ads?
- How broad is their sourcing reach — and do they specialize in your industry?
- Can they walk you through how they'll approach your search?

Technology

- Do they use a modern applicant tracking system (ATS)?
- Is there a client portal for reviewing candidates in real time?
- How do they manage communication and updates?

Speed of Hire

- What's their average time to fill roles like yours?
- What happens if timelines slip — do they add resources or go dark?
- Can they provide examples of past results under tight timelines?

Guarantees and Terms

- Do they offer a replacement guarantee? For how long?
- What's their policy if the hire exits within 30, 60, or 90 days?



Contingent vs. Retained vs. Hybrid

Understanding how they're paid reveals a lot about how they operate:

Model	Pros	Cons	Avg. Success Rate
Contingent	Pay only if you hire	Low commitment, often rushed	~15%
Retained	Full commitment, prioritized search	Higher upfront cost	80-90%+
Hybrid	Flexibility with staged fees	Requires clear scope	~60-80%

Retained search isn't always better, but if the role is crucial, niche, or confidential, it often is.



● **SHORTLIST**

Narrowing the Field

Good decision-making starts with the right comparisons — not the loudest voices or most visible firms.

Vetting Beyond SEO and Referrals

It's tempting to pick whoever shows up first in a Google search or comes highly recommended by a colleague — but that's not always the best indicator of fit.

- High search rankings usually reflect SEO or ad spend, not outcomes.
- Large firms may hand your search to a junior recruiter you've never met.
- “Great” referrals might have worked well for someone else, with a totally different type of role or company culture.

How to Structure the First Round of Outreach

Once you've built your criteria, use it to evaluate at least three firms. Look for alignment on process, not just polish.

Tips:

- Treat the intro call like a two-way interview
- Ask to speak with the actual recruiter who would run your search
- Use a simple scorecard to evaluate how each partner addresses your must-haves
- Take notes on tone, follow-through, and how well they listen — not just what they pitch

Watch for These Signals

- ✓ They ask detailed questions about your needs — not just pitch their firm
- ✓ They're transparent about timelines, pricing, and limitations
- ✓ They focus on long-term fit, not just making the placement
- ✗ They overpromise without understanding your context
- ✗ They can't explain how their process works
- ✗ You're passed off to someone less senior after the call





● MEET



Meet the Recruiters, Not Just Salespeople

The person closing the deal may not be the person doing the work. Don't commit until you've met the recruiter who'll actually run your search.

Who's Actually Doing the Work?

You're not buying a brand. You're hiring a person (or team) to represent your company in-market, often with senior candidates. That matters.

Ask:

- Who will be the day-to-day lead on this search?
- How many searches are they handling right now?
- What's their experience level in your industry or function?
- Have they worked with companies like yours before?

The difference between a seasoned executive recruiter and a junior generalist is night and day, in both candidate quality and your experience as a client.



Signs of Real Partnership

- ✓ The recruiter comes to the intro call, not just a BD rep
- ✓ They ask nuanced questions about your team, goals, and context
- ✓ They offer insights, not generic selling points
- ✓ They're transparent about capacity, timeline, and expectations
- ✗ You only hear from sales — and they “loop in” the recruiter later
- ✗ The recruiter seems disinterested or rushed
- ✗ They can't speak confidently about your industry or role type

Don't Underestimate Fit

You're trusting this person with your brand — and with access to senior talent. That requires:

- Strong communication
- Mutual accountability
- Cultural alignment

If something feels off early, it probably won't improve once the contract is signed.



Engage With Confidence

Before you sign, make sure you know what you're committing to — and what they're committing to in return.

What Your Agreement Should Include

A professional search partner won't hesitate to put clear terms in writing. Your agreement should outline:

Scope of Work

What type of search is being conducted? How many roles does it cover? What's the expected timeline?

Payment Terms

When are payments due? Are they tied to milestones (e.g., kick-off, shortlist, hire)? What's refundable — and what isn't?

Guarantees

What happens if the hire leaves within 30, 60, or 90 days? Will the firm redo the search at no cost, or at a reduced rate?

Confidentiality

If the search is confidential, how will they protect your brand and candidate information?

Candidate Ownership

Who “owns” candidates if the search is paused or terminated? Can you hire someone they introduced months later?

Exit Terms

Can you terminate the agreement if things go south? Are there penalties?

Red Flags to Watch For

- ❌ Vague scope or no defined deliverables
- ❌ No mention of recruiter accountability or timelines
- ❌ One-sided terms that shift all risk to you
- ❌ No mention of how conflicts (e.g., poaching) are handled

A strong contract reflects a strong working relationship, one built on mutual clarity and trust.



● CLOSING THOUGHTS



Choosing the right search partner isn't just about filling a role — it's about finding someone who understands what's at stake.

The best executive searches don't feel transactional. They feel like alignment.

When you work with the right firm, you get more than resumes. You get:

- A partner who protects your time
- A voice that represents your company well in the market
- A process built for results, not just activity

Most hiring mistakes aren't about bad candidates. They're about unclear goals, rushed decisions, or mismatched partners. This guide was built to help you avoid all three.





About Ready Set Exec

We're not recruiters. We're growth enablers.

Ready Set Exec helps scaling organizations find senior leaders who drive real results. From C-Suite to high-impact departmental roles, we deliver not just candidates, but **confidence**. Founded by Patrick Shea and John Pezoulas, we've built teams, scaled companies, and helped over 10,000 people find roles they thrive in.

Visit readyssetexec.com for more insights or follow us on LinkedIn.

If you're planning a relocation or hiring from outside your region, let's talk.

