HIRING SENIOR EXECS

Seven critical differences

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Hiring senior leaders is fundamentally different from hiring for mid-level or junior roles. Here are seven reasons why:

1. **Strategic impact** - Senior hires carry greater long-term weight. Their decisions shape direction, culture, and performance – so the thinking behind their selection must be deeper and more strategic.
2. **Leadership over skills** Beyond functional expertise, they must bring leadership qualities: vision, adaptability, resilience, and the ability to influence at the highest level.
3. **Risk mitigation through soundings.** Off-the-record conversations and discreet references (or "soundings") are essential. They reduce the risk of a misstep in high-stakes decisions.
4. **Higher stakes require a more sophisticated approach** - and that's both employer and candidate side
5. **Confidentiality is often a priority** - Many senior hires involve sensitive contexts: replacing an incumbent, market entry, or transformation initiatives. Discretion is non-negotiable.
6. **More subject to change** Roles – and even business models – are more fluid at this level. Senior execs must thrive amid uncertainty and help lead others through it.
7. **Timescales are longer** - often 3-6 months versus 3-6 weeks

Hiring senior executives isn't standard recruitment. These roles demand leaders who shape your organization's future—making the stakes and challenges much higher. This guide, featuring headhunter Robert Tearle's expert insights, reveals the key differences, pitfalls, and essential steps in executive hiring—from identifying true leadership to managing confidentiality. Make smarter decisions, position your roles competitively, and secure top executive talent for your organization's success.

1 STRATEGIC IMPACT

Senior remits often involve long-term initiatives like acquisitions, organic growth, or selling the business. CXO and senior management roles align with the company's long-term goals: buy, sell, or grow.

Individual contributors, by contrast, focus on short-term objectives such as new sales, supplier consolidation, or service improvement. Exec hiring needs are shaped by current business challenges and the context in which the vacancy arises.

Replacing a top performer who resigned may differ from filling a position vacated due to poor performance. Different challenges—accelerated growth, crisis, turnaround, or cultural change—can shape hiring requirements.

Senior roles tend to address multi-year goals, while individual contributors work on tactical, short-term objectives.

Consider both past and future challenges when defining what you need someone to achieve in a role.

The performance of an organization depends on the relevant executive, and the more senior the role, the broader the ripple effect of their performance across the business.

It’s more strategic.

The more senior the role, the greater the ripple effect.

The more senior the hire, the more the role focuses on shaping strategy rather than implementing it, with an emphasis on strategic versus tactical objectives.

Accelerated Growth | Crisis | Turnaround | Transformational or Cultural Change

1 STRATEGIC IMPACT (CONTINUED)

Consider Short/Mid/Long Term Goals

You need to think not just about what your business wants to achieve this year, but what it must accomplish over the years to come. That means considering both your goals and the challenges and surprises that may arise.

Ask: what will this job truly require over a multi-year period?

A senior hire can have 5X, 10X, even 100X the impact of a typical hire. Their ripple effect influences revenue, cost, profit—and ultimately ROI for owners or shareholders. At this level, performance outcomes can swing by 40% either way.

Leadership style and values matter. You need someone who attracts top talent and inspires high achievers and future leaders.

The larger the business, the greater the ripple—and the longer it may take to feel the impact.

So start with the long-term vision. Define what's truly needed, then work backwards.

NB: If they can't excel this year, the rest doesn't matter.

Short - Mid Term Goals

12 Months

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- Aliquam vulputate
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Mid - Long Term Goals

3 Years

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5 Years

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10 Years

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2 LEADERSHIP OVER SKILLS

Integrity and responsibility.

Investors and business owners now prioritize managing businesses with responsibility and integrity.

Emotional intelligence:

Leaders with high emotional intelligence (EI) are 40% more successful. Senior executives who nurture strong relationships through high EI often succeed, while those lacking it may fail.

One of the characteristics of emotional intelligence is social management i.e. driving results through people. In leadership this is a key attribute, assertiveness is important.

‘A’ player leadership quality:

The four ‘E’s of leadership: Energy, Energizing others, the Edge to make tough decisions, and the ability to Execute on promises.

Results:

Hiring decisions are based on past results, but it's essential to distinguish between a candidate’s direct impact on outcomes. Someone may have failed in a thriving business or succeeded in a failing one due to factors beyond their control.

Performance:

Evaluate the candidate’s past impact on results. Did they truly influence business outcomes? In interviews, explore how they might move the business forward and their approach to future challenges.

Growth potential:

Assess their ability not just to meet current demands but to grow as the business evolves. Key leadership qualities play a critical role here.

3 RISK MITIGATION THROUGH SOUNDINGS

Soundings are critical to understanding a candidate's true potential.

A sounding is an informal reference—an opinion or perspective about a candidate, typically gathered to validate impressions or gain deeper insight into their character, performance, or leadership style.

When to Use a Sounding

A common approach is to ask the candidate for permission to take a sounding once the interview process is well-advanced. This might involve speaking with a former manager or colleague—ideally someone who has since moved on from their shared employer.

In other cases, companies may pursue a blind reference—a sounding conducted without the candidate's knowledge. This method should be approached with extreme caution. Any inadvertent disclosure could seriously compromise the candidate's position and reputation at their current employer.

Why Soundings Matter

Soundings can reveal critical insights into a candidate's judgment, interpersonal effectiveness, and emotional intelligence (EI). Interestingly, those offering input often disclose far more than they realise—through tone, emphasis, and the details they choose to share.

How to Conduct an Effective Sounding

The most useful soundings blend general impressions with targeted questions. Examples include:

- "What was your working relationship with the candidate?" (e.g., peer, manager, direct report)
- "How would you describe them professionally?"
- "What was the scope and complexity of their role?"
- "How would you describe their leadership style?"
- "How did they perform in high-pressure or ambiguous situations?"
- "What was their role in [specific project]?"
- "How were they perceived by peers, subordinates, and senior stakeholders?"

4 REQUIRES A SOPHISTICATED APPROACH

Prospective high performing employed candidates are more likely to say “No” to a direct approach.

And it’s not just about confidentiality. Hiring senior executives requires a more refined approach, as it's a major decision for both parties. This shouldn't be underestimated. Tact is essential, as senior execs are often concerned about confidentiality and won't respond well to direct approaches.

Many employed execs, especially from competitors or closely aligned industries, are unlikely to engage in direct dialogue. This makes them harder to reach.

A headhunter can be invaluable here, acting as a sounding board to shape your requirements and offering a second set of eyes and ears. They can also discreetly gather insights on candidates without exposing their interest in the role.

Positioning the opportunity is key. Senior roles come with a smaller talent pool, so you must carefully consider why a smart, in-demand exec would be interested and how to present the role to them effectively.

5 CONFIDENTIALITY IS A PRIORITY

Confidence needs building on both sides

Hiring senior executives requires a sophisticated approach. It's a bigger decision for both parties, and high-performing execs need to be courted diplomatically.

Many are familiar with hiring active job seekers, but it's a different game when targeting employed high achievers who are well-integrated and respected in their roles.

Engaging their interest takes time, and you need to tune into their perspective. Few know how to hire candidates who may be content where they are. This is one of a number of critical areas in which headhunters add value. They use non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) to ensure client confidentiality, allowing for open dialogue without exposing the candidate's job search.

The opportunity must be positioned well. Senior roles come with a smaller talent pool, so you must carefully consider why a smart, in-demand executive would want to take up this role and how to present it.

CXO types often have little tolerance for lengthy hiring processes, especially when they aren't actively looking. The process must be handled with balance and finesse.

To land an "A" player candidate, you need an "A" player hiring team—one that can build confidence on both sides and develop the candidate's interest to the interview stage and beyond.

5 CONFIDENTIALITY IS A PRIORITY CONTINUED

Confidentiality is magnified when you're replacing an incumbent job holder.

Confidential hires often occur when a team shouldn't know someone is leaving, or more discreetly, when an incumbent needs to be replaced. This happens if the current person isn't meeting targets, lacks leadership, or doesn't have the qualities to take the business forward.

In these cases, headhunters are frequently commissioned to find a new hire without the incumbent being aware. They can approach candidates without revealing the company's name and assess if they possess the necessary skills and qualifications. This process ensures prospective candidates are pre-qualified before moving forward, keeping the current job holder unaware of the situation.

By contrast, directly advertising or contacting candidates can tip off the incumbent that their position is being filled, compromising confidentiality.

Headhunters are critical in ensuring a smooth and confidential process, avoiding any leaks about an impending replacement.

6 MORE LIKELY TO BE SUBJECT TO CHANGE

Shifting priorities may require adjusting the candidate profile mid-process.

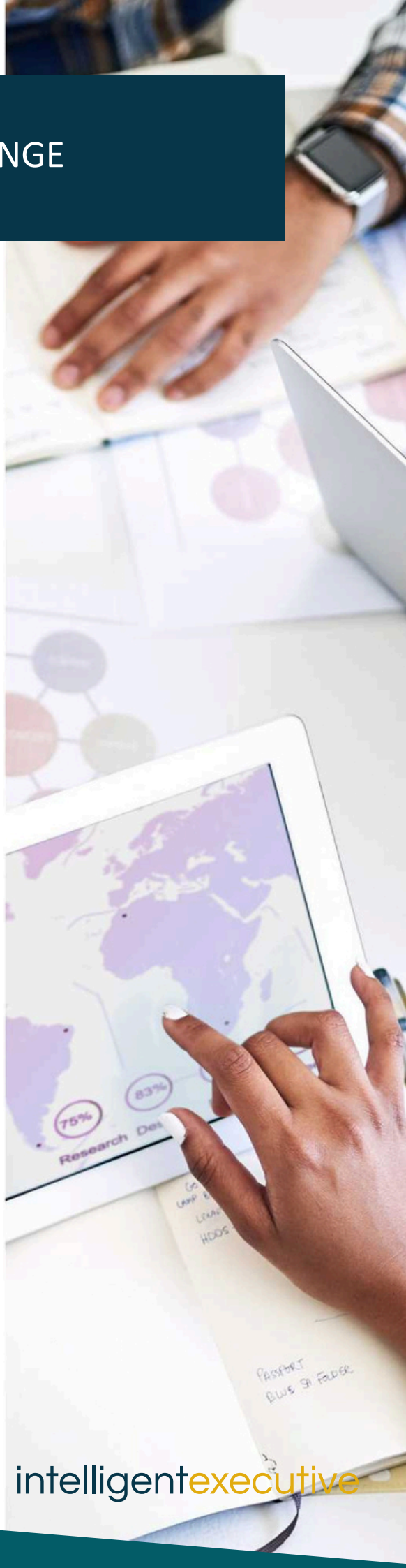
When making senior hires, the goalposts often shift as the process unfolds. At the start, the focus may be on finding a candidate with specific technical expertise or industry knowledge, but as conversations progress, broader leadership qualities become more critical.

Hiring for senior roles is not just about ticking boxes for skills and experience. It's about finding someone who can align with the company's evolving strategic vision, lead through change, and inspire teams. During the process, decision-makers often realize they need more than just technical expertise; they need someone who can shape the future of the organization.

As business challenges are discussed, new priorities emerge—perhaps the need for a leader who can handle crisis management, drive a turnaround, or manage cultural transformation. These shifting priorities may require adjusting the candidate profile mid-process.

Moreover, senior hires need to fit with the company's long-term goals, not just its current needs. As business landscapes change, so too must the expectations from senior leaders. A candidate who looked like a strong fit initially may no longer meet the revised criteria as discussions progress.

This fluid nature of senior hires means flexibility is crucial throughout the process, as companies must adapt their search to ensure they find not just a capable leader, but the right one for both present and future demands.



7 TIMESCALES ARE LONGER

Three to six months

Hiring cycles for senior executives are often much longer and more time-consuming than for regular roles. Senior execs have fuller diaries, more demands, and greater responsibilities, making scheduling difficult on both sides. Appointment changes are also more frequent at this level due to shifting priorities.

Sourcing candidates 4 weeks

There is also more caution during the hiring process, with more stages involved and decisions not rushed. Notice periods for senior execs typically range from three to six months, and many may want to finish ongoing projects before leaving. This needs to be considered early in the interview process when evaluating candidates.

Four, five, six, seven+ interview stages

For regular roles, the recruiting cycle may last under four weeks, but for senior and specialist roles, expect the process to take 4 to 8 weeks and for leadership roles, expect it to look more like even 3 to 6 months. Working with a headhunter helps maintain momentum and manage expectations.

Delays on both sides

There's always a gap between the ideal scenario and reality. You want to avoid a drawn-out hiring process, but delays are common due to illness, holidays, or shifting priorities on both sides.

Notice periods 4-12 weeks

To prevent unnecessary delays, it's essential to approach the process with a sense of urgency while remaining flexible about the inevitable challenges.

CONCLUSION

Senior hires are strategic decisions that require you to think beyond immediate needs and consider your mid and long-term goals.

If the role reports to you, it's crucial to take ownership of the hiring decision. Meet with the candidate at least three times to ensure you've properly assessed their fit. One or more of these meetings could be a phone call for convenience, but make sure you get to know the candidate well.

Understanding a senior hire's character and abilities at a deeper level is key. At an advanced stage, consider taking up a sounding with a former employer before reaching the offer stage. This helps confirm the candidate's suitability and ensures no surprises.

Top candidates are in high demand and often receive counteroffers, so it's essential to build interest and confidence throughout the interview process.

If you're replacing a senior executive, lining up a discreet replacement is best done through a headhunter. Headhunters help reduce operational disruption by handling the time-consuming tasks of sourcing and screening candidates.

Lastly, the hiring process for senior roles can be lengthy. Approach it with urgency to avoid it becoming drawn out and distracting. Engaging a headhunter can help streamline the process and protect business continuity.

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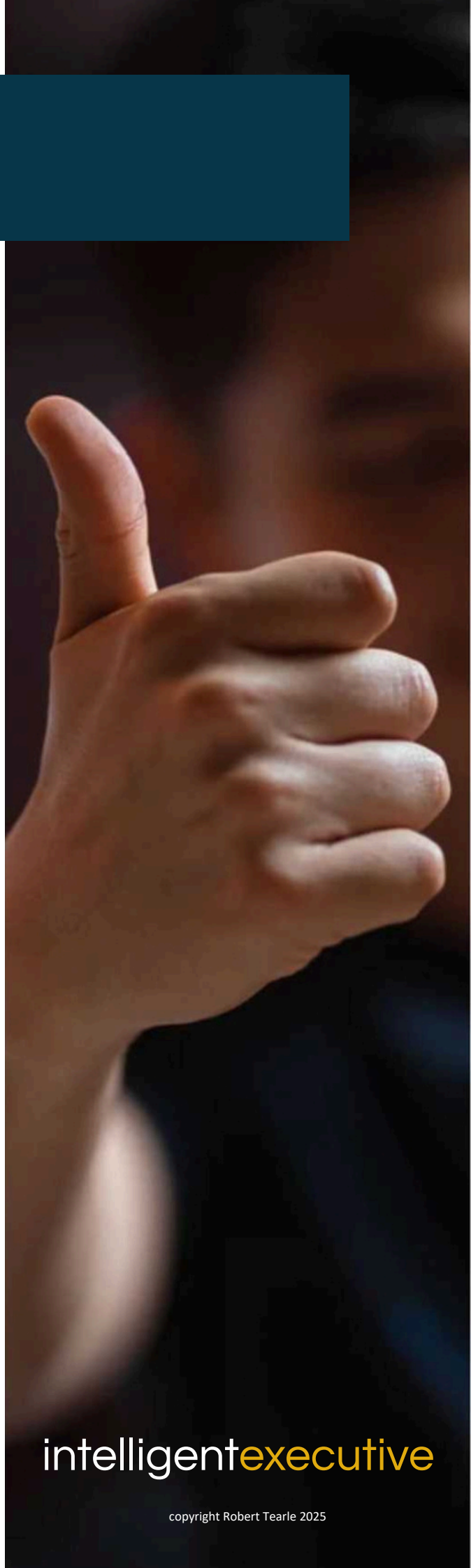

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