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# Seven Questions

– to ask your Search Firm before you agree to partner with them

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# Seven Questions

## – to ask your Search Firm before you agree to partner with them

Competition for managerial talent is intense and especially in Africa where localisation is creating additional pressures to have African nationals in leadership roles. A critical executive hire will have a significant impact on a company's future, yet do you give the right level of priority to selecting a search firm which can professionally manage the search process and successfully complete your assignment?

Before hiring a search firm, it's important to avoid firms who don't really understand how different it is to manage a search and attract talent for roles based in Africa compared to other international locations. Does your search firm really understand the local environment, how to do business in Africa and what is required to deliver success?

If your search consultant does not know this information then how can they demonstrate a thorough enough understanding to be able to present the role and opportunity to a potential candidate and assess if they have the personality and commitment to thrive within that environment?

Your choice of search firm recruiting executive level positions in Africa is broadly covered by four main generic categories, which are:

- Global Search Firms
- Sector Specialists
- Locally based 'search' firms
- Boutique international search firms

*These will be explained in more detail on the next page.*



## The four main Search Firm categories

### Global Search Firms

The advantage of using these organisations is that it sounds prestigious to say that you are using a big name firm and brings a degree of comfort factor.

The disadvantage is that your search can get very expensive with additional costs, your business will represent an insignificant portion of their total global revenue and it is unlikely that the partner who you appointed will actually work on the assignment. You pay, regardless of search success.

### Locally based 'Search' Firms

Local African firms are often much cheaper but beware what you actually get for your money. They are based on the ground so can theoretically interview local candidates face to face and should know the local market well.

They are unlikely to have the ability to run a full mapping and search process as they will often just advertise, and will have lots of local 'hands off' restrictions. They may lack international networks and associated prestige.

### Sector Specialists

These may have a large international network of specialist executive candidates within your sector and good technical understanding of the role.

However they may not understand the operating environment in Africa and will also be restricted on who they can head hunt from due to their client lists, so effectively reducing the 'pool' of candidates available for them to search from by up to 50%.

### Boutique International Search Firms

Due to their size, your business is important to them resulting in a personal & attentive service and a longer term commitment to getting the search right. They often have specialist experience or geographical focus.

However, they do not carry the 'large firm prestige status', may be trying to cover too broad geographies if 'emerging markets' focused rather than Africa focused.



## Are you asking the right questions?

So how can you ensure you are asking the right questions in order to select the most appropriate firm to run your search in Africa?

### ***“Have you been to Port Harcourt?”***

Does your Search Consultant really understand the environment where your business is based whether that is in Port Harcourt, Dar es Salaam or Luanda? Have they been there? Do they know what the accommodation is like, what are the schools like, how is security? Is your search firm really an Africa specialist? What percentage of their business is in Africa? Do they have experience in covering all of Africa or just specific countries? Are they able to assess candidates' language skills such as Portuguese and French if required?

### ***“How can I be sure you will find the best available person?”***

Does your search firm actually proactively map, approach, assess and present the best available candidates in the market place or rely purely on their own database? Do they map the entire

relevant market before approaching anybody?

How many candidates do they consider at each stage? How creative is your consultant in their search – do they think laterally? Do they follow a documented, transparent and thorough traditional search process?

### ***“Who will actually deliver my search?”***

How does your search firm assess and select the candidates presented on your shortlist? Who actually interviews the candidates? Is it the Consultant / Partner you spoke to or will your search be outsourced to a more junior member of the team, contract consultants or even a third party? Were those individuals present on the original briefing and therefore understand how to successfully engage the right candidates? Is your search relying on just one individual's opinion? How will they represent your business within the market during the search?

## Are you asking the right questions? (cont)

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***“Can you access local talent as well as international candidates?”***

With localisation, succession planning and the development of local talent becoming more and more important to most organisations operating in Africa, you need to be assured that your search firm has extensive networks in the local African markets as well as internationally and with candidates in the Diaspora. What experience do they have of producing shortlists of purely local nationals? How many African candidates have they placed? What do they do proactively to ensure they maintain the strongest possible networks? What roles have they needed to consider expatriates for and why?

***“Do your clients use you more than once?”***

Is your search firm looking to build a long term partnership with you to support your business growth in Africa or just looking to make a quick fee? How important is your search to them? Do they commit to completing every assignment? Will they guarantee your results? What happens when it goes wrong? How many of their placements are still there after a year? Can they provide relevant client references?

***“What am I paying for?”***

Does your search firm involve you thoroughly in their process? How quickly do they deliver the shortlist? Do they deliver what they promise, when they promise? What do they charge and does this include disbursements? Do they work in partnership, getting to understand your business and its requirements? Do they understand your objectives & strategy and therefore have the ability to advise and challenge?

***“What is your hands off policy and how will this affect us?”***

You would not expect your search firm to headhunt from your organisation and neither would any of their other Clients. Local companies and sector specialists may be limited by who they can headhunt from, thus restricting access to some candidates for your role. Who are their relevant hands off agreements with? How long will they commit to not headhunting from your business?



## Summary

When your business makes a significant investment to expand through local growth, or into new territories, this decision is not made lightly and involves many stakeholders and extensive due diligence.

With the success of these plans so dependent on ensuring you have the right leader in place to deliver this on the ground, why would you not take equal care when selecting the right search partner to find this critical hire for your business?

Ultimately your search firm should have the capability and passion to act as an extension of your business, and should be fully committed to delivering the results you require. You should expect nothing less.

For more information on why we believe that Executives in Africa are the right organisation to partner with you to deliver the best business leaders for your business in Africa, please contact:

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