

CIO recruiters offer tips on getting the job you want

By Linda Tucci, Senior News Writer

21 Aug 2008 | SearchCIO.com

Talk to headhunters specializing in CIO searches and they all say the same thing: If you're good, we'll find you. Maybe so. But for CIOs or would-be CIOs whose phones are not ringing off the hook, we thought it might be useful to ask about the dos and don'ts of getting on a recruiter's radar.

The question is increasingly relevant to the IT profession. Our SearchCIO.com survey of 150 enterprise CIOs and IT managers found that while 38% located their current job through a personal network, 30% worked with a recruiter to land a job. Even for CIOs not looking to move, headhunters we interviewed said there are ways you can make yourself useful that will pay dividends down the line and mistakes that can, well, put you in the doghouse forever.

First, some kudos. After years of operating on the outer rim of the C-suite fishbowl, enterprise CIOs are in deep.

"The role has moved to the forefront, no question. It's a true C-level position," said Chris Patrick, a consultant in the technology practice at Egon Zehnder International, a retained executive search firm in Dallas. Just look at the recent appointment of Marty Lippert at Citigroup, charged with driving "transformational change" across the enterprise.

"There is a seat at the table. CIOs are expected to contribute. They are not a cost to be contained, or a back-office function to ignore until something happens," Patrick said.

With the status comes pressure. "The tolerance for anything but execution and results is zero, and the expectations are high," he added.

Veteran recruiter Suzanne Fairlie, president and founder of ProSearch, an executive retained search firm outside Philadelphia specializing in IT and finance, said the CIO operates in a different league than seven years ago, when IT was at the epicenter of the tech bust. "CIOs are more business focused. There isn't a job that IT doesn't touch," Fairlie said. "And the spend they control is often the biggest spend at the company."

Moreover, despite all signposts pointing to a rough road ahead, recruiters remain busy, even as "we're all looking over our shoulders," Patrick said. "To be honest, I've lost a few candidates recently, whether it was to counteroffers or because we couldn't move fast enough. Good candidates have multiple options," he said.

Here are some suggestions, from the macro to the minuscule, for managing your career, so that you have multiple options too.

1. Track record

This speaks to the cardinal rule of recruiters: Build something and they will come. CIOs who are going places stay at a place long enough to deliver, Patrick said.

"If you haven't been through a business cycle or two, I don't care how good you are, you can't claim success," he said. A year or 18 months usually doesn't cut it. "You have to be there long enough to live with your decisions, to make adjustments, to fix things you've done wrong and do more of the things you've done right."

Shawn Banerji, with the technology practice at New York-based retained search firm Russell Reynolds Associates, said CIO searches often begin with very specific queries from client companies.

"A CEO, or president or CFO, sometimes a board of directors, will come to us and say, 'We need to drive a massive transformation of the business and require a CIO who's done major systems integration. Who's done that?' Or, 'We need a CIO with a background in consumer packaged goods who's seen 50% to 100% growth year over year,'" Banerji said. The search is then on, where that talent exists.

Companies know that you don't always have control over how long you last in a job, but "you have to manage your career," Patrick said.

"You have to look at your career and ask, 'Am I continuing to progress, am I getting broader, bigger and more complex responsibilities, am I building a portfolio of experience that will be valued by the next company, or the company after the next company?'" he said. Look for good companies and good leaders from whom you can learn.

And, oh, by the way, nobody is going to do that for you. Said Patrick: "If you sit back and let your career happen, you might get lucky, but I tell you, I wouldn't be comfortable letting good luck and good fortune decide where I end up or what I am able to do."

2. Visibility

About two-thirds, maybe even three-quarters, of the people Banerji ends up contacting for executive searches are already in the Russell Reynolds database. "It's our job to know who is out there." But that leaves a good chunk of people who have slipped under the radar, "for whatever reason," he said, including those who are "working so hard they haven't had time to put their head up."

Lose the invisibility cloak. All of the headhunters we spoke to stressed the importance of getting on the speaker circuit.

"When I am doing a search, the first place I go is to the top expert in the field who is talking about this subject," ProSearch's Fairlie said.

She advises that you identify a topic you know about and tell your vendors that you're available to speak at an event.

If you have not given a talk to a big audience before, Fairlie suggests you first get on a panel, which is easier than giving a speech. "People are always hungry to get experts. It is actually easier than you think to be on a panel," she said. Another forum is your local, regional or the national chapter of the Society for Information Management (SIM), the industry association for CIOs.

If you are selected as a speaker, prepare, prepare, prepare. Word travels fast on Google if you bomb, Fairlie said. She recalled the Fortune 100 high-level executive who came unprepared to an event for a major industry association. "It was embarrassing, and it was painful for people watching. I sit on the program committee for the association, and I can tell you, we will never have him back."

"The tolerance for anything but execution and results is zero, and the expectations are high."
Chris Patrick consultant, Egon Zehnder International

Fairlie also recommends having a presence on two Web sites used by major executive search firms: RiteSite.com and BlueSteps.com. "They are accessible only by the retained search firm and your name is blind," she said.

She is also a big fan of LinkedIn, but used strategically. Your information must be accurate and concise. Hide your connections, but "connect to as many people you know who you think are good," she said. If you get a request from somebody you don't know, ignore it -- no need to write back.

Finally, Fairlie recommends you go to Amazon.com and plunk down \$20 for Rites of Passage at \$100,000 to \$1 Million+: Your Insider's Lifetime Guide to Executive Job-Changing and Faster Career Progress in the 21st Century, by John Lucht.

Banerji said "being quoted in the industry press" is another way to get into the limelight.

3. A trusted source to recruiters

The covenant of eternal employment was broken some time ago, Banerji noted, hence the need for a strong professional network, which includes recruiters.

"You need to proactively build a relationship with executive recruiters in your space, so you come to mind before others," he said.

Good recruiters have visibility into the marketplace. Over the course of a long career, a recruiter can act as trusted advisor. But good relationships are mutually beneficial, Banerji said.

"Headhunters are busy," he said, "and they're going to be spending most of their time on the searches they're being paid to do, not just giving out superfluous career advice."

You can make yourself useful, Banerji said, in ways that will repay you many times over. "Let's say you're the CIO of Acme and used to work at GE. I call and say, 'I need to know the best IT person there in terms of Six Sigma process improvement,' and they'll say, 'Call John Smith or Jane Doe and mention my name.' Or, I might say, 'We've got a candidate for a search at GE, but one job prior he was cut loose from Acme. You were there, what do you know about him?' "

And when it comes to your own career, don't fib or fudge, Fairlie advised. If you're thinking of leaving but can't really move for the next eight months because you're due to come into a major stock option, you'd better say so. "Be honest, and good recruiters are honest back --painfully so," she said. "People who are lying and exaggerating, we don't work with. I have 200,000 people in my database."

4. Go best, young execs

A word to the wise for the up-and-coming CIOs: Ambitious professionals look for the next rung up, the job nobody thought they could do, to prove themselves. But the wise investment might be a lateral move, Patrick said, if there is an opportunity to work with the best --a Gary Reiner of General Electric Co., a Robert DeRodes of The Home Depot Inc. or a Rob Carter of FedEx Corp.

"These are great learning environments --in my opinion, worth the investment," Patrick said. It's best to make the investment early in your career, if possible, "when you have a little more flexibility in the scope and scale of role you can take," he said.

In any case, big companies --the Microsofts, Dells, GEs and Procter & Gambles of the marketplace -- tend to hire "bigger than the role," Patrick said.

"These companies are so complex, the matrix is so difficult to get your arms around," he said. "To put you in a stretch role in an environment where you don't know the company, you don't know the political landscape, is really difficult. It's a unique individual who can take on those two variables and be successful.

"Their view is to put you in a role that you can do, so you're not underwater from day one," Patrick said. "As you progress and figure out how things get done, we'll expand your role. And it's limitless, predicated only on what you are capable of doing."