

# Hightech Partners ITP

## The Specialist versus Generalist Approach to Executive Search – What's the difference?

There are two main types of Executive Search and Assessment firms. One is the large, all encompassing, frequently publicly owned, generalist firm working in all industry sectors. Such firms feature a single global brand, uniformity of process and approach. The other is the specialist firm that is focussed on select sectors, often working in consortium with other specialist firms across the global market.

There are critical differences between these categories of Search firm, and Clients are increasingly aware of the differences in response time and the quality of results they deliver.

We discuss these key differentiators below:

### **Focus on Professional competence:**

The Specialist firm aims to understand and be informed about the pace of change in select sectors of business: Principals of such firms have worked in similar fields as their Clients for many years, have selected, recruited and developed managers themselves, have delivered business results and are

aware of the qualities displayed by leading successful executives. They rapidly understand the Client situation and can help in analysing the business problem that has surfaced the need for a new appointment. Frequently, Principals not only know their Clients, but also clients of their Client.

Generalist firms often strive to build specialty practices within their organisations, but their size, structure and processes are major inhibitors to attracting Principals or Practice Leaders with relevant line management experience. Experienced executives from industry who are considering a career in Executive Search have a marked preference to work with a few peers in selected sectors within a relatively small Specialist firm, rather than become managers in a large, structured search firm.

The task of selecting candidates for a Client position, and, as important, of convincingly conveying the virtues of that position to a worthy candidate, always fall to a Principal in a Specialist firm.

The volume of work and the size of generalist firms naturally limit what their Principals can address. All too often, researchers, associates or junior candidate developers with no business experience will perform most of the candidate qualification process, and worse, will be charged with selling the Client's value proposition to candidates.

### **Flexibility and Responsiveness:**

Specialist firms are more flexible in meeting the Client's need by providing customised agreements that can feature, for instance, aggregation across periods or geographies or business units or currencies. A custom approach will always be better delivered by a specialist, comparatively smaller firm, whose Principals are business leaders with an overriding interest in building long term relationships with their Clients.

Larger or publicly owned firms have a reputation for a "take it or leave it" approach when offering terms.

### **Authentication of credentials and references:**

The Specialist firm entrusts only its Partners or Principals to verify the credentials of candidates. Such Principals, being business-minded, knowledgeable about the business sector and competent to understand critique or other comment, personally authenticate the candidacy of each individual who they present. They can differentiate between formal and informal qualifications, theoretical knowledge versus actual track records

In many cases Principals in a Specialist firm will know referees personally, having been associated with the industry for many years. They are familiar with how to draw referees into genuine statements of support or critique, having been senior managers themselves. They can distinguish between impersonal acknowledgement of candidate qualities and personal backing.

This contrasts with the approach taken by larger generalist firms, where credential and reference checking is process driven, frequently seen as an administrative task and often delegated to less qualified personnel to perform.

### **Access to relevant pools of candidates:**

Years of specialisation inevitably cause relevant data bases and networks of contacts to be established by the Principals of a specialist firm. As promising

individuals rise through various operational and functional positions in one or more reputable companies, their progress is tracked and contact is maintained. Clients benefit from such knowledge, for the more senior the position the more thorough is the leveraging of past contacts by the specialist firm.

The focus on professional competence in Specialist firms leads to higher quality short lists, less time wasted in interviewing inappropriate candidates, faster completion of assignments and more enduring appointments.

Larger, generalist firms use centralised data bases to maintain profiles of candidates across many fields and sectors, relying less on person to person interactions.

Frequently profiles of available candidates are blocked or reserved by internal rules, designed to minimise conflict between multiple assignments and internal teams engaged in similar work and forcing a "first come, first served" process. The size of a Search firm can thus be a root cause of blockage of access to relevant candidates.

Moreover generalist firms tend to have extensive "Off Limits" lists, whereby they may not field candidates from existing Clients, owing to prior agreement. The larger and the more generalist the firm, the more limited the candidate pool for an assignment. "Candidate Contention" is often the cause of sub-optimal short lists.

### **Assessment, and Bench Marking:**

A specialist firm will be able to give a dispassionate, authoritative assessment of an individual candidate or a team that is in place, should that be the requirement of the Client. Advice and Consultancy is based on actual line management experience of the firms' Principals. Specialisation allows objective assessments in the context of the industry sector in which the Client is engaged. Benchmarking of competence versus the market or competition can be performed. The Client thus gets assistance of direct business value, rarely available from a generalist firm.

**Entrepreneurial Approach:**

Specialist firms operate as entrepreneurial groups of well-qualified Principals, motivated to succeed, and given to an open, team-minded method of internal, external and international co-operation.

This contrasts with global search companies, who run extensive offices, salaried staff, administrative procedures and pursue a wide range of business interests, local P&L objectives and often including corporate shareholder value.

Net, Specialist Executive Search and Assessment firms deliver superior results for Clients.

Hightech Partners ITP is the only European Specialist firm with global capability in the high-tech sector. We aim to serve clients who know that depth of study, focus and speed are important guarantors of success in all technology driven business.

For more information, or to discuss your own particular potential needs, please visit our website, [www.hightechpartners.com](http://www.hightechpartners.com). Details are given there about how to contact individual Partners directly, or you may call our Brussels office +32 2 663 1600 or email us at [Info@Hightechpartners.com](mailto:Info@Hightechpartners.com).

A visit to your offices to discuss your requirements -- with no obligation -- can be arranged to suit your convenience.