

Synchronised headhunting

In our increasingly globalised world, outdated timeframes and inflexible working patterns are on the way out. Today, companies need worldly, adaptable executives without going through long recruitment processes

Patrick Mataix, Co-Founder and former COO of Vistaprint, sees himself as an entrepreneur, not an HR person. Together with fellow INSEAD graduate Robert Keane, he built Vistaprint into the NASDAQ-listed entity it is today. However, Mataix's experience of management wasn't without problems, the worst being the process of finding and recruiting relevant executive talent.

Now the Founder and CEO of executive search firm CEO Worldwide, Mataix found the same problem everywhere he operated. He needed somebody very quickly, and the top international headhunters couldn't provide this service.

When he left Vistaprint, therefore, Mataix set out to create an executive search platform that gave companies access to relevant executives in a reactive and flexible way. *European CEO* spoke to Patrick Mataix on the evolution of the industry and the developments that have most influenced its transformation.

In what ways has there been a shift in the international executive search industry in recent years?

We're living more and more in a global economy, and companies today must go beyond their own borders to expand. Therefore, headhunters must also become international. I think the goal should be to provide global customers with global players – and by this I mean truly global players.

We used to have headhunters looking only for permanent jobs, but recently we've seen a shift towards interim appointments before

deciding on a permanent position. This is key because it asks that search firms be prepared and flexible enough to quickly adjust assignments if necessary.

Why is the industry moving towards a more synchronised model?

In the main, to find the right candidate anywhere in the world, and in good time. When I started, the average timeframe was between three months and six months in a given country, whereas today I think we need to be able to do it in a couple of days.

We achieve this through synchronisation, giving business leaders access to any number of executive competencies all over the world. This turnaround is something that would have been totally unbelievable 10 years ago and it is still hard to believe for most, but it is something we believe can be achieved with a more synchronised model.

How have changes in working patterns affected the industry?

The executive of today must integrate many different ways of working throughout their career. We've seen people working from home, part-time and on an interim basis. This is not exclusive to executives either. Therefore, being able to accommodate these people is extremely important, and the world of recruiters must work to take advantage of this. All these shifts are impacting business drastically and, in effect, altering the paradigm of the international executive search industry.

Are companies becoming more flexible in the way they expect their employees to work?

If I were to look at what we manage, our many sectors, countries, companies, and economic environments, I couldn't possibly find the right answer, because it really depends on the size of the company, its future and so much more. In India, for example, it's impossible to appoint an interim executive, whereas in the UK it's certainly possible. Also, in some large corporations it's just not possible, though in smaller organisations there is often more flexibility. At the end of the day, companies should be agile and flexible enough to adapt. It's not a choice, and they have to be able to cope with that.

Is there a growing trend of people working from home?

As I said before, flexibility is primarily about location. This is accepted more in Anglo-Saxon countries than in Latin countries right now, but it's spreading. When I was working in London, my manager was in Guildford and was only working two days a week, and this was as a head of department. What I'm saying is that this type of system works. It's not due to laziness; it's really seen as an efficient way to work. Commuting to London, for example, can be very time intensive, so saving those hours can be precious. Now, even in Latin countries, they're starting to adopt the view that home office working is an efficient organisational tool. And what was not accepted before is totally acceptable now.

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What economic and digital trends have affected the executive search industry?

First, globalisation. You cannot afford to stay in your country. Maybe if your country is China or the US then you can, but otherwise you need to move out, and fast. This needs to be done in a reactive and flexible way, which is obviously changing the industry.

Another significant trend is the rise of social networks, which have brought about a huge change in the way executives are communicating and in the way they are found by our industry. Obviously, the internet as a whole is also changing the industry and playing a key part in the globalisation process, but these are the macro trends that are impacting a lot of service industries, including the executive search business.

What societal changes are affecting the industry?

There are two main factors. Firstly, people live longer. For example, in our pool of over 14,000 top executives worldwide we take people of 60, 65 and even 70 to work on a permanent or part-time basis. Life span is increasing drastically, causing the duration of work life and diversity in the work place to increase simultaneously.

The second factor is connectivity, which has also brought vast societal changes and increased abilities for executives. It means that executives often cannot stay in the same country for the whole of their lives. I feel that this is affecting the industry, because working longer, being connected and willing to learn in new countries opens up new ways of attracting talent.

How do you see the executive search industry changing in the future?

I want to change the things that frustrated me in the past. I hope that we will move faster to find the right executive. Also, I'd like to work on removing the risk for the client. By this I mean if we don't find the right executive, then we are not paid. This is part of sharing the risk, and a lot of search firms are not taking responsibility. For me, this is a vital change, because the cost of failure in terms of executive recruitment is dramatic. It's dramatic for the morale of the people working for the company, the bottom line and for growth; it's just a disaster. And the way the executive search industry was structured before, it took too long to fix the failure and too long to remedy it.

By moving to a more efficient industry, by using the right technology, we can match the right people and get them in place. In doing this, I think we can help both the global economy and the global company. ■



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