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Guest Columnist: Exposing skeletons, before that new exec becomes that big mistake

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The hunt for a key executive, a CEO or CFO, typically requires three to six months of effort. No board of directors or hiring manager wants to arrive at the end of such a grueling journey only to find that the entire effort has failed and has to be repeated. It's emotionally debilitating and very costly.

But it's far better than an even more costly alternative: hiring the wrong person.

Too often hiring managers are so fatigued at the end of the drawn-out interviewing and evaluation gantlet that they agree to hire a candidate without making absolutely certain that the person is authentically who he or she purports to be. Quick decisions at this stage can lead to organizational, financial and public relations debacles that can take years to live down.

If there is a skeleton lurking in the candidate's closet, someone will eventually pay in a severe way for not unearthing it before hiring is complete and the individual is onboard collecting a high salary.

Of course, rigorous and comprehensive reference checking from all angles can help prevent such an occurrence. But the unmentionable truth is that reference checking in the first part of the 21st century is a highly problematical effort at best.

The process of talking to past employers about a candidate's job performance and character has been so thoroughly denuded by a variety of burgeoning employment laws and battering litigation that the people who are asked for input rarely venture beyond "name, rank and serial number" or other platitudes.

It doesn't take much insight to recognize that the reference names provided by candidates are only those individuals who will serve up glowing reports of superior performance and stalwart character. Going beyond those names authorized by the candidate, however, can put both the search consultant and the hiring company in violation of the Federal Fair Credit Reporting Act -- and in the untenable position of having to expose the unauthorized reference's comments in a written report that by law has to be provided to the candidate on request.

You can imagine where this kind of exposure of a reference's negative comments on a candidate seeking employment might lead. The lawyers win again.

So what can be done to ensure that the potential skeleton gets exhumed before it's too late?

While reference checking is a piece of the recruiting puzzle that can't be overlooked, smart employers go beyond this and have their consultants conduct in-depth investigative checks, including a sweep of public court records and credit worthiness. Again, in order for this to be legal, the candidate must sign a release form authorizing the check.

It's worth noting, though, that merely an intentional comment to a candidate that a release form for public records and credit checks will be required before a final hiring decision can be made is frequently enough to smoke out potential problems.

As soon as a candidate begins to balk, and sweat beads break out on his brow over signing such a document, it is apparent that something significant is lurking in the darkness of that closet.

Proceeding further with a direct question such as "is there something in your background that I should know about?" can be enlightening -- and may make engaging a private investigator unnecessary.

Aside from the ever-expanding tendency for job seekers to pad or outright falsify resumes, claim college degrees that they never obtained and otherwise mislead unsuspecting hiring managers, it is not at all unusual to discover that the articulate senior executive who so professionally parried the selection committee's probing questions also had a prostitution conviction five years earlier or a lien of over a million dollars placed against him as a result of a recent bankruptcy.

A company may choose, even after learning of a candidate's legal or financial transgressions in a background sweep of public records, to hire a candidate. But at least they did so completely informed about the risk they were choosing to undertake.

But companies and recruiters seeking new executives must be wary of being misled by a candidate who may be more skilled at being recruited than at the job for which he's being hired.

At root, the process of interviewing for any job, particularly at very senior levels, is a game, albeit a serious one. There are clear rules, and particular skills are required. As in other games, these skills can be practiced and honed until the practitioner is extremely proficient.

There are executives in the labor market who simply know how to shine during interviews, regardless of how tough and penetrating the questions.

Companies who predicate their hiring decisions only on a slick interview performance are risking a great deal.

Most candidates will come through a rigorous background check with few problems. Hiring managers would be shocked, though, to discover how often a serious skeleton emerges during backgrounding and interviewing that bedevils everyone involved in the selection process.

Still, it's better to identify a potential problem early and deal with it, even if it means starting the arduous search for talent all over again.

SO, IT'S YOU WITH SOMETHING IN THE CLOSET

If you're on the other side of the interview and the skeleton is in your closet, here are a few tips to deal with it:

- When you sense that you have generated "serious" interest from the company, be candid early with the recruiter in revealing skeletons so you and the recruiter can agree on a strategy as the process moves forward.
- Identify the good things that arose from a bad situation: what you learned, how you grew and evolved, as a result of having made a previous mistake.
- Try not to be defensive or hostile with either the client or the recruiter, since they have the "power position" in the recruitment process. Simply state the facts, take responsibility, and move to the positive "I'm a better, more effective person for having gone through this trying circumstance. Here's how."
- Marshal the resources of past references who know about your "mistake" and who can speak forcefully and articulately about how you have overcome, changed for the better, succeeded in new and different ways, etc.