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HOW TO GET THE EDGE IN A COMPETITIVE JOB MARKET:

TIPS FOR ORGANIZATIONS AND SENIOR MANAGEMENT PROFESSIONALS

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Many publications and news programs talk about the competitive job market. But what makes the market competitive in the arts and culture field? From the organization's perspective, there are issues of quality and/or quantity of the talent pool, its ability to provide an appropriate compensation package, its geographic desirability, public perception of the institution, past turnover history, strength of Board, the impact of its educational activities, financial stability, organizational maturity, and artistic quality among others. From the prospective employee's angle, there are competitive issues related to experience, education, accomplishments, employment longevity, teamwork capability, written and verbal communication ability, and many more. But what do both organizations and prospective employees share as a competitive challenge? The ability to effectively market and present themselves to one another. In this issue of *Arts Insights*, we'll provide a few tips for both organizations and senior management professionals on how best to get the competitive edge in the ever-evolving job market.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS ARE EVERYTHING

It's an old adage, but one that's more important now than ever before – you only get one chance to make a first impression. With the advent of the internet and easy access to information, be it factual or opinion-based, the first impression that both an organization and prospective employee make on each other can occur before one of the parties even realizes it has taken place. In this fast-paced marketing-driven, public-relations-obsessed world, what are a few things that each side can do to ensure that they are ready to put their best foot forward?

Organizations – Be Ready Internally

Quite simply, be ready for your search before announcing a senior management vacancy. Too many arts and cultural organizations simply dust off an old job description, take a few key words from it, and disseminate innocuous 100-word advertisements that would likely fit almost any organization. Whether or not your organization undertakes the search process on its own or uses an outside executive search firm, think about asking yourself the following questions before announcing a position vacancy:

1. *Do we have a clear sense of our own institution's strategic direction that shows what impact we, and ultimately the incoming candidate, are seeking to achieve in our community?* Senior management professionals are very picky, and rightly so, when selecting a new opportunity, and particularly when it comes to working in the arts and culture field. It's an impact industry with many senior professionals who are socially entrepreneurial and mindful of the mission-based importance of their organizations.
2. *What is our uniqueness as an organization and how do we want to present that to prospective candidates in a thorough and complete job description?* Ultimately, this is what will excite the candidate and encourage their interest in an opportunity. If the candidate is simply looking for a job for the sake of a job, it isn't likely going to be a good fit, so addressing organizational culture and its value will bring clarity to everyone involved.
3. *Do we agree internally and are we ready to clearly articulate our expectations of a senior management professional regarding their skills, experience, education, accomplishments, competencies, communication styles, and other objective qualifiers?* This is a must. If you're unclear what you want the person to do or has done, they won't know what value they bring to the table. Asking for the sun, the moon and the stars is fine, but you need to decide on your true priorities for the role. This step also helps build consensus with the internal team regarding the relationship between existing positions and the type of person that will best suit the team's needs.

4. *Do we have an effective transition management plan while the search is ongoing?* An organization must plan for an effective transition while searching for a new senior management professional. This includes being able to diplomatically articulate both the reasons for the vacancy and the steps that the organization is taking to ensure continuity during the search. This could mean designating an internal team member to fill the role(s) or outsourcing to an experienced senior management professional during the transition. This allows the organization to present a positive image to funders, and in some cases audiences, and provides for the necessary time to find the right candidate for the job. The last thing an organization wants to do is have a sense of urgency that causes them to select the wrong candidate. By the same token, candidates need to feel that they're not "walking into a mess," or into a job that has been a "no-win" for various professionals in the past.
5. *What is our current public image and how might we overcome any negative issues that currently exist for us?* Not all types of candidates are interested in organizations that are navigating troubled waters, or at the other extreme, those that have reached a maturity level where they are almost on autopilot. Organizations should look back at least a year into what has been publicly disseminated about them in newspapers, blogs, and other media. They should be prepared to address any misperceptions and to present a positive message to prospective candidates.
6. *Do we really know how this job fits into both our current organization and how the person entering the job might help us take advantage of key opportunities over the next three years?* Life in the arts and culture field is full of unexpected occurrences, but there should be a strong sense of the strategic priorities ahead, as each candidate will be motivated by different challenges. And not every candidate who has filled a similar role in another organization is the right one for yours. It is wise to be flexible in considering a broad variety of candidates and how their skills and experience might fit into the future.
7. *Do we have effective and thorough written materials that we can disseminate to candidates that encourage them to be interested in our organization and our community?* After the initial pre-screening of candidates, these materials are a great way to keep good candidates interested while ensuring them that they are being considered. An effective screening process takes time and ongoing cultivation of candidates throughout is needed. Comprehensive materials are a great way to present your message positively. Incorporating internal organizational perspectives and community images, aside from what candidates will find from general public sources, may help overcome any preconceived notions that they may have about your organization or community.
8. *Do we know what we're willing to pay, at least approximately, and how that stacks up against what other similar organizations in our industry and/or geographic community pay for comparable jobs with similar responsibilities and challenges?* Many organizations still shoot from the hip in this regard, basing their pay on what the last person made or what they "feel" the job is worth. Keep an open mind when going into the process, but at least have a general idea of what's possible. Sometimes the process or person needed dictates the market rate for a position, so being too rigid or narrow won't advance the organization effectively. Remember that investment in human resources is as an investment in the future of the institution.
9. *Have we selected a well-balanced search committee and/or an executive search firm that will represent our institution fairly, objectively, and positively, and do they have clarity on their roles and responsibilities?* If the candidate doesn't feel good about the initial gatekeepers and leaders of your organization, it will become an uphill battle to convince them that there is more behind the curtain later in the process. And if the search committee members don't have time to meet the candidates or understand their duties or roles in the screening process, it will become extremely difficult to move forward expeditiously and successfully.
10. *Have we convincingly presented our arts institution and cultural community as an attractive "quality of life" package to the prospective candidate?* Many arts institutions do not highlight all that is attractive about the job because they haven't considered the entire package for the candidate and their family – a great city, an affordable cost of living, quality schools, good healthcare, a variety of cultural activities, and outdoor activities. Make certain you feature these benefits and include accolades from respected publications and research studies in your materials.

Prospective Employees – Know Thy Self

Senior management professionals and those aspiring to senior positions need to make sure that they're well prepared with the best written materials possible, including a knock-out cover letter and a resume that clearly identifies their expertise for a position. Even before you send in that first introduction to a prospective employer or its search firm, there are a few things that you should ask yourself:

1. *How well do I know myself, my communication style, soft skills, and have I objectively assessed my own strengths and weaknesses?* Most senior managers are pretty self-aware and know what they're seeking, but it never hurts to revisit these issues when considering making a transition. It is critical to understand yourself, as it becomes extremely difficult to "be yourself" in the interview process that will follow if you don't really know who you are. There are assessment tools and qualified executive coaches across the country that can objectively help you focus on these issues, and the best time to use them is before you're submitting any application.
2. *What do I really want from a new opportunity?* This is somewhat tied to the above, but people have a variety of personal interests, attitudes and values that are important to them. Is the new job about money, geography, tradition, the art form, social impact, spreading knowledge, career advancement, the people involved, or a combination of these? The rewards we each seek are important to understand in advance.
3. *Will my quality of life be better in a new organization and in a new position, or is the "grass always greener?"* Most seasoned executives have been around long enough to know the difference, but it is always a good idea to think long and hard about this issue. Talk to colleagues or draw up your own list of pluses and minuses related to your current job before thinking about making a leap. The core reasons for your decision to leave need to be explored, as well as addressing whether or not you have done everything possible to make your current job a successful partnership with your organization.
4. *Is this the right time for me and my family to make a change, and have I fully explored the ramifications of making this job change and/or a geographic move?* Sometimes candidates are so drawn to an organization and its impact that they forget to consider the importance of family consensus on the move and its effect on their quality of life. Considering the importance of a true life balance can make the difference in being happy on the job and at home.
5. *Do I have a portfolio of materials that, if needed, show the quality of work that I have overseen?* Regardless of whether you have held senior management positions in development, marketing, education, finance, artistic administration, or the CEO role, each position is involved in producing or overseeing the production of printed materials, recordings, videos, news articles, strategic plans, and other items of interest. You may not have to show examples of each to a prospective employer, but they should be on hand just in case.
6. *Are there other skills and competencies I bring from other fields and disciplines in my professional and personal life that relate to this job?* If you are moving from one professional field to another, you should bring traits that might enhance your job performance and make you a far better candidate than someone without this professional experience. At a non-profit arts organization, professional experience in the for-profit world and/or non-profit worlds of education, healthcare, and social services often bring new perspectives that translate effectively to challenges facing non-profit arts organizations today. Your own volunteer work can also be an important factor in demonstrating your commitment to a community or cause.
7. *Are there a few key people who I can take into my confidence as prospective references in the event that the search process moves forward?* A thorough process will involve reference checking in some form that includes key people from your current and past employers. Maintaining these positive relationships is critical to consensus building once the employer advances you in the search process. Timing may be tricky when quietly looking for a new post, but those closest to you will be key to your future success. Don't forget the other old adage about not burning bridges, as the reference checking process may also involve speaking to those whom you've known or with whom you have worked that are not on your list.

8. *Have I thought about the salary and benefits package that works best for me and my family?* Be realistic in your expectations and honest and upfront in your negotiations. Obviously, it can ebb and flow based on negotiations and new pieces of information, but candidates should consider what is most important in any package and on what points you're willing or unwilling to compromise.
9. *Am I able to communicate with passion and knowledge about the art form I am hired to represent?* Some candidates don't have the exact organization experience in a specific art form or cultural institution. That's okay. But there must be a way to effectively discuss the art form or your passion for it with informed Board Members, staff members, donors, and patrons. Senior management skills in other non-profit disciplines may be transferable, but the enthusiasm and knowledge about the specific art form needs careful attention and consideration before making a move to a new opportunity.
10. *What is my timing for making a transition to something new?* This may be difficult to pinpoint, but you should at least have a general idea of how many weeks or months it will take you to make a graceful transition out of one position and into another.

THE DATING PHASE

Now that you've each done your own self-assessment, have been honest with yourself about your strengths and weaknesses, and have done consensus building with your organizational or family "teams," it's time to dip your toe into the talent or job opportunity pool. Once the written announcements are disseminated they can travel like wildfire through various media, including the internet and e-marketing, industry associations, word-of-mouth, and print advertisements. But what's next?

Organizations – Get to Know the Candidate

Gaining the competitive edge at this stage is a key to success for organizations. Print advertisements are the tip of the proverbial iceberg in effectively recruiting candidates. Below are a few ideas of what your organization might do to get the best candidate, regardless if you're using a search firm or doing the search internally.

1. *Be Proactive!* It is amazing that there are still organizations that believe an advertisement will quickly result in candidates beating down their door. Your ideal candidates may not be familiar enough with the organization, its people, goals, or impact to respond to such an advertisement. Your organization and/or its search firm must call colleagues for candidate recommendations, as well as approach those who appear to have the qualifications and personal attributes to fill the role. We all want to be wanted, so a little wooing in the dating phase is always appreciated. The search process for qualified senior management professionals is not a passive one.
2. *Don't rush!* As a wise colleague repeated at many points in a recent process where she was leading the search committee, "the process is the process." It simply takes time to review materials, schedule meetings, coordinate interviews, build consensus, negotiate offers, and ultimately get the right candidate into the organization. Generally, if you can prepare, announce, interview, select your candidate, and have them start within 30 days, you probably haven't completed an effective or thorough process. In the same way that you wouldn't likely ask someone to marry you after knowing them for a short time, it is important for many stakeholders to get to know top candidates and to view them in a variety of interview and social situations.
3. *Don't Drag!* Unfortunately, some organizations become *too* enamored with the process. It is critical to have a search committee chair, CEO, or search firm that keeps the team focused on the ultimate goal. Some organizations enjoy window-shopping so much, that they begin to lose credibility as good candidates are put in a holding pattern and prospective candidates become concerned that the process has gone on too long. It's all about external perceptions and timing. Managing these perceptions throughout the search will be key to success. "Getting to yes" on all sides of the consensus building process is extremely important.
4. *Be Organized!* Typically, senior management candidates spend a good amount of time coming into your organization, and your search committee and stakeholders will be expending emotional and physical energy getting to know the candidates. Managing time wisely makes for a happy group that can present a positive image for the organization with the candidate. A clear and specific

itinerary for the candidate, including arrivals, departures, meeting times, names and positions of stakeholders being engaged, contact information, facility tour schedules, lodging arrangements, and other logistics will make the candidate more comfortable and show them that you have your act together. In a confidential search, participants are typically invited to be involved in various stages of the process without necessarily being aware of a candidate's full schedule.

5. *Be Prepared!* A systematic approach where similar sets of interview questions, assessment tools, and timing structures are employed for each candidate is usually the most effective. At the end of the process, organizations need to ensure that they have ascertained all the necessary information that they require while giving stakeholders and candidates appropriate time to bond. Ultimately an organization can't just go on "feeling good" with a candidate, as there are many likeable people out there who just aren't right for certain jobs, organizations, or institutional challenges.
6. *Be Honest!* In the long run, full disclosure is best in performing an effective search. There should be as few surprises as possible related to leadership changes, financial conditions, strategic direction, political challenges, or other institutional and community issues.
7. *Treat the Candidate Well!* In the same way that an organization would cultivate a donor it should cultivate a candidate. The organization is making a big investment in a senior manager, so it should consider housing out-of-town candidates in appropriate accommodations, paying for their spouse or significant other to join them during at least one of the interview stages, and making the process as enjoyable as possible. It is important to provide both personal attention to and down time for the candidate. These actions not only show the candidate that you respect their interest in the position but understand that they are making a significant life choice by joining your team.

Prospective Employees – Clarity and Focus

Some of the same issues that organizations consider above should also be a guiding force for prospective employees. Some of these include:

1. *Be Prepared!* It should be somewhat easy with today's technology, and with appropriate advance materials sent by prospective employers, to be prepared. Reviewing an organization's website, analyzing their tax returns (www.Guidestar.org), speaking with colleagues, and experiencing their programs, if possible, will help you gain invaluable insights.
2. *Be Proactive, but Follow Protocol!* Strong candidates respect the structure and restrictions imposed by potential employers during the executive search process. Follow the initial application instructions as carefully as possible, and don't send materials that aren't requested. Your communication skills and ability to follow instructions are almost always taken into consideration. The same applies once you're in the process, as excluding key players at any stage can be perceived as disrespectful and a sign of how you might respond once on the job.
3. *Be Clear and Concise!* Typically a phone interview will be the first stage of the process. There is a lot of information that needs to be obtained in a relatively short period of time, so it is very important to answer the questions that are asked in a clear and concise manner. This includes being able to articulate your reasons for making a change, which you likely addressed in the preparation stage above.
4. *Manage Your Time Wisely!* One of the trickiest times for candidates comes when they get to the second stage, which includes various individual and group interviews. It's tough to adapt to new people quickly while significantly impressing them. With a specific itinerary, you can stay aware of the message that you're meant to deliver. If the interviewer says "please take 5-10 minutes to tell us about your background," take it at face value. A long monologue or presenting irrelevant information won't win any points. Demonstrate your skills and strengths through specific examples that show your positive career impact and look for non-verbal cues that the interviewer(s) may want to interject or follow-up on a specific point that you've made. And keep an eye on the clock, so that you know that you have time to present your best attributes.

5. *Oui, oui, oui!* There are definitely times when answering a question with the word “we” should be used, as no one person makes an organization successful. But there are likely more times where those interviewing want to hear the specific role that you played and the accomplishments that you achieved as part of your team. Modesty is fine, but this is not the time where “we” should be consistently used, as the interviewers need to get to the point where the organization can fully embrace a “yes” to your candidacy.
6. *Ask Insightful Questions!* You’ve had a lot of time to research the organization and gather preliminary information, so your questions need to show that you know your stuff. Questions should provide needed information to learn about the organization and its culture and enable you to evaluate the job opportunity properly. A well structured process gives you both time to be the interviewee and the interviewer. Questions should also provide an illustration that you understand the specific challenges and opportunities of the job and allow you to communicate your expertise in meeting those challenges.
7. *Be Honest!* Karma is everything in the world of job searches and being honest makes all the difference. Employers will check references, verify education and dates of employment, and do their best to discover anything they can about you during the process, so it’s best to be up front and address your life’s challenges head-on. It’s through our mistakes and victories that we learn.

A MATCH MADE IN HEAVEN

The end of the search process can be one of the trickiest parts. Both organization and prospective employee are now basking in their adoration for one another, and they know that they’re ready to take the next step - together. But there’s still one remaining issue – the final negotiation. As in any relationship where emotions can become involved, it can be difficult to talk about compensation and employment package issues. Those organizations that use outside search firms may have an advantage, as there’s an objective intermediary who can guide both sides through this final stage. Again, both sides need to prioritize their package and know what a make-or-break deal looks and feels like. In true negotiating style, both sides need to know the ramifications of “no deal.” But with the right planning, consensus building, open communication, and objectivity throughout the process, a healthy and happy match can indeed be found and negotiated.

Organizations – Be Flexible

Organizations seeking true “advancement” must be willing to stretch in order to close the deal with the right candidate. Being creative in your deal-making should minimize the risk of losing a good candidate. A good candidate wants to know that the organization is willing to make the appropriate investment in their collective future. Unfortunately it isn’t quite like buying a house where there is another available just around the corner.

Prospective Employees – Be Flexible

Candidates must also be willing to compromise on something in order to close the deal with the right organization. Some candidates are unwilling to negotiate and want everything upfront before they have proven themselves to the organization. Or they feel that they somehow have an organization “backed into a corner,” and suddenly make dramatic demands that are outside of the realm of what the organization previously communicated were its compensation parameters. Most organizations want to know that the candidate is reasonable and committed to their team, as well as to the mission, vision, and goals of the institution.

CONCLUSION

Both organizations and prospective employees have much to consider in gaining an edge in the competitive job market. But with careful thought, thorough planning, and flexibility, each can achieve stellar results and a happy relationship.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION ON HOW ARTS CONSULTING GROUP CAN HELP YOU OR YOUR ORGANIZATION GAIN AN EDGE IN THE COMPETITIVE JOB MARKET, PLEASE CALL US TOLL FREE AT (888) 234-4236.

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