

Increasing Clout of Recruiters Stirs Debate among Philanthropy Experts

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Chronicle of Philanthropy

April 3, 2011

Getting to the top at a foundation rarely happens anymore without the involvement of a headhunter.

Trustees often lack the time and resources to conduct a search themselves, so they ask search firms to help them draft job descriptions, identify and vet candidates, and act as intermediaries between job seekers and the hiring committee.

That influence has stirred a debate about the role of search firms—and in particular the four that typically conduct searches for large foundations—and whether they are doing enough to help philanthropy find the best people.

Some people argue that because headhunters have little incentive to find edgy or unusual candidates—their main objective is to please the board—they don't bring forward daring choices.

“Search firms significantly limit the kinds of candidates that boards are exposed to,” says Aaron Dorfman, executive director of the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, a watchdog group in Washington. “They should be more courageous and more intentional about issues of diversity and experience when presenting boards with a pool of candidates.”

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