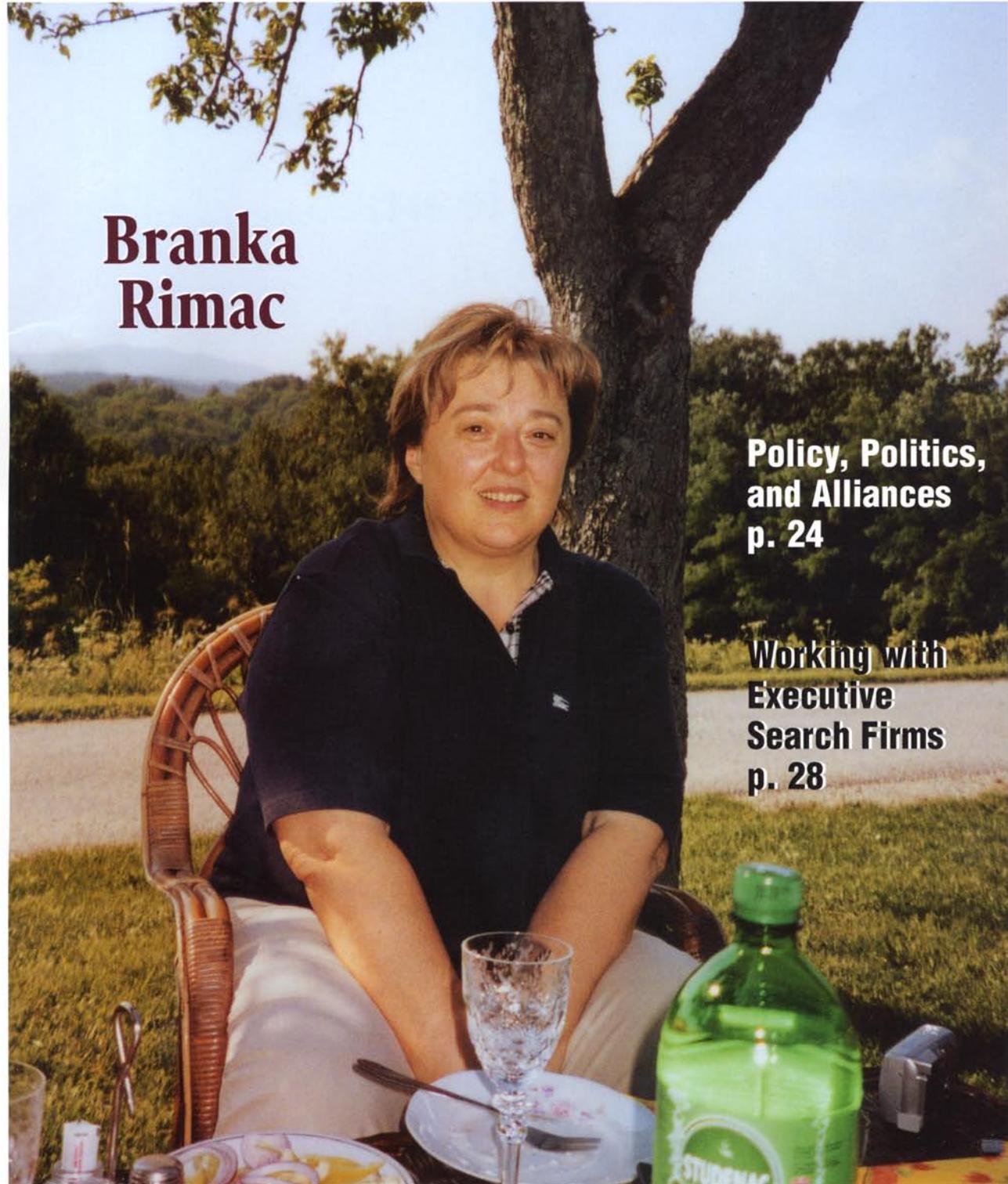


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Why Take the Call?

Working with Executive Search Firms

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You are working at your desk and receive a call from an executive recruiter who is interested in discussing an executive-level nursing position available in your region. What is your response? If you are like many nursing leaders, you tell the recruiter that you are happy in your current position and hang up.

When you manage a call this way, however, you eliminate a powerful networking opportunity that you may need in the future. You may also inadvertently create a negative perception about your interpersonal skills that could eliminate you from consideration for positions that would be of interest to you.

What if you indicated to the recruiter that you are happy in your current position and flattered that he or she called? This approach leaves the door open for future conversations and networking opportunities. You could also offer to share the opportunity with other colleagues in your community. This lays the groundwork for a relationship that you can draw from for future referrals and keeps you current on the changing landscape of the health care employment environment.

As content as you may be in your position, workplace environments do change. An organizational fit that was excellent with one chief executive officer may not be with his or her successor. Vestal¹ recently wrote about nursing leaders who had failed to build networks with colleagues and executive recruiters that would have proved valuable when they found themselves seeking a new leadership position. There may also be times in your nursing career when you reach an impasse and ask yourself, "Is that all there is to my career?"

Nurses should consider working with executive search firms at the beginning of their leadership careers, whether

or not they are looking to change jobs. A good executive recruiter as part of your networking circle can be invaluable in providing counseling about career opportunities that you may not have even considered.

FACTS ABOUT EXECUTIVE SEARCH FIRMS

Networking with one or more executive recruiters over the course of a professional career has been a long-accepted practice outside of the health care environment, but nurses have been slow to welcome and embrace the potential of these relationships. This is the method of recruitment for leadership positions at certain levels in almost every organizational environment today, including health care. Knowledge about executive search firms and what they can and cannot do to assist you is an important step to strategically managing your nursing leadership career.

There are basically two types of search firms. The distinctions between the two and the business models they use are important to consider.

Retainer Firms

Retainer firms are hired to fill a specific position. They may also be kept on by their clients to fill midlevel to senior level positions that are difficult to fill. When retainer firms are used, they have an exclusive contract to fill a position. The contract includes payment to the search firm from the outset.

Essentially, a search firm's time is committed for the duration of the search. Retainer firms are hired because of their research expertise and ability to identify and present for interview a highly qualified pool of candidates. When given an assignment, they assemble a short list of candidates. You are probably part of a small candidate pool if a retainer firm is considering you for a position. If you work for an organization that has retained a search firm to fill an upper management position, regardless of your qualifications you may be considered off-limits for positions in other organizations that the search firm is seeking to fill.² Networking with executive recruiters from more than one firm is an important consideration if your organization routinely uses retainer firms.

A breach of trust in your relationship with a search consultant can have serious consequences as to whether you are ultimately referred for a position.

work. It is important for you to know if the person at the other end of the phone, whom you may trust to represent you in the marketplace, has credibility and a proven track record of success in search and recruitment. Synergy or chemistry between your and the search consultant should also be considered.

Word of mouth and referrals from satisfied clients or candidates is usually the best way to approach an executive search firm if you are interested in beginning the networking process to make people aware of your interests in the job market. Some resources to locate search firms include the Association of Nurse Executives' Consultant Directory,³ the International Association of Corporate and Professional Recruitment,⁴ and the book, *Rites of Passage at \$100,000 to \$1 Million+: Your Insider's Lifetime Guide to Executive Job Changing and Faster Career Progress in the 21st Century.*⁵

Contingency Firms

A second type of search firm is a *contingency firm*. These firms work on both an exclusive contingency and a general contingency basis. They receive payment only if their candidate is hired for the position. If a contingency firm is considering you for a position, you may be part of a large pool of applicants submitted by multiple firms. Most often they fill entry to midlevel leadership positions.

Employment Agencies

Employment agencies should not be confused with search firms. Employment agencies are entirely different in their structure, scope, set of rules, and licensure requirements. Additionally, an employment agency can require a candidate to pay part or all of the recruiting fee.

Other Considerations

Whether the executive search firm is a contingency or a retainer firm, some general guidelines always apply. Neither potential candidates nor candidates ever pay the search firm. The fees are paid by the organization that hires for the position. The executive search firm's client is the hiring facility and not the individual applying for the position. Some executive search firms, regardless of where they are located, work nationally or internationally, so do not limit your networking to firms in your state or region.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT EXECUTIVE SEARCH FIRM

When called by a search consultant, ask questions about the firm and how long the individual has worked in recruitment. Some executive search firms specialize in health care or have recruiters who do. The best networking opportunities come from executive search firms with broad experience in health care that represent organizations you would potentially be interested in.

The average length of time that individuals work as recruiters is less than 2 years, but many executive search professionals make search and recruitment their life's

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM AN EXECUTIVE SEARCH FIRM

The key to effective networking is finding an executive search firm that will listen to your needs. Good search consultants are interested in filling a position, but only if it is the right fit for the candidate and the organization. Quality search firms take the time to understand the challenges and problems of an organization before presenting candidates with the right skill and experience mix to move that organization forward. You need to be wary of comments like, "This is the perfect job for you." You may also not be referred for a position by a firm if the organizational fit does not seem to be good or if there are stronger candidates in the applicant pool. Executive recruiters should be able to provide you with a good overview of an organization prior to your interview. The savvy candidate should also pay attention to any advice given by executive recruiters about dress code and organizational norms.

Confidentiality in talking with executive recruiters is often a concern to nurse leaders who are employed. Executive search firm recruiters should be advised that your résumé may be shared with a client only after you have given them permission to do so and know the name of the client. If you are interested in pursuing an opportunity presented to you by an executive search firm recruiter, do not circumvent the recruiter or contact people in the organization to inquire about the position. At this point, the executive search recruiter needs to be involved in assessing whether the opportunity is right for you. A breach of trust in your relationship with a search consultant can have serious consequences as to whether you are ultimately referred for a position.

NETWORKING OPPORTUNITIES

Periodic conversations with executive search firms that have expertise in health care can provide you with information about changes in the health care employment environment. Executive search consultants spend a great deal of time networking and sharing information about windows

of opportunity in the marketplace. They are also aware of changes in regional employment markets and in the degree of difficulty in recruiting for certain organizational positions before data are published. Executive search firms may be able to provide chief nursing officers with good data about opportunities to move into chief executive officer or chief operational officer positions in your location. They are also aware of changes in the skill sets and educational requirements in the current marketplace. "What trends are you seeing in the health care and nursing job market?" is a key networking question to ask executive recruiters who can provide invaluable information to nursing leaders.

PLANNING YOUR NEXT CAREER MILESTONE

Webster's dictionary defines *milestone* as a significant event or point of development.⁶ Every nursing leader experiences points of development in his or her career.⁷ With the rapid changes in health care, *windows of opportunity* to create your own milestones have expanded. Networking with executive search firms can provide you with insight into what these milestones may be for your leadership career. "What career opportunities do you see for experienced nursing leaders with my skill set and interests?" is an important question to periodically ask of executive search consultants who are part of your networking circle. Their answers may require you to think outside of your current comfort zone where career opportunities may be abundant.⁷ Consider the following story involving two of the authors of this article.

Karen's Story

Karen Thornton described the experience of being recruited for a position by Bobbie Stone.

My career path had been in the nursing academic environment. My only experience with executive search firms was through my friends in master of business administration programs who talked about using headhunters to help them get jobs after business school. My first contact with Bobbie's firm was through an announcement for the position I now hold as a director of nursing quality and research. I had not considered a move from teaching in a university setting, but the announcement was so beautifully written that I was intrigued. So I took a chance and made the call. As this was my first time working with an executive recruiter, I was really impressed that she asked me during our conversation if I had any previous experience with executive search firms and then said, "Well...let me tell you what we do and how we work with the candidate and the organization."

Bobbie was quite up-front in her questions as to whether I really wanted to make the move into a hospital environment. The most important thing she did was to carefully explain the type of position and expectations of the organization. This was helpful, because I did not have a reference point as to what would be expected in an administrative position in the hospital environment. She also described the nature of the work. In doing this, she asked questions that gave me a chance to tell her about my experiences in academia.

Bobbie was able to help me see similarities in both positions and gain confidence about my ability to be successful in the job. I found the executive search firm to be supportive throughout the process, from application to hire. Discussing money is something I was not comfortable doing. She carefully explained the firm's role in the process and goal of creating a win-win situation for both me and the organization. A face-to-face meeting with her early in the recruitment process really helped us develop a stronger rapport, and I felt much more confident about our working together.

Since placement, I have maintained an ongoing relationship with the firm and have found it helpful. I appreciate the intermittent support and contact that I received during this major career milestone. I would definitely use (and recommend to others) an executive search firm in future career planning. I know from this experience that a firm helped me to both clarify my professional goals and find the right job to match my needs.

CONCLUSION

Today's nursing reality is all about choices. The key to positioning yourself for your next career milestone is developing a strong network before you need it.⁷ Executive search firm consultants may be the key players that are currently missing from your network. Next time, take the call from an executive recruiter and you may be surprised at how developing a networking relationship can enrich your career.

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