

Developing a Candidate Pool

When an organization initiates a search to fill a senior management position, a key step in the process is to develop a strong list of potential candidates. A very important role for search committee members is to tap into their respective networks to build a candidate pool. You might think of the outreach process as a “network development campaign.” The search committee should ask questions such as, “How can we target the right kinds of people, including both those who might be candidates and those who might be good sources of candidates? How can we ensure that we are reaching candidates beyond ‘the usual suspects?’ Who do we know who knows those kinds of people?”

On a very concrete level, effective search committees put together a chart with committee members’ names, individuals to be contacted by each of them, and a “referred” column in which ideas shared can be noted along with any general comments. This chart is a living document that grows during the search. It also becomes a powerful tool for future searches (imagine those individuals you would like to recommend for a different opportunity, even if they weren’t ideal for this one) or simply for building the organization’s connections within the community.

But it is important to go beyond personal networks to broaden your reach to potential candidates. In addition to using personal networks of staff and board to find both candidates and sources of candidates, organizations can take advantage of media such as newspapers and online job posting sites. The key is to seek out the most appropriate channels for the specific networks you are trying to tap into—for example, the [Financial Executives Networking Group](#) or other finance-related networks if you are looking for a CFO.

Online job sites are another option. Although a Bridgespan Group survey of approximately 75 nonprofit employers found that, at any given time, roughly 90% of open positions are not posted on online job boards, organizations that do use online job boards find that the boards help them cast a broader net for their searches and are particularly helpful in reaching out to candidates in key functional areas or in different geographies.

The process of developing the candidate pool is especially critical if building a diverse team is a priority. One key mistake organizations make is moving to the interview stage before getting a significant level of diversity in the initial pool. Getting a diverse slate of candidates requires extra effort because the networks of any given individual or organization tend to resemble that person or organization and therefore to be fairly homogenous. Moving beyond the typical networks means, among other things, not relying solely on generic job sites and databases, but rather finding channels into target communities, such as using local newspapers that circulate in specific neighborhoods, associations like [The League \(of Black Ivy Alumni\)](#) or the [National Society of Hispanic MBAs](#), or conferences focused on a specific group or an issue relevant to the groups you are seeking to reach.

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The candidate development phase is one in which organizations often find professional search firms to be of tremendous help, given their strongly established networks of both sources and candidates. A persistent and disciplined approach, however, will help an organization run a successful search using only internal resources. For example, search team members might send emails to their own contact lists and reach out directly to potential sources of candidates. To make these outreach emails and conversations most effective, team members must be in clear agreement on the top three to five characteristics of the ideal candidate (as defined earlier in the process). Consistently evaluating candidates against the same three to five characteristics will let the team focus on the most qualified candidates.