



Audacious Headhunters – Advocating Outlier Talent

By Claire Harbour and Antoine Tirard

It's been a while since most headhunters relied on their “little black book” but currently, with pressure from their clients for safety and speed, allied with the latest data analytic tools, there is a danger of dull, predictable candidates being churned out for results that serve but do not shine.

We started this investigation with the analysis that we had heard at a panel on careers in a London club from a prominent headhunter who suggested: “Search consultants, however naturally creative, find themselves stuck in a position of risk mitigation on behalf of their clients. More often than not, they end up placing the candidate who is the closest to being the carbon copy of the predecessor – minus whatever faults s/he was deemed to have”. This damning conclusion did not sit well with us, however close it was to a possible reality. While we don't deny the importance of hiring for required skills and experience, we

also hold the belief that organisations should take into greater consideration candidates' potential and personality in their recruitment decisions. So we set out to identify a number of headhunters who have been braver: the audacious ones, who added outlier candidates into the mix, and managed to convince their clients to hire them. The stories that follow shed some light on four extraordinary searches and uncover the rationale and impact of hiring beyond the obvious talent.

Tried and Tested CEO Wanted - Nonprofit

When Kathleen was asked to find a new CEO for Project Bread, a Boston-based anti-hunger organization, she knew this would be an unusually challenging search, as the incumbent CEO had been in place for over 20 years, with all the complex legacy and allegiances that one might imagine.

After an initial sounding of the full range of

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stakeholders in the organization, it was clear that there was a strong need for a strategist, as well as a crisis leader with strong fund-raising skills. The board was calling for a tried and tested candidate, ideally with the sort of strong personality and history that are commonly pursued and successful in the not-for-profit field.

The long list was a challenge, and the skill mix required more than a little unusual. Not only were they seeking out a candidate with external presence, convincing leadership skills and donor savvy, but they also needed someone with the vision and conviction to conceive and deliver a new strategy. There was agreement from the outset to consider those outside the strict confines of the food security field, but there was a sense that the candidate must have a background in some aspect of “helping and supporting vulnerable people”.

As the list evolved, with more conventional names being added, Kathleen continued to source information and recommendations around her. She was intrigued by the advice that a trusted leader gave her, to contact Erin, who was at that time in a director position at another Boston non-profit organization. The board of Project Bread had formally stipulated that they wanted an experienced CEO, so this made Erin a theoretical non-starter. But Kathleen’s source had underlined the fact that she was CEO material and had been intently skilling up and filling any gaps, such as fund-raising, in her bio, so that she would be ready for bigger opportunities as they came along. He also had a great deal to say about her on a human scale, describing her as kind but tough. Kathleen received another glowing recommendation from a second trusted advisor, and so made the call.

“When I met Erin, I was blown away!”, recalls Kathleen. “She had fire in her belly and could tick all the boxes across the spectrum of what

was needed by Project Bread”. Erin had recently turned around an ailing government agency, doing remarkable work, and, what is more, had a personal connection to food insecurity which made her conviction all the more credible, authentic and compelling. The fact remained, however, that Erin was lacking the CEO experience, despite her natural gravitas and the power of what emerged as she spoke and engaged.

Carefully orchestrated meetings and interviews went ahead with the recruitment committee and others in groups and one-to-one. Kathleen had taken the time to show due process with the rest of the search, and to show and introduce enough of the more traditional candidates. But she was confident that, between her facilitation and diplomacy, and Erin’s charisma, things would work out the way she believed they needed to.

Some salient positive aspects that struck the various decision-makers were how deeply and singularly Erin prepared for meetings: she created personal connections through her sincerity, backed up by strong research to find common ground. At the same time, she had massive knowledge and understanding of how to lead and rejuvenate complex organizations like theirs, benefiting from a mix of experience, intuition and native curiosity. She also managed the tensions and competing agendas of the various stakeholders with a delicate touch, federating all quickly and easily around her vision. What is more, she was able to be honest and convincing about the caveats and “gaps” that sprang from not having been a CEO, but this was done so convincingly that she made it appear more of a virtue than a drawback.

In the end, the conclusion was that Erin stood out by far: she was the hungriest for the role, and the most able to take it on, while any of the more experienced alternates still in play came with baggage that she would not be hindered by. The process was certainly helped along by the fact

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that a key reference came from the former state governor, who indicated deep and positive knowledge of her skills and positives. And so, it was unanimously that the board agreed to hire Erin, towards the end of 2017. She is still in the role now and, as Kathleen says, “working 23 hours out of 24 during the challenging Covid-19 time, making appeals and reports on TV, working with donors and other community, corporate and government partners, and generally being the total rockstar she has always been”.

Reflecting on the process, Kathleen muses that “on paper, or with any AI, Erin would have been weeded out long before any meeting”. She also adds that perhaps in the non-profit sector, the need for the “mission piece” is so great that this creates a little more latitude for creativity. Either way, this story is a roaring success.

Russian Talent - Business Growth Guaranteed

Yulia*, a maths and computer science genius from Soviet-era Russia, did not wait long, once the wall came down, and Moscow was open for commerce, to approach one of the best-known global computer brands. She built a huge business for the company, as employee number two, leading the commercial side of the business. Over a period of almost 19 years, Yulia grew a meteoric career, culminating in a prominent role, based in New York, as VP of a substantial global division with a turnover of several billions of dollars. She was not necessarily the kind of person one would imagine being enticed away to a somewhat slow, male-dominated global logistics company, based in Switzerland, and in dire need of a turnaround. And yet, this is what happened.

The vision came to the headhunter, Peter*, as he considered the needs and constraints, in his usual “fortunately dyslexic way”. He tends to see problems differently to his straighter-line-

thinking colleagues. This time, what he saw was a large logistics business, with significant client relationships and much at stake, so he started to imagine that he might find the future COO at an IT services company instead of just looking in the pool of logistics experts. There was however an additional challenge: the company was owned and driven by a well-known private equity firm, who were not known for their lateral thinking when it came to hiring. They tended to be more fans of the plug-and-play model.

Yet, Matthew*, the CEO of the company was an outlier himself, and although by this stage adept in logistics, had come from a well-known global FMCG brand background. So, along with Peter’s hunch that the star candidate might be found outside the logistics box, there was some open-mindedness on his part, too.

The search began by mapping the market and looking for all the logical, classical candidates, of whom there were a number. And when Peter went to meet Yulia in New York, although he was excited and curious about the possibility of her outlier role, he was not really sure that she would be right. However, in his words, “She totally blew me away with her extraordinary energy, drive, intellect, openness and clear thinking.” This indicated that she would have the capacity to adapt and learn fast, which she would need to do, given her lack of sector experience.

At this point, in Peter’s mind the search was done. But now came two separate and lengthy processes, which could blow up in his face at any time. Firstly, he needed to convince both the CEO and the board of her suitability and star status, and next he would have some selling to do of a role in a suburb of Basel!

Fortunately, Matthew was enthusiastic, and championed Yulia wholeheartedly. While he supported her as the top candidate, the challenge was now to convince the board. Between Matthew and Peter, a campaign was waged,

*Name disguised

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carefully and strategically. The PE firm, with its demand for instant competency, and its context of being driven by numbers and data in everything, needed to be shown the whole process, to observe that the search had been complete, methodical, and effective. So, the “black and white” candidates were introduced first, to show that all viable individuals had been considered.

And then, once the dreary stage was ready for her entrance, Yulia was introduced, in all her technicolor brilliance. They kept two other conventional candidates in play, but Yulia’s fit and pizzazz were incomparable. Peter even managed to “sell” her, despite demanding that extra time be built in for adequate onboarding – almost unheard of in the PE world.

On the other side of the table, Yulia was not convinced by the idea of leaving New York and her comfortable, glamorous life there. But she remained open-minded throughout. Matthew played a key role, and chaired all meetings both with and about her, selling the deal progressively to both sides. Yulia voiced all her concerns as she went along, but kept on exploring, and finally what carried her was her intellectual curiosity, as well as her recognition that if she did not jump soon from her IT ship, she would be stuck at the top, and less agile to switch later.

Peter reflects on what a pleasure it was for him to play a role in making such impact. Yulia did an outstanding job in her new role, and dazzled the whole team over the three years she was there. Peter’s conclusion is that this was less the case of an “audacious headhunter” than it was of an “amazing candidate”. No doubt the answer lies somewhere between the two, but the magic certainly happened.

Digital Officer Needed - Luxury Group

Fabrice had just joined the Parisian office of a prominent executive search firm when he

received an unexpected phone call, directed specifically for him, and not for any of the more established stars of the firm. On the other end of the line was a senior strategic recruiter from LVMH, wondering if he was interested in pitching for a highly confidential, global search. Fabrice took up the challenge and met the recruiters to find out that the group was looking for someone to help them “lead the digital transformation for the Group”, but that there was not much clarity beyond this.

Fabrice had helped to build a digital agency in New York fifteen years earlier, which LVMH had attempted to buy, and thus was already familiar with the luxury group’s digital strategy. This knowledge, plus research including deep study of 15 years of annual reports for the group won Fabrice the project, despite being neither famous nor a partner, unlike his competition. He arrived at the final pitch, along with the partner from his firm, attired in jeans and trendy casual wear, as if his plane had been late. The partner scolded him, but Fabrice is confident that this look set up the right environment for what was to come later.

From then on, the whole project became an “outlier”. Fabrice was given a very short briefing in a meeting with the heads of group HR. There was no job description, nor even a clear plan about where this person would fit in the organization. The clearest indication came from Arnault’s youngest son, Alexandre, who came to the meeting. He was only in his mid 20’s, had studied computer science and engineering at the same school as Fabrice, and was deeply engaged in making this critical search work.

Alexandre outlined how important it would be that the candidate understand and fit in with the idiosyncratic LVMH culture, and that s/he would need to have the vision to “just understand” how to capitalize on the current digital trends, and derive value from assets sitting in the LVMH portfolio, which were crying out to be developed.

There is a need for companies to look for increasing numbers of outliers, and this should be the distinctive skill of a headhunter.



So the agreement was that Fabrice would search globally, high and low, and that “they did not know exactly where they were going”, “but in a good way!”.

The search required total confidentiality. Fabrice was not permitted to mention even the name of his client to his colleagues, let alone to potential candidates. He understood that the talent pool would be more or less limitless; at the time, there was a great deal of noise about digital transformation, and very little information, success stories or benchmarks to refer to. Given this unique context, the client accepted that the search was not going to be done in just a couple of months, as most searches are these days.

Over the next several months, Fabrice used an open-ended, iterative approach akin to design thinking to create a long list of, literally, hundreds of names (a typical “long-list” in executive search is made up of roughly ten names). The rationale was that this candidate could be found in any one of numerous “profile boxes”, including the GAFAs, digital product, IT, fashion, music or retail sectors, and all of these in any country in the world. This sheer volume of possibilities required a shift beyond the monologue of research, toward an ongoing process of dialogue with potential candidates for real and broader understanding of the problem. At this stage, Fabrice deliberately kept options open, and strategically broad.

Of the multitude of names, Fabrice therefore spoke to two or three hundred, hampered by the fact that he could not mention the client’s name, nor show a job description, but this margin for exploration was also liberating. The participation of the younger Arnault was crucial too as he was committed, and resolved doubts or hesitations along the way. Fabrice began to narrow down the numbers, as he realized that he needed to capture those who viewed digital transformation more as an organic, natural

process, which they were embracing and driving every day.

And that is where Ian Rogers, the then head of Apple Music, fitted in beautifully. He had instinctively been navigating the digital space for years, having created the online presence of the Beastie Boys as far back as 1993. He had played a naturally disruptive role in a variety of digital spaces, and one challenge for Fabrice was that he very obviously did not fit into one single category. But that in itself, coupled with a strong personality, actually made him attractive. He was ahead of the curve, having created cultures, and understanding the Millennial generation, without actually being one of them.

Others in the mix included someone from the news media industry who had already completed a successful digital transformation, and a strong, but more classical candidate from the “new economy”. Fabrice knew that Ian was the standout. But his challenge now was to ensure that the final candidates would meet the client, as they still had no visibility on the company, the salary or any other detail. “I had to ensure that they were wowed from the outset”: this meant that Fabrice aimed for the meetings to be directly between the candidates and the Arnaults, circumventing the usual screen from HR. He managed this by devising a set of written questions for the candidates to answer, sending the responses to HR, which kept them satisfied that process was being duly followed.

Finally, the selection was down to two candidates. Ian Rogers was selected, based on his challenging strategic approach, enormous EQ, political and cultural astuteness, and the fit with company owners and their vision. Fabrice played a key role in influencing Ian about the safety of moving himself and his family to Paris – a far cry from LA, but he introduced him to friends and family members who would reassure them socially and culturally in the new location.

Reflecting on this extraordinary story several

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years on, Fabrice admits that he will never know if the choice made to retain him was astute or serendipitous. He remains certain that a more seasoned consultant would have done a very different job, with the risk of not actually placing anyone. He also reflects on the need for companies to look for increasing numbers of outliers, and that this should be the distinctive skill of a headhunter. “Alexandre Arnault understood that risk mitigation is about minimizing the downside as much as maximizing the upside. In this case, he was smart enough to want to leave that upside open, and it led to a result that was way bigger than anyone had imagined”.

French Utilities - Hiring Transformation Chief

In our final story, the client, a substantial and long-established, traditional French utilities company, knew exactly what they didn't want, when they briefed Caroline on the search for the new Head of Industrial Transformation and Operations. But she was not made aware of this key fact at the outset. What was new, uncharacteristic and challenging was that they were looking outside their own strong talent pool, whereas they usually hired exclusively from within at executive committee level. What is more, this newly-created role, reporting directly to the CEO, was bringing together several “silos” that had historically been separate, and each one was ruled by powerful “barons” who had been used to absolute power and influence in their realms.

The process began with a briefing from Monique*, the quietly astute head of senior executive development, and at first sight, little seemed different from the usual thinking and process. The instruction was to identify candidates who possessed experience from at least four out of the five functional domains, which were a heady mix: IT, Procurement, Real

Estate, Shared Services, and Digital Transformation. This led to a relatively short longlist of the limited number who possessed all the required experiences, which was presented to the CEO and Monique in the next meeting. The response to this list was lukewarm, with the CEO, after having met three of those candidates, saying “if I had wanted to interview candidates like those, I didn't really need you”. This is when the real agenda became clear, although it could not be written, when Monique hinted “you know the only way this is going to happen is if you present a woman!”.

So, next time they met, Caroline presented her list of 12 female candidates, where she had gone for half “traditional” French nationals, with the relevant experiences, and half international women, who had transformation as an achievement, despite their lack of experience in some of the domains initially defined. The CEO stopped Caroline mid-flow, and said: “You are just walking me through their pros and cons. What I want is your gut feeling; way beyond what you think, I want what you feel!” This acted as a catalyst for Caroline.

From that moment on, there was only one star candidate, Nathalie*, who was unknown, in a world dictated by old school ties, too young, not at board level, and lacking experience in most of the defined functional silos. But she had led an extremely successful transformation of a well-established company, bringing people along not only through her sharp strategy, but also via huge cultural and emotional intelligence. She was a born leader, and this was what had so excited Caroline.

Nathalie was one of the twenty or so executives that Caroline had been keeping on her radar screen for the past few years. She calls them her thoroughbred foals. The prime requirement for membership at that stable is that “the talent is underutilized, if not wasted where it is

*Name disguised

Experiencing the Process from the Candidate's Point of View

Olivier Campenon made the journey from an exhilarating but exhausting role as VP of Growth and Development at BT Global, to that of CEO of a family-run French legal publishing company. The link? The long overdue digital transformation. The challenge? Olivier had already stepped away from the hustle of a daily plane trip, mixed with constant technological revolutions and annual mergers and reorganizations, having decided to spend more time with his family. He was happily running a consulting business as an expert, as well as chairing the Franco-British Chamber of Commerce and other networks, but then his long-time friend, Ahmad Hassan, a partner with Heidrick & Struggles, whom he had known and trusted since their days at AT&T, called him with an opportunity he assured Olivier he should consider.

What helped this all to happen?

- **TRUST** - Olivier knew that if Ahmad was "pushing" this role, it was because he truly saw a fit.
- **SCALE** - While he was enjoying the retreat from the "anything but quiet" environment of BT, Olivier felt that a large, family-run business might offer some stimulating contrasts.
- **ENERGY** - Realizing that if one "decided to go into something, one had better be passionate about it, and then one finds the energy" was crucial in helping Olivier to make a philosophical U-turn
- **TIME** - The process was slow. There was some dissent in the board, as certain members could not see the viability of a change from something as "modern" as ICT to "the legal field". This initially put Olivier off, feeling that he would not be welcomed unanimously. But ultimately, this meant that both sides had the opportunity to get used to the situation and appreciate it better.
- **REVERSE PSYCHOLOGY** - Because Olivier pulled away, upon experiencing the doubts about his capacity to change sectors, this made him all the more attractive to the board, and so they pursued him harder.

currently". Pulling out a foal card for the right circumstance had previously proven to be smart and profitable for Caroline, and this time it worked again.

Initially hesitant, Nathalie expressed concern at her own lack of experience and thus gravitas. She expressed this not only to Caroline, but even to the CEO when she met him. By this stage, the CEO was won over, and then set up a charm



Olivier Campenon
CEO, Lefebvre Sarrut



Ahmad Hassan
Partner, Heidrick & Struggles

- **CLARITY ABOUT THE TRANSITION** - Olivier has always believed that sector is not so critical. From early exposure to a range of fields in the Young Presidents' Association, he has observed that "we all face the same challenges, regardless of sector. As a leader, we need to have the right people in the right place at the right time, and to motivate them appropriately. The sector stuff is just knowledge that can be learned"
- **INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE** - Having worked in global companies, especially with Anglo-Saxon cultures, Olivier was already well exposed to contexts in which people were hired for their values and attitudes, above their industry experience, so this helped him to see how achievable this shift would be.
- **MATURITY** - Both for and against. While many of the board members were keen on finding someone from the digital world, they were initially wondering whether "even younger = even more digital". Eventually, they realized that the comprehensive digital experience brought by Olivier, allied with his broad experience and maturity, were the right mix for them.

And now, four years in, Olivier is happy, and taking the company on the long, arduous change journey they needed to embark on. For Olivier, transformation is a must and requires open-minded executives, ready to innovate and test new management approaches while delivering results. Having had the opportunity to learn and build successful businesses in one of the world's most dynamic sectors for over 20 years, he is now thriving in a different sector and a family-owned environment, and continues to enjoy all opportunities to learn from others and to succeed together.

offensive, which included bringing in Monique to give a more rational view to the candidate, explaining how difficult it would be to take on the role, but that she could not imagine anybody better than Nathalie to do it. All of this was developing in the middle of August, while Caroline was on vacation in Peru on a trek with no access to a mobile network, but even this did not derail the process.

In the final interview, the CEO went through all that he felt necessary to explain and present, intent on securing the services of Nathalie. At the end he simply enquired “Are you in? Or out?” Within only a few seconds, he got the confirmation he was seeking.

While taking references, Caroline talked to a former manager, who had clearly been an outstanding mentor, and who mentioned that he had been telling Nathalie for at least five years that it was time to get out and take her talent elsewhere. Finally, the stars had aligned. Since entering the company, Nathalie has had a difficult but successful path. She is still there, despite political obstacles: two of the previous “barons” resigned. One was left to go, and the other, she persuaded to stay, even before she had joined the company, such is her influence and art of persuasion.

Caroline underlines that she never expected to stay in the executive search profession for the twenty years she has now accumulated, but that her only measure is “am I still improving and learning?”. She emphatically states how much she learned from this particular search, and most notably from the CEO. “It takes two to tango, and not only did he dance, but he led beautifully!”

All Organizations – Seeking Outliers

We can certainly take hope and inspiration from these stirring stories, and observe that many times, the outlier is the winner. But it takes exceptional players in the game, whether the exception is the candidate, the headhunter, the CEO or the search itself. As we navigate through the strange times of Covid-19, we can speculate endlessly on the mix between data and softer aspects of any part of business. The above stories undoubtedly depended more on sense and gut-feel than they did on pure data. We can hope that more risks are taken, that more upside be “maximized” as Fabrice suggested, as the battle for the best talent continues. Our ongoing argument that career disrupters make some of the best candidates, due to their flexibility, curiosity, capacity for learning, and many of the characteristics described in our stories, is borne out by the

5 Tips to Unlock the Value of Outlier Candidates

To Companies

1. Understand that the “plug-and-play” approach to hiring won’t necessarily bring the most value for certain roles
2. Consider bringing more outliers in your talent mix
3. Think of the candidates’ profiles beyond skills and experience requirements: look at their performance record, potential and personality
4. Be open to uncertainty and be patient – some search assignments might take much more than two months
5. Trust your search consultant – when dealing with him/her, balance challenge with support

To Headhunters

1. Challenge the assumption that the perfect candidate should tick all the boxes
2. Think broadly and strategically about the key success factors for a role and where to source candidates
3. Be audacious: dare to present outstanding outlier candidates who may not meet all the formal criteria
4. Utilize your EQ, political savvy and diplomacy to manage your client’s stakeholder environment and coach your winning candidate through the finish line
5. Source talent and nurture relationships with them for the long run, keep them on your radar screen until the right opportunity arises

To Candidates

1. If you don’t meet the skills or experience requirements, put forward your performance track record, your leadership and your potential
2. Prepare yourself intensively, show your curiosity and hunger for the role
3. During the interview process, be sincere and authentic – don’t pretend to be the perfect candidate and be open about it
4. Consider the headhunter as a trusted ally who will support you throughout the entire process
5. Rely on your capacity to adapt and learn fast but ask for more time during your onboarding

research we did for this article, and we want to know: how actively are you seeking out those outliers for your teams and organizations?

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