
Executive Search for a Nonprofit CEO: Finding Top Candidates

Your Executive Search Committee is Wondering: Now What?

Your executive search committee is ready for action. Key stakeholders have weighed in on the competencies needed in the next CEO. A detailed profile of the ideal candidate is in hand. Now what?

The next logical step is to place ads, post the opportunity on online job boards, blast it out to the community via email and social media, and wait for the resumes to roll in. And why not? With so many online job boards and industry-related social media platforms available, it is easier than ever to reach a large number of potential candidates.



Editor's note: This article is coauthored by Dennis C. Miller, the Managing Director of [The Nonprofit Search Group](#). Dennis is a nationally recognized strategic leadership coach and executive search consultant with more than thirty-five years of experience working with nonprofit board leadership and chief executives across the

country. He is also an expert in board governance, leadership development, philanthropy, and succession planning. In addition, he is a sought-after motivational speaker, retreat facilitator, and leadership performance coach.

While well-placed ads, posts, and email blasts are an important part of any search process, by themselves they do not comprise a comprehensive recruitment effort. When organizations come to us for help with a CEO search, they count on us to provide them with the best possible slate of top candidates for their executive opening. That means reaching beyond the pool of candidates who respond to public announcements about the position. A truly effective, strategic search will actively recruit candidates who may be happy in their current position but who might, if asked, be willing to consider your organization for their next professional move.

To create and launch a comprehensive recruitment effort, you have to be willing and able to invest considerable time and energy in research, relationships, and person-to-person outreach.

Start Building Relationships Before You Need Them

Get out of your office and maybe even out of your comfort zone to connect with your industry's professional community. Attend conferences, luncheons, and fundraisers. Even alumni events can be useful, especially if your alma mater is located in the vicinity of your organization. Take note of who is serving on panels and committees and try to get to know the ones who make a good first impression.

Social media platforms can be excellent tools for staying connected, but they are a poor substitute for real, personal interaction. Carve out pockets of time to have coffee or lunch with individuals who you think could be a good fit for your organization, if not right now, then at some point down the road. When the search is on, you'll have a ready-made short list of potential candidates to contact.

Reach out to Associations and Professional Organizations

Every industry has its own professional organizations. You probably belong to one or more yourself. In addition to discounts on the cost of attending association events and mixers, most

memberships also allow you access to membership lists, including contact information. Review the list to identify individuals who are working in positions similar to the one you are trying to fill at organizations you hold in high regard. Then pick up the phone and start calling!

In addition, associations and professional organizations often have job boards that offer exclusive or discounted job postings for members. These provide a low-cost advertising alternative that will reach a highly targeted, industry-specific market.

If you or your organization have not yet joined a professional association, or if you have a membership or two but are wondering if there are other association options out there to support your executive recruitment efforts, don't forget about the [*Encyclopedia of Associations: Regional, State and Local Organizations: An Associations Unlimited Reference, 29th Edition*](#). It's a directory of more than 99,000 US regional, state, and local nonprofit organizations. Tip: Check with your local library's reference desk to see if it has a copy available.

Dig into Databases

After exhausting your professional relationships and association contacts, you will want to take your search a step further, just to make sure you aren't missing out on great candidates. [Guidestar](#) is one of our favorite resources. The free version allows you to create searches based on organization type, geographic location, and revenue level. For example, you could search for Arts, Culture, and Humanities organizations with revenues of \$1.5 million or more that are located in Phoenix (I came up with sixteen).

Once you have your list of organizations, you can comb their websites and LinkedIn to identify professionals who are currently working in the organizations you have targeted, in roles similar to the one you hope to fill. You now have yet another set of leads to pursue in your recruitment effort.

Build a Better Slate of Candidates

Maybe luck is on your side and the perfect candidate is starting a job search just as your announcement goes public. But is this a chance you're willing to take? Because the odds are just as good (or even better) that your ideal candidate is not actively job hunting and won't even see your ads and posts. *Don't limit your search.* By building out your recruitment effort to include individuals who are not actively looking for a new position, you will vastly improve the

quality of your top -candidates list, and of your search.