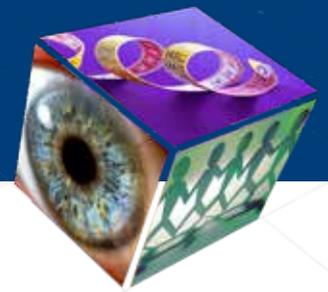


# De-risking Hiring Senior Executives







## ■ Summary

Hiring senior executives successfully has always been a risky business despite the many valid techniques deployed in the recruitment process to reduce the failure rate. Amongst these is the use of a quality search firm to attract the best candidates and add value where references and reputation are concerned. Insights from assessments and psychometrics are very effective to and yet mistakes are still common place.

Odgers Berndtson believes however that much of the risk is attached to the post appointment phase, in the weeks and months after the initial honey moon period when demands and expectations really start to kick in. This paper argues that this is when results focused executive coaching is at its most needed and effective. Progressive research also confirms that performance coaching materially impacts on the success of new hires and the case is made to embrace it as an integral part of any talent management strategy.

## ■ You have hired a star so help them shine!

In the traditional scenario of a successful senior hire, the star candidate is found 'ready hatched', perfectly matched to the role and the company's culture, and temperamentally equipped to deal with all the various peers with whom (s)he will be working. In reality, this is rarely the exact case in practice. Best intentions and positive spirits can often wane after a few weeks into the new role, as the pressures of delivery and personal politics take their inevitable shape.

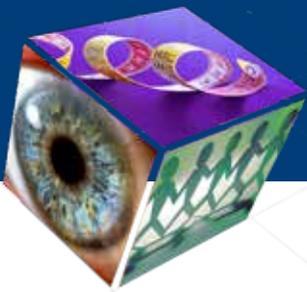
Most recruiters move away from the hire as soon as the placement is made. A few cheery phone calls to the candidate after joining are seen as enough to seal the process and cement goodwill. The hiring executives have understandably, and rightly been focused on solving the problem at hand - finding the right person to join their client's team. There is only ever a binary outcome to a hiring process and to some extent it is only natural to feel that the job is complete once the new face arrives ready and willing on day one.

'Integration' or 'Transition Coaching' is only rarely packaged as part of the search assignment, but Odgers Berndtson emphasises strongly that these first few months in the role are the perfect time for senior executives to benefit from the support of results focused performance coaching.

Typically, coaching support is engaged much further down the line and often when leadership style, behaviour or some other 'issues' require tweaking. This is entirely valid in its own right but not as valuable, Odgers Berndtson believes, as investing in coaching the new talent just in through the door. Independent research shows that transition coaching supports cultural integration, optimises performance and materially reduces the risk of failure which is all so common in the first 12-18 months after the 'star' arrived. ***(48% of coaches are hired along this agenda - Harvard Business Review - Jan 2009.)***

Whilst the search industry of course benefits from this attrition (fuelling the distress purchase of search assignments), it is clearly the success of the placed executive which truly upholds the headhunter's brand and reputation.

**"We all know that up to 40% of senior executive hires fail in the first 18 months so wouldn't it be wonderful if we could do something about it?"**



## ■ But search is search and coaching is very different!

Yes, traditionally the two consulting skill areas appear very different at first sight, but in reality, the shrewdest and most successful recruiters have the psychological understanding and intuition to be able to match the person with the culture, and it should be a short step from there to helping the candidate release the potential they have recognised, in the time period of most criticality – just after, not just before the hire.

Odgers Berndtson is investing in offering both, believing the case for combining the two is compelling. Certainly, the message which suggests that the best headhunter in town can both find the right person and also then be there to materially help the ‘new star’ integrate and excel, is one which is being very well received by the most discerning clients. ***(89% of coaches are engaged because they are already known and trusted – The International Coach Federation (ICF) 2012.)***

## ■ So what is this ‘coaching’ sweet spot?

The principles of ‘Positive Psychology’ are most relevant in scenarios when high calibre executives change jobs as part of their own commitment to elevating themselves up the leadership ladder, excited by bigger and fresh challenges. They are good already, that’s why they were hired but they are human too, and they have anxieties and concerns, conundrums and unfamiliar pressures in the new work environment.

And all this remember is going on whilst they are under the microscope and expected to perform with great confidence and skill. And at warp factor speed! Just the very awareness of these levels of pressure and expectation can itself diminish performance by ‘freezing’ the successful candidate, and preventing them from performing as they would do naturally.

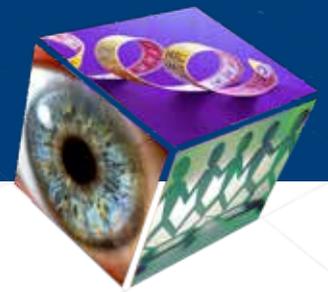
Books on leadership are often bought frantically by the new appointee, and depending on their style can often end up adding to the sense of panic. “Your First 100 Day” type action plans, complete with lots of ‘homework’ can feel like an extra job of work in themselves, well intended but sometimes counter-productive.

In Odgers Berndtson’s experience, strengths based and non-directive coaching delivery when it is set within a peer to peer relationship is perfectly matched to these situations, the mandate being to help the very good person perform and succeed beyond everyone’s expectation, not least their own.

This makes sense commercially, as well as practically. Coaching is comparatively inexpensive compared to other specialist talent management services, but certainly no less valuable in terms of impact and visible results. Investment in developing a new hire’s strengths is proven to yield a better return on investment than attempts to diminish or eliminate weaknesses (the latter being classically where the greatest proportion of executive training budgets are spent, usually to no avail in terms of positive outcomes). In the worst case scenario, coaching can help prevent the costs of attrition, outplacement and re-hire. ***(Consulting Psychology Journal – variously.)***

**“It is tougher being a leader today. Business is more complex and stakeholders are more diverse, demanding and sophisticated. Good talent management is about helping executives perform and this is where coaching comes in.”**

**“Turning a poor leader into an average one does not compare favourably with helping a good one to become excellent in terms of quantifiable business benefits.”**



“I have developed a great relationship with the headhunter who is now my coach. He supported me through the hiring process as my new organisations trusted partner. He knows my CEO, peers and the company culture very well so is already up to speed with my challenges.”

## ■ And what message does this send to the newly appointed executive?

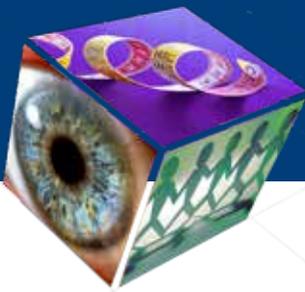
Odgers Berndtson research points to the idea of transition coaching coming across as great news to candidates, providing it's provisioned through a sponsor who is supportive. ***(Personal chemistry is the most essential criteria when choosing a coach according to 76% of respondents to a 2012 ICF survey.)***

In practice though, the best time to engage in this type of integration or transition coaching is after the initial honeymoon period is over, when the induction process is finished and the real challenge of actually performing in the new job starts. (This is Odgers Berndtson's experience from its coaching engagements which are focused on supporting fast track executives). It's at this time, in the *conscious incompetence* part (“*Can I actually do this job?*”) of the classic learning curve, when non – directive coaching in pursuit of crisply defined goals has a real impact on the performance of the now ‘not so new’ high flyer. This is especially the case for the first time board member who feels uncomfortable discussing teething problems with their CEO, colleagues or direct reports for fear of coming across as not quite as good as they were made out to be in the arrivals announcement or worse still, just plain weak. Image and profile are paramount at this juncture and simply having a safe place to think with someone who believes in them, is undeniably supportive and totally non judgmental, is a unique and invaluable resource.

## ■ And for the sponsoring organisation?

The search partner clearly has the biggest, most vested interest in the real success of the appointed candidate and providing the coaching contract is set up correctly (especially where the boundaries around confidentiality and scope of input are concerned) expectations become more closely matched with adjustments to objectives easier to negotiate. (Qualified coaches will avail their buyers of a relevant code of practice which they use such as the one prescribed by The European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC)). More positive and open relationships always unfold due to the greater confidence, self-awareness and the clear results that coaching always delivers.

Odgers Berndtson's research also reveals that buyers of search services always remember the brand which found them the last really successful leader and with transition and performance coaching proven to reduce time to effectiveness and increase engagement and productivity, it would appear to be a ‘no brainer’ to buy it as an essential ingredient of the talent attraction strategy. As such, Odgers Berndtson recommends that the new norm should be that all senior level executive career movers are offered 6-12 months of coaching support to help them engage, excel and progress more quickly.



## ■ So how does it work in practice?

Whilst each coaching assignment is necessarily bespoke 'because we are all different' the transition and integration assignment starts as soon as the ink is dry on the new contract of employment. This is provided that the new star sees the merit in receiving some help in making the move a smooth and successful one; and by the way, they almost always do. The hiring organisation and its executives will have a feel for both specific and generic challenges which new leaders face on the way in and will brief both the coach (who will already know most of them in the Odgers Berndtson model) and the newcomer with the over arching objectives for the coaching journey which typically lasts 6 or 12 months through a regular series of monthly sessions. Of course, what goes on in the sessions stays strictly in the room with the onus for feedback being placed on the executive where coaching effectiveness and ROI is concerned. It is not for the coach to summarise how good they are although a formal review against the initial objectives is always good practice.

## ■ Is there a catch?

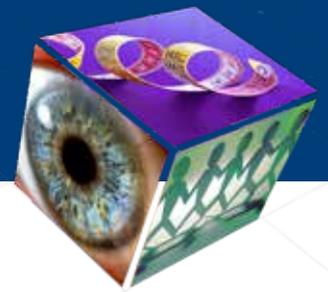
Wary buyers might muse that this extended service proposition forgets that search and coaching budgets (to date at least) are usually held separately in the HR function (if they are held centrally at all that is) of larger organisations and that increasingly, they differentiate between specialist suppliers along each segment of the talent management agenda. ***(Coaching revenues in Europe have reached c£600m – the 2012 ICF Global Coaching Study.)*** Ethics and probity around confidentiality is also a concern for some, and certainly the coach qualified headhunter needs

to operate transparently within clear parameters and against carefully defined over arching and agreed objectives. More fundamentally, there is sometimes a fear of letting a headhunter loose on the inside thus giving him/her access to the talent treasure. (Sorry but any decent headhunter already knows who and where all the good people are!) Some HR departments have their own raft of leadership advisory consultants, or executive coaches, but these people generally do not know the candidates concerned, and can adopt the 'cookie-cutter' approach, often acting as a slightly more sophisticated extension of the corporate induction programme. Moreover, don't forget either that most executive coaches practice as part of a portfolio of other activities so they are in fact, no more specialist than the headhunter who has already been engaged and become trusted. ***(77% of coaches in the UK generate income from sources other than coaching assignments – Meyler Campbell – The premier business coach training programme in the UK.)***

In contrast, the speed with which the 'coach headhunter' can empathise and start to add value is a material advantage here, and providing they are qualified and experienced, they are uniquely positioned to add great value.

## ■ It's a no-brainer!

As we have shown, post appointment coaching materially reduces the risk of failure but just as importantly, it speeds up the integration and performance of the new executive who feels invested in and secure. Leading independent research also concludes that greater loyalty is enjoyed by organisations which infuse a coaching culture within its senior leadership cadre. ***(Ref. Dr. Alex Linley - The Centre for Applied Positive Psychology (CAPP).)***



The coach-qualified headhunter also develops a stronger relationship with his or her client organisation and this benefits onward service provision through a deeper understanding of culture and business ethos.

Everyone would appear to win here (even the budget holders who will enjoy the long term savings associated with better talent retention). The proposition which helps clients to attract, retain and optimise the performance of their talent is a genuine no-brainer.

**“My new job was a big step up for me and everything was great to start with. I then hit some brick walls when I tried to change the things the CEO hired me to improve. This is when coaching really helped me by giving me the space and time to focus on my objectives and how to achieve them. The sessions were challenging but always held on my terms and to my agenda. I feel I’m performing well again now.”**

## ■ About the author



### ■ Martin Noakes

Martin specialises in helping senior executives to reach their full potential. A highly effective coach at critical periods of promotion, role transition or career change, he helps clients achieve both individually and as part of a leadership team.

With a 25 year background in headhunting and internal coaching, his methods are underpinned by graduation from the Meyler Campbell Business Coach Programme and the principles of Positive Psychology, about which he is passionate.

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## ■ About Odgers Berndtson

Odgers Berndtson is the UK’s pre-eminent executive search firm, helping private and public sector organisations find the highest calibre people for permanent and interim management appointments in the UK and internationally.

Our reputation at the top of the executive search profession is over 40 years old. We have seven offices and a team of 350 people in the UK, and an international presence in over 50 cities worldwide. Our experienced executive search specialists operate with absolute discretion, integrity and care, and are expert in finding exceptional individuals for challenging roles.

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