

CHOOSING AN AGENCY

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In this chapter you will learn about:

- Understanding what you are looking for.
- Working with a recruitment consultant.
- Preparing yourself mentally and physically.
- Getting the most out of an interview.
- How agencies could improve the interviewing process.
- Tips on candidate selection.
- Tips on agency selection.

Both as a candidate and as an employer, recruitment can be a very swift process: pick up the phone to a recruitment consultant, say what you are looking for and let gut feel take over. With this method you may get it right, but you are more than likely to encounter severe problems and get it extremely wrong. While instinct should not be ignored, what this chapter is about is arming the candidate and employer with all they need to go into the recruitment process. Finding a new job or new candidate is a very time-intensive process involving both visible and invisible personal and agency

costs. Therefore the risks need to be reduced and the process needs to be as smooth as possible. Much of it is about knowing what you are looking for and optimizing the time at an interview.

PREPARING FOR THE SEARCH AS A CANDIDATE

Whether you are a seasoned player or a raw graduate, you need to take a critical look at yourself before you start your search for your new ideal agency. In essence, you need to know what you are about and what you are looking for.

I will approach this from the aspect of somebody who has already been working in an agency, although the preparation exercises are just as valid for raw recruits.

Something is making you think that a move is a good idea. In order to avoid a premature conversation with a recruitment consultant or prospective employer, take a step back and interview yourself. Ask yourself the following questions.

Why Do You Want to Leave?

Be truthful about the reason. Better job fulfilment, career advancement, nearer location, getting away from your idiot colleague and so on are equally valid reasons and everyone's motivation will be different.

If you are not honest with yourself about your motivation, you may encounter problems. If you are running away from something and you are not facing up to what it is, you may find it at your next employment. For example, a reason such as 'I'm sick of pandering to clients' trivial whims' may uncover a larger issue (let's face it, agencies will always have clients with particular styles). So your suitability for the service industry may have to be questioned.

COMMENT

Often people identify reasons that they feel they cannot share. That was the case with an old friend of mine. He asked my advice, as he knew that ultimately he would be asked this question a number of times by recruitment consultants and prospective employers. Although he did not get on with his boss, that person had

an impeccable reputation in the industry and my friend felt that people would think he was the one with the problem.

I understood his dilemma: lack of personal chemistry is a valid reason for moving and I knew people would understand this, but I could see that my friend would feel uncomfortable with such an explanation in an interview situation. This type of discomfort should be avoided, particularly at the beginning of an interview, so I proposed he use a slightly different interpretation of the situation to the recruitment consultants. I suggested he should say that it was the lack of personal development opportunities that was making him move. When it eventually came to telling his current agency, I told him he should say that he had been made an offer he could not refuse.

When he started interviewing, this reinterpretation helped him to be comfortable and focus on the more important matters in the interviews.

What Do You Enjoy/Dislike about Your Job?

Try to deconstruct the elements of your daily routine and grade their importance on a scale of 1–5. Put them in a matrix to see the elements in comparison, like in Figure 1.1.

Element in current job	Score	Desired in next job?
Strategic input	4	YES
Client interaction	3	YES
Internal team interaction	3	YES
Departmental interaction	2	NO
Filing/admin	2	NO
Financial housekeeping	5	YES
Creative product involvement	2	NO
Account business sector	4	NO
Project management	3	YES

Figure 1.1 Current job suitability matrix

What Sort of Person Are You at Work?

You can dissect this in a number of ways, but I would suggest that first you think about what clients and colleagues would say in a *This Is Your Life* situation.

Are you fun to work with? How do you cope with stress? Do you go the 'extra mile'? Do you respond well to constructive criticism? Are you optimistic? Would they miss you on their business?

Make sure that you consider all the angles. Interviews can bring things out of the closet that even surprise those who are saying them.

People also often ask this question in terms of your strengths and weaknesses. Choose a weakness that does not conflict with your suitability for the job or that you can turn into a positive (e.g. 'I used to be incredibly disorganized and not good at time management, but I asked to go on a course and now I enjoy the kick of being efficient with my time').

TIP

Agencies are interested in the three Ps (Passion, Pride and Performance). Group your characteristics into these three categories and provide examples to illustrate them. ('I think the clients will miss me because they have valued the ongoing competitive review that I initiated.')

What Sort of People Do/Don't You Get on With?

This is important inside the agency, but also in relation to the type of clients you can work with. Remember, you may have different likes according to whether it is a work or social context. I think this is something you need to spend time looking at. Think of your friends, colleagues, clients and suppliers. List the reasons you get on with them, can work with them and have a productive relationship with them. In contrast, look at those relationships that do not seem to work.

TIP

Don't confuse effective relationships with friendships. As an ex-client of mine says, 'I have enough friends at home. I don't need to like the agency people as friends, but I do need to respect their work and judgement.'

What Do You Think of Your Current Agency Culture and Style?

If you have not been at another agency, talk to other colleagues who have. They have an automatic comparison in their heads. For your next agency, do you want funky creative, a 9–5 working regime, small and intimate or bigger and networked?

Bear in mind that different styles and sizes of agencies bring different issues. When I moved to my current position, I was looking forward to the intimacy of a small agency after being at an agency of 200 people. Looking back it was definitely the right decision, but it did take me time to get used to the change in size. Even though I had worked in smaller agencies and rationally I knew it would be a radical change, it was the practicalities that made it sink in. With a larger agency comes an infrastructure that is not appropriate for a smaller agency.

So be ready to be flexible: one minute you may be presenting million-pound strategies, the next you may be changing the toner on the laser printer. You need to work out your own preferences based on your experience and what you know you like.

Where Do You Want to Be in Five Years' Time?

I can hear the groans to this question from here. Yeah, your uncle asked you to think about that when you left school but you still don't know the answer. See it in these terms and it may be easier: five years from now, *Campaign* magazine requests an interview with you to create a personal profile. What do you want that profile to say? What steps would you need to take to get there? (For example, if you are going to be a retiring dot-com millionaire, shouldn't you at least take that PowerPoint course and start reading the *Financial Times*?)

What Position Are You Looking For?

Are you looking to move up a level at the same time? Find a less demanding role? Move into a new area? Whatever you want to do, that is fine as long as you can convince both yourself and then others of your desire.

The recruitment consultant will provide the sanity check, but remember to be prepared to be challenged. Some years ago, I interviewed someone for a senior account manager role who was then an account manager. I thought he would be able to make the move up until I asked him why he thought he could handle a position one level above his current position. He became flustered and talked about being very committed and enthusiastic. Until that point I believed he could handle the role. If he had demonstrated a few examples of how he had acted in a senior account manager capacity in his current role, I would have continued in my belief. Yet his response showed me he did not believe in himself at this level.

How Have You Made a Difference in Your Current Job?

Thinking about this will help you understand what you will contribute in the next job. Remember that when you talk about campaigns and client servicing, prospective employers want to know what specifically you did to achieve the objectives.

What Type of Agency Environment Are You Looking For?

You may be able to answer this very easily because of your experience. Otherwise, pretend you are a client and ask yourself what brand (philosophy, approach), people, location, resources (department functions) and accreditations you are looking for. (See Chapter 3 for pointers.)

TIP

Write down the answers to these questions. You may think that by considering them in your head you can shortcut the process. However, you will find that what is in your head and what comes out on paper show different stages of evolution.

In addition, talking to somebody about your answers will also start them make more sense to you.

HOW TO WORK WITH A RECRUITMENT CONSULTANT

Advertising and marketing recruitment consultancy is a crowded industry. You will encounter variety in function, quality and size.

I do not intend to recommend any particular ones, as personal preference and individual relationships are key. If you read the marketing press and talk to colleagues, you will have no problem in identifying and contacting the best consultancies.

Here I am interested in how you work with them, both as a candidate and an employer.

As an Employer

In some agencies' minds, recruitment consultants occupy a plankton-filled environment along with estate agents, lawyers and loan sharks. Others think the opposite and develop strong, very productive relationships with consultants. My view is that the latter group will get better candidates and be involved in a smoother, shorter process.

Whatever your opinion, ignore recruitment consultants at your peril. The danger is that instead of being an ambassador within the marketplace for your agency, they become unhelpful suppliers, provide second-division candidates and/or do not want to work with you. My recommendation is to develop good working relationships with the individuals within the consultancies. Keep them apprised of recent developments, creative/strategic credentials and the senior management team. Also inform them of how you wish to work with them (financial terms plus working procedures – see later in this chapter). A number of the major recruitment consultants are ex-agency, so they can be very helpful in terms of any recruitment processes. Also they are always interested in new credentials (face-to-face recommended) and recent creative work.

To work with a recruitment consultant effectively I suggest the following:

- 1 A written recruitment brief (see example Figure 1.2).
- 2 Up-to-date agency information (printed or electronic).
- 3 Agreement on communication channels.
- 4 Agreement on financial arrangements (commission/probation period/exit payback).
- 5 Honesty and spirit of partnership.

Recruitment Brief

Position Required: Account Manager
Date: 23rd November 2007
Issuer: Michael Sims
cc: Finance Director/Personnel
ABC Recruitment
Acme Partners
Process: Send any candidates' CVs directly to M. Sims. Arrange interview time with Penny Anderson, his PA. Feedback will be given within 24 hours after interview.
Communications: E-mail (msims@wdgwa.com) or phone (switchboard: 0209 1234567)

Requirement
Account Manager reporting to Account Director, working on pan-European digital media strategy and implementation for Donky Cars.

Client Background
Donky Cars has been We Do Great Work Agency's largest client for three years. Donky Cars is a top five car manufacturer which is now pursuing an 'e-commerce only' sales distribution policy. The agency handles the private and fleet markets for the major European markets and is the exclusive supplier of digital strategy and customer communications for Donky.

Job Purpose
To assist in the client servicing of Donky Cars for WDGWA, delivering digital strategy/campaigns to high satisfaction standards.

Role and Responsibilities

- Assist Account Director in development and implementation of account and major campaigns
- Liaise with central client on campaigns
- Run singlehandedly minor digital campaigns to satisfaction of client
- Maintain account admin (including client correspondence and finances)
- Liaise with other European market clients on translation activity for campaigns
- Coordinate with project management and creative department to deliver client campaigns
- Supervise outside suppliers and partners
- Create and maintain project files and creative guard book
- Manage Account Administrator

Skill Set Required

- Good digital campaign management skills
- Pan-European coordination experience essential
- Languages an asset (preferably French)
- Good admin and project management skills
- Potential to manage team members
- Feels comfortable with sophisticated creative products

Personality Traits/Skills

- Outgoing, confident, flexible
- Good at building relationships (face to face and virtual)
- Good communication skills
- Enjoys challenges
- Enthusiastic, committed and passionate

Personal Experience

- 1–2 years in digital agency or dot-com environment
- Automotive experience an asset
- Consumer and B2B experience ideal

Remuneration

- Salary \$xxx
- No car
- Annual agency-wide bonus (after nine months of employment)
- Health cover (after three months)
- Life cover (four times annual salary at employment)
- Company pension scheme (agency will match up to 3% of personal contribution after one year of employment)

Brief approved by




Figure 1.2 Sample recruitment brief

As a Candidate

Ultimately you need to realize that your relationship with the recruitment consultant is influenced by the fact that it is the employer who pays the consultant's commission. The consultant's client is the agency, not the candidate. So the bad news is, in terms of priority, you are not No. 1. The good news is that, as a good candidate, you can make yourself a desired commodity.

Over the years I have worked with a number of consultants as a candidate. You will end up only using a few because of your personal preferences. For this reason, I would suggest that you maintain and nurture these relationships over the years.

In order to get the best out of your relationship with recruitment consultants, I would recommend the following:

- 1 Decide how many different consultants you wish to work with to ensure good coverage of the marketplace (more than three starts to get confusing).
- 2 Be prepared for the core questions (see previous section).
- 3 Develop a good working relationship (they may go the extra mile for you).
- 4 Agree on the communication channels (also describe your office environment so they understand your particular need for discretion).
- 5 Make sure you sell both yourself and your aspirations well, as they will need to sell these on to employers.
- 6 Make a list of the agencies/opportunities that you discuss with a particular consultant (these will then be off limits to the other consultants).
- 7 Be prepared to talk about what salary package you are on and what you would like (be comfortable with such conversations).
- 8 Don't accept all suggestions if you are not interested.
- 9 Identify the better consultants who invest in you as though you will be a future client of theirs.

TIP

There is a lack of professionalism in any recruitment consultant who sends your CV to an employer without your permission. Make sure that their policy is to discuss any opportunities beforehand.

HOW TO PREPARE YOURSELF MENTALLY AND PHYSICALLY FOR THE INTERVIEW

It's funny how some people love job interviews and others see them as the proverbial trip to the dentist's. Whatever the case, you are the one who has initiated the process so this is your spotlight, the time to show your star quality, to move from amateur hour to a full recording contract with fans mobbing you at the stage door. It is a performance you need to rehearse and one that should delight your audience.

There is a whole industry of literature about job interviews. I will only concentrate on the main areas that are particularly relevant to agency recruitment.

Before the Interview

- Find out everything you can about the company through websites, recruitment consultant's brief, yearbooks, cuttings, ex-colleagues.
- Find out what type of work it does and what clients you would be working on and seek out information accordingly.
- Find out the background of your interviewer(s). Try to find any common ex-colleagues etc. (but be careful).
- Confirm time and location and plan your timely arrival accordingly (a sweaty, out-of-breath arrival won't add anything to your performance).
- Be prepared.

COMMENT

Be prepared for anything. When I was an account director, I was sitting as a candidate in the reception area of a potential employer waiting for an interview and was discovered by my senior account manager, who was picking up a friend for a drink.

Friends have had scrapes with tramps, goose droppings (yes, in central London!) and anarchic lifts that have left their attire not of interview standard.

Then potential employers can add their bit to the unpredictability of interviews as well. Forgetfulness, interviewing people for the wrong job and constant interruptions are just the more common occurrences.

TIP

A written-out version of standard questions and answers can be very useful. You should not learn anything off by heart, but it is very good to focus your mind on the tube, bus etc. when you have rushed out of the office with your mind on other things.

- Psych yourself up. Sports psychologists could recommend a whole range of positive thinking activities here. I find a good technique is to play the interview in your head, understanding where the pitfalls (and solutions) and highpoints could be. Then tell yourself you are really going to enjoy it and so is the interviewer. And really believe it.
- Do not schedule any early-morning meetings if you do not function very well at that time.

During the Interview

- The first person you will probably encounter is the receptionist. This is your first opportunity for your star to shine. Do not forget that often interviewers elicit feedback from all those who have met the candidate.
- First impressions are incredibly important, as the first thing in the interviewer's mind is how you will appear to the client on first meeting.

COMMENT

In these days of dress-down Fridays and agency casuals, the choices are difficult. Do you go for the casual look or do you risk appearing stiff? I think ultimately in the majority of cases you have to go for the safe option of a suit or equivalent. However much your Prada open-toed sandals cost, you should remember the first thing on your interviewer's mind, i.e. the initial client impression. If the client is a youth marketer on the web, your micro scooter might work out. I let you make that decision.

- Remember the handshake and eye contact code and make the interviewer feel within 10 seconds that the next hour is not going to be a waste of time – quite the reverse.

- You need to put your stamp on proceedings even before you sit down. Don't be afraid to talk. Break the ice, make that impression.
- You may want to find out about the following in order to decide whether the job is for you:

Agency

- Size of agency (no. of staff, locations)
- Department/functions and resources
- Senior management personnel
- Positioning
- Major competitors
- Major clients (and activity undertaken)
- Partnerships/network affiliations
- Turnover (income vs billing)
- Age
- Culture/management style/spirit of agency
- Working hours

Account

- Structure of team
- Activity undertaken for client
- What clients are like and what they would say about agency
- Prospective boss
- Role and responsibilities
- Potential of account
- Reputation within agency
- Good and bad points
- Predecessor(s) on account and reasons for leaving

General

- Agency social life
- Awards
- Agency attitude to personal development and training
- Potential direction for agency

TIP

Remember to dig deeper than the surface with your questions. For example, if you ask about the creativity of the agency, check the number of awards they have

won recently, ask them to show the campaigns they are most proud of and ask what their clients would say about the creative work.

After the Interview

- Be prepared to give feedback on your interview and your interest in the agency to the recruitment consultant (tackle any issues such as something going wrong, because the consultant will get to hear of it).
- If it goes to the next stage, ask to meet the managing director, creative director, the team and someone from a similar level but different account. It will give you a good insight into what working there would be like. (Although you may initiate it, treat each meeting like a further interview.)
- Confirm salary package elements once you get more serious.

HOW AGENCIES COULD IMPROVE THEIR INTERVIEW PROCESS

The reality of the marketplace dictates that there are not enough skilled, experienced account handlers for the number of positions available. Having said that, agencies still have not really caught on to smartening up their act when it comes to the recruitment process. There are still too many stories of missed interviews, job offers without budget sign-off and egotistical interviewing. If you are responsible for interviewing new candidates, you may want to think about the following:

- Make sure that, before you approach the recruitment consultants, you have internal sign-off on the brief and the salary budget from the head of the department and the finance/managing director.
- Take the time to write a recruitment brief. Putting your requirements in a brief will focus your thoughts and deliver better-quality candidates (see example on Figure 1.2).
- Tell each recruitment consultant which other consultants are being used.
- Agree the communication channels (e-mail, phone or post; fax is unfortunately very indiscreet).
- Agree timing of feedback on candidates (maximum 24 hours should be a target).

- Be aware of the sensitivity of the situation. Treat candidates and their CVs as you would your own.
- Maintain discretion and confidentiality throughout the process.

TIP

Your most effective way of recruiting may be through employees within the organization. Make people aware that if they introduce a successful candidate there is a financial reward.

Before the Interview

Everybody seems to know what to do for an interview, but the time never seems to be available to do the basics. Here they are:

- Send directions to agency.
- Book a room in advance with refreshments (try to make it away from your office, and general interruptions).
- Make sure that the room and reception are tidy.
- Have a copy of the brief at hand.
- Have a copy of the candidate's CV at hand.

TIP

- 1 There are normally a few minutes when the candidates are waiting in reception. What about having an envelope containing the brief (minus salary details) and information on the company for the candidate to read? This scores a few first impression points.
- 2 What about creating a written matrix of required experience, characteristics and skills that you can use during the interview (see next section and Figure 1.3)?

COMMENT

A friend of mine had three offers on the table. They were all from agencies working in the airline sector. The agencies were large, medium-sized and small. The opportunities were different but all quite appealing. She had real problems in deciding, but set

	Candidate 1	Candidate 2	Candidate 3
Pan-Euro digital experience	3	4	2
Client fit	4	2	3
Agency fit	4	4	3
Languages?	French	French/German	French/Italian
Automotive?	No	No	Yes
Coordination/project management skills	3	3	3
Star quality	4	3	2
Presentation	4	3	3

Figure 1.3 Candidate suitability matrix (out of 5)

everything out in writing to help her decide. In the end, it was the agency culture and style category that decided it for her. She described it as the ‘clued-up nature’ of the agency, but it was interesting that she repeatedly mentioned the CD-ROM of the agency credentials that they mailed to her house before her first interview. Enclosed was a postcard from her potential boss, which also conveyed a personal touch.

The Interview

There are a number of styles when it comes to interviewing candidates. Whatever your style, you should allow candidates to do most of the talking so you can assess their suitability. Nevertheless, make sure you sell the agency and the opportunity.

I would structure a typical interview as follows:

- 2 mins Tea/coffee/settling in
- 2 mins Explanation of interview procedure
- 5 mins Whistle-stop agency credentials
- 5 mins Job function description
- 10 mins Candidate talks about experience
- 10 mins Candidate talks about reasons for moving/suitability for position
- 5 mins Candidate asks question about job/agency
- 15 mins Candidate is asked questions
- 5 mins Candidate asks any more questions
- 2 mins Wrap-up/description of next steps
- 1 min Candidate is thanked and shown out

OK, you cannot be that precise, but I aim to allow the candidate to be the one who shows star quality.

COMMENT

I know of one candidate who was not that impressed with an agency but knew the opportunity was very interesting. When it was time to go, instead of thanking him for his time and showing him out, the interviewer asked him to come back for another interview but left him at the door of his office. The office was in the middle of a large work area on the sixth floor and the candidate had no clue where the lifts were. He realized later that this unconscious 'sink or swim' mentality was probably this interviewer's management style, confirming my friend's earlier suspicions, and therefore he refused a second interview.

Here are some suggestions for general interviewing techniques that may help:

- DO prepare (room, brief etc.)
- DO be on time
- DO NOT cancel
- DO stage-manage your environment
- DO NOT allow yourself to be interrupted or distracted
- DO state how you wish to conduct the interview
- DO make sure you have a clock in view
- DO NOT look at your watch to keep time
- DO keep notes (but alert the candidates to this at the start)
- DO NOT ask unacceptable questions or witness this without intervening
(see below)
- DO be aware of your own body language (and theirs)
- DO ask open questions
- DO ask candidates to substantiate claims with anecdotes/evidence
(e.g. 'Give me an example of how your clients see you as passionate')

COMMENT

Written notes, including a structured matrix as recommended above, have a number of advantages. First, they help you make decisions and they can be given to another interviewer. However, you should agree on the criteria together beforehand.

More importantly, if for any reason a rejected candidate pursues a court case against a prejudiced rejection, there is written evidence that may substantiate that rejection.

TIP

Did someone say *court case*? Let me draw your attention to equal opportunities legislation and the list of sample questions below. The principle behind the legislation is to make sure that questioning and consequent selection are conducted on the basis of relevance to the job concerned. For example, whether you are married or not does not affect how you perform your job.

Unacceptable Questions

Under the Sex Discrimination and Race Relations Acts, it is unlawful to discriminate against job applicants on grounds of sex, marital status or racial origin. Questions asked during interviews may show an intention to discriminate if they reflect assumptions about one particular group or if they are only asked of women or of men or of certain racial groups.

The laws may seem quite complex in their potential interpretation if you are not familiar with them. An example would be to ask women whether they intend to get married or to start a family. This might not be discriminatory in itself if it is a genuine requirement of the job that employees are single and remain childless; however, a good deal of this type of questioning is discriminatory because of the underlying assumptions. For example, the reason for asking this question may be based on the assumption that once she is married or has children, the woman would leave the company because her husband would automatically become the breadwinner.

In essence, it is important that there is a good reason for asking questions, that no discriminatory assumptions are made and that questions pertain solely to the actual fulfilment of the job.

If you are aware that another interviewer is asking an unacceptable question, you need to intervene, or if there is no opportunity until the end, apologize then and reassure the candidate that the answer will not influence any decision making.

Examples of unacceptable questions:

- Are you single or married?
- Are you pregnant or intending to become pregnant?

- Who stays at home when the kids are ill?
- How many days off work did you have last year because of your disability?

I suggest that if you are interviewing regularly, you should familiarize yourself with the Equal Opportunities laws (<http://www.eoc.org.uk>) and read some books on specific interview questioning.

SELECTING A CANDIDATE

First, evaluate your notes and your summary matrix (see Figure 1.3).

One interview will not be enough. You will need to ask your colleagues to interview the best candidates, but I would suggest you give them a similar matrix so that you have a basis of discussion.

For candidates you are really serious about, ask them to prepare and deliver a 10–15-minute presentation on a campaign they have worked on. This should be in front of a panel of colleagues.

MAKING AN OFFER

There are three steps involved in making an offer:

- 1 Before making an offer, reconfirm with ‘the powers that be’ that this is still OK.
- 2 Reconfirm with the candidate or recruitment consultant a) their willingness to accept the offer; b) their notice period/start date (very important); and c) if they have any concerns.
- 3 Make a verbal offer followed up by a written offer.

SELECTING AN AGENCY

As an outstanding candidate, you will come to the point where you have to decide which one of your numerous offers you will accept. I would suggest another selection matrix (yes, another!) such as the one in Figure 1.4.

	Agency 1	Agency 2	Agency 3
Agency positioning/culture			
Account			
Account team			
Boss			
Opportunity			
Package			
Location			
Fit with personal plan			

Figure 1.4 Agency selection matrix (out of 5)

Whatever you decide, you need to be open and fair with those agencies making offers. Remember, this job may not work out and you could be in the marketplace again very soon.

EXERCISES

- 1 Use the matrix in Figure 1.1 to evaluate your situation.
- 2 Which candidate would you assume the interviewer would select based on Figure 1.3?
- 3 Do you interview people? Ask if there are any training courses or books in your agency. Practise your technique on a colleague.

