

Board Development

Hiring the Right Executive Director for Your Organization: One Size Does Not Fit All

Hiring an executive director is a key decision for any board of directors. What makes this a critical board responsibility is:

- The importance of the work of the executive director
- The close working relationship between the executive director and the board
- The executive director's influence on all of the organization's programs and services
- The executive director's profile in the community

In this leadership position, the executive director plays a pivotal role in your organization's overall success or failure. Therefore, whether it is the first, or the tenth, executive director, a board must not move too quickly when finding the right person for this important position. When faced with this challenging task, you need to consider three major steps:

1. Assess the strengths, areas for improvement, and needs of your organization
2. Plan the search process
3. Conduct the search thoroughly

1. Assess the Strengths, Areas for Improvement, and Needs of Your Organization.

Before beginning the official search for a new executive director, take time to assess your organization's strengths and areas for improvement. Striking an *ad hoc* committee is an effective way to carry out this task. However, be sure that the entire board understands, and supports the work of this committee, because this is the first step in identifying the most appropriate person for your organization.

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“One of life’s painful moments comes when we must admit that we didn’t do our homework, that we are not prepared.”

— Unknown

A clear assessment of the current situation helps you to design a position profile and job description that reflects the unique needs and characteristics of your organization. Some areas that you may want to include in your assessment are your organization’s:

- Vision and mission statements
- Community image
- Staff morale and needs
- Current program results and needs
- Financial condition
- Structural framework, such as the bylaws, job descriptions, and committee structure
- Board and executive director roles, relationship, and expectations

Use this information to identify the strengths and emerging challenges facing your organization. Be sure to look for obstacles that could prevent someone from taking the position of executive director in your organization. For example:

- Is the salary compatible with your expectations for the position?
- Do your board and organization have a positive reputation for the treatment of the executive director?

Prepare a position profile.

Use the information from your organizational assessment to help clarify what kind of person your board is seeking. Be sure to consider both the short-term and long-term requirements of your organization. The current development stage of your organization is an important factor to consider when determining the key skills and characteristics of the new executive director. For example, a newer organization with few staff may require an executive director with a high level of program-specific skills, and an ability to create public awareness. A more mature organization with more staff may require an executive director with financial and human resource management skills, and less expertise in the direct operations of the organization. Depending on the type of organization, your board may also need to consider related professional standards.

Consider inviting staff to take part in this process. Staff can provide valuable input concerning major challenges and the type of executive leadership required at this time. This also allows the board and staff to collaborate on a decision that is critical to both.

After developing a position profile, be sure that the board agrees on the new executive director's desired:

- Competencies
- Characteristics
- Experience

Review and update the existing executive director's job description.

With this information in hand, the committee can now review and update the existing job description for the executive director. When completed, this job description needs to accurately reflect:

- What the board expects the executive director to accomplish
- The working relationship between the executive director and the board
- A summary of responsibilities and specific duties
- The board's governing style

It is important to take the time to reflect on your organization's current status, and to discuss the board's expectations for the working relationship between the board and the executive director. By doing this, your board actively works to ensure that the prospective candidate understands, and agrees with, the way in which the board governs and works towards the organization's mission.

Review the salary and benefits package.

After updating the job description, it is advisable to review the salary and benefits package for the executive director. This is especially true if you have made substantial changes in the job description, and/or your organization has had the same executive director for a number of years. You can contact similar organizations to compare salary and benefits packages, or contact organizations such as Imagine Canada or your local volunteer centre to locate any recent surveys on salaries and benefits.

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“If what you are doing is not moving you towards your goals, it is moving you away from your goals.”

— Brian Tracy

2. Plan the Search Process.

The board now needs to decide whether the board and its committees will undertake the search process on their own, or whether an outside executive search firm will guide it. A board can incur a heavy financial cost by using an executive search firm. However, this can be the most effective approach when no obvious candidates are known, when the search is national or international in scope, and/or when time is of the essence. Remember that the board retains the ultimate decision and responsibility for hiring the executive director, no matter what approach you take.

Many boards choose to mandate a search committee to manage the executive search. If your board decides to do this, make sure that the board is clear on:

- The committee's mandate
- The timetable
- The budget
- The committee's level of authority
- The committee's expected outcomes

For example, does the committee decide who will be interviewed, or does it make recommendations to the board? Does the committee make the final decision about who will be hired, or does it make recommendations to the board? Beware of having a committee offer a position to a potential candidate before informing the board. An executive director needs to know that the entire board supported his or her hiring, and not only the members of the search committee.

It is important to consider the membership of the search committee. You may choose to have only board members participate; however, this is also an opportunity to involve constituents from your organization and/or the community. Try to involve at least one person who is experienced in the interview process from start to finish. Remember to select a chairperson who has the time and energy to devote to this task, and who can make sure that the process is fair, timely, and well organized.

All members of the search committee need to understand and respect that all of the information that they see and hear is strictly confidential. Therefore, the search committee needs to develop and use a process that maintains the confidentiality of all the information during the process, and that clarifies how the information will be destroyed after the search is complete. If a staff member manages the logistics of the search, such as creating files and setting up interviews, this person must also be able to maintain strict confidentiality.

Conduct pre-interview activities.

To keep the hiring process on track, there are a number of tasks that the search committee needs to complete before looking for potential candidates. These tasks include:

- Preparing the job posting
- Identifying essential criteria for the position, and creating screening sheets for applications and résumés
- Preparing the interview questions
- Developing assessment sheets to use during the interviews

Designing interview questions and assessment sheets are difficult jobs. If your search committee does not have someone with this expertise, be sure to get some assistance. Appropriate and focused screening sheets, interview questions, and assessment sheets are essential in helping you decide on the most appropriate candidate for your situation.

3. Conduct the Search Thoroughly.

Identify potential candidates.

You are now ready to look for people who will be able to fill the position of executive director. Here are several ways to approach this process.

Members of the search committee can identify and directly contact people who may know of good prospects for the position. Keep in mind that many people at the executive level did not hear about their current position by traditional methods, because they were not looking for a new position at the time. Instead, they responded to a direct appeal from someone who believed that they were the right person for the job.

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Considerations for Confidentiality

- *Where will the job applications be sent?*
- *Who will open the mail?*
- *Who will prepare copies of the information for the committee members?*
- *Who will call to set up the interviews?*
- *Who will write and send out the rejection letters?*

— *Hiring and Performance Appraisal of the Executive Director*, Board Development, 1998

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The committee can have the board chairperson send or fax a letter to key constituents or leaders in the field, inviting them to submit names of individuals that they feel would be appropriate for the job. In both of these methods, you need to send the identified prospects an information package that includes your organization's mission, goals, and desired qualifications for the position. Ask these prospects to send you a résumé if they are interested in applying for the position.

Well-placed and clearly worded ads can also help you locate candidates for the position. Advertising can be very expensive, so you will need to develop a strategy that delivers your message to those locations where you would expect to find people with your desired qualifications. Some of the options include:

- Newspapers
- Newsletters from the community and related associations
- Electronic bulletin board services
- Bulletin boards in places such as employment offices and related organizations

After the deadline date, the committee screens the résumés, using the candidate assessment sheet that lists the key criteria for the position. Ideally, you will be able to narrow down the field to a short list of three to seven candidates.

Schedule the interviews.

When scheduling interviews, be sure to plan enough time to allow both the committee and the candidate to get to know each other, and to cover the interview questions. You also want to allow time for the committee to write down impressions of the candidate at the end of the interview. Be careful not to schedule too many interviews in one day, since interviewing is hard work that requires intense concentration.

Conduct the interviews.

The interview is the opportunity for you to discover how each candidate will help move your organization towards its mission. Therefore, allow enough time for the candidate to clarify questions from the committee, and for the committee to clarify information from the candidate.

Effective interviewing is both an art and a science. If your search committee is not skilled in this area, be sure to get assistance in carrying out this process.

Select the candidate.

Relying on the information from the interview alone may not result in the wisest decision. Selecting the final candidate is a process of putting together all of the information that you have about each candidate in a way that allows you to see which person is the most appropriate match for your organization. The information that you need to consider includes:

- The candidate's performance during the interview
- Responses from references
- An alignment between the candidate's interview answers, and his or her actual experience and achievements

Remember that previous behaviour is one of the best predictors of future behaviour.

The final step, before offering the position to the candidate, is for the search committee to make a hiring recommendation to the board. While some organizations allow the committee to make this decision without the board's input, it is important to keep in mind that the executive director works for the entire board, not only for the search committee. The candidate needs to know that he or she has the initial support of all board members. This is an important factor for the person to consider when deciding whether or not to accept the position.

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For More Information on Related Board Development Topics

Contact the Board Development Program to receive other issues of *Board Development Information Bulletins*.

Other topics include:

- *Effective Organizations Call for Effective Chairs*
- *Building Better Boards*
- *Where, Oh Where, Did Our Membership Go?*
- *Meetings that Work*
- *Sustaining Healthy Boards*
- *Financial Responsibilities of Not-for-Profit Boards*
- *Maximize Your Time and Efforts – Collaborate!*
- *Evaluating Your Executive Director's Performance*
- *Strategic Planning & Governance*
- *Developing Policy*
- *So You Want to be a Board Member*
- *Understanding Financial Statements*
- *Committees*
- *The Board's Role in Fund Development*

All Information Bulletins are also posted on www.albertabdp.ca

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Board Development Self- Guided Workbooks

The Board Development Program has published a series of self-guided workbooks on board development issues.

- *Developing Job Descriptions for Board Members of Nonprofit Organizations*
- *Drafting and Revising Bylaws*
- **BOARD BUILDING:**
Recruiting and Developing Effective Board Members for Not-for-Profit Organizations
- *Financial Responsibilities of Not-for-Profit Boards*
- *Hiring and Performance Appraisal of the Executive Director*

You can purchase these books from:

- **In Edmonton:**
The Resource Centre for Voluntary Organizations
780-497-5616
(rcvo@macewan.ca)
- **In Calgary:**
Volunteer Calgary
403-265-5633
(volunteer@volunteercalgary.ab.ca)

Make the job offer.

Once the board has approved the recommendation, the search committee can make the job offer. Be sure to include information such as the salary and increment schedule, the benefits package, holidays, and the probationary period. When you offer the position, you may find that your potential executive director has some final questions. Be sure to answer all of his or her questions honestly — even those that may not place your organization in the best light. This is an important step towards developing the trust level that is essential for an effective board and executive director working relationship. It is difficult to establish and maintain an effective working relationship when the executive directors later discovers that he or she has been misinformed, misled, or uninformed about important organizational issues.

Welcome your new executive director.

To help ensure a smooth transition, you need to plan how you will assist your new executive director to become involved in your organization. Develop strategies for:

- Announcing the appointment within your organization
- Announcing the appointment to key stakeholders and the community
- Orienting the new executive director

Hiring an executive director is an opportunity to revitalize and/or to move your organization in a new direction. Planned thoroughly, and carried out effectively, this can be one of the greatest contributions that your board can make to the success of the organization.

Something to Think About

Currently, there is a practice to state in advertisements that only candidates invited to an interview will be contacted. While this may be an expedient way to deal with the number of applications that you may receive, it may not send out the message you want to give about your organization and how it operates. A courteous letter to unsuccessful applicants lets the individual know about the status of the application. It can also help your organization build community support.

— *Hiring and Performance Appraisal of the Executive Director*,
Board Development, 1998