
The Impact of Technology on Executive Search by Tony Leng, Managing Director

How has technology impacted the executive search process?

The use of technology has impacted the executive search process via the use of social media, databases and analytics.

- Social media tools such as LinkedIn provide a platform that enables both clients and executive search professionals easy and fast access to target candidate pools.
- Search firms are investing in more extensive databases that have robust features for maintaining and tracking relational candidate, client and historical search information.
- Both internally and externally generated information allows analytics to be used to help understand candidate behaviors and capabilities.

Skype and FaceTime have dramatically sped up the process of interviewing and assessing candidates. In days gone by, one had to spend valuable time and considerable expense travelling to meet people and we can now obtain a reasonable impression of a candidate via face-to-face contact over the Web at little to no cost.

What tools are being used – and for what purpose?

If LinkedIn is a tool – then it has had the biggest impact. Most executives now have a LinkedIn profile and so finding candidates, which once was a key differentiator for search firms, is no longer the significant differentiator that it once was. Since LinkedIn contains self-reported information, screening is vital in order to verify data.

Some senior executives have actually started removing themselves from LinkedIn because they are targeted so often. The challenge now is engaging senior executives about an opportunity as they are approached so frequently that they tend to screen out everything. And the business has come almost full circle where having a personal relationship with a senior executive is where the value lies. If a search executive knows someone in his/her space and is trusted, then he or she can get an audience and present a career opportunity.

Other ways to measure candidates using current technologies are reviewing Facebook posts, blogs and tweets to determine if a candidate has a digital footprint outside of their resume and/or LinkedIn profile. It is increasingly common for employers to do a deep and wide digital scan, which often reveals a candidate's private life. While this is common, laws are being proposed in certain states which may limit an employer's ability to search Facebook and other such online sites as part of their job screening process.

Many employers use applicant tracking systems, databases and internal referral systems to both find and monitor high caliber candidates in their industry, and often have a pool of suitably qualified individuals who they monitor, so they may be quickly targeted for future employment should gaps open in their organization.

So, finding candidates has been impacted significantly by technology. LinkedIn is most useful, but as mentioned above other social media are also useful – Twitter, Facebook, etc. The trick now becomes engaging the executive and then determining background suitability and cultural fit.

What about online assessment?

From a cultural fit perspective, online assessment tools are increasingly available and certain firms and companies require candidates to complete those assessments. My view is that this can be of value, however, in my experience if the interview process within our firm and/or the client is working effectively, there should be congruence between what the assessment shows and what the in-person interviews reveal. If one comes to rely too heavily on the tool, you can get misleading results, and interviewers may not be diligent and effective during the interview process.

I believe that these assessment tools can be used effectively during the interview process if utilized by an experienced psychologist, but are often most effective at the *end* of the screening and interview process when a hiring decision has been made and the focus has shifted to deciding the best way to integrate that candidate into the organization.

As mentioned above, an assessment tool can be useful if the evaluator has a deep and nuanced understanding of how that tool has been put together, and can properly understand the output. However, those people are rare, and often inexperienced users jump to inappropriate conclusions. The most effective technique is still conducting a competency based in-depth interview during which a candidate is being measured against a set of skills and capabilities that are required for a position, and is asked to talk about his or her direct experiences, rather than about how her or she would theoretically approach a problem. “Rule” – people can’t lie in detail, so get candidates to describe situations where they led, and ask probing questions about the candidate’s actual role and contribution to outcomes.

There are an increasing number of databases which are using analytics to predict behavior. These have been in place for credit reference purposes for a number of years, but increasingly, predictive analytics are being used to understand behavior patterns and individual risk profiles, which can be applied to the work setting. While this is not widely used currently, there are employers who are experimenting in this area, but from a legal perspective, it will need to be decided if employment based decisions can be made based on this data.

How do employers feel about using technology for searches?

Employers can utilize Skype to save time and expense when interviewing candidates. Many search firms also utilize online portals to provide clients easy access to candidate materials. Others prefer to receive candidate materials via email and set up a regularly cadenced status call to receive candidate and search updates. We are very much driven by our clients’ needs in terms of what technology they are most comfortable using.

While there are interesting technologies available, the old canard of “garbage in garbage out” still applies, and there is no substitute or replacement for an experienced interviewer when it comes to identifying and understanding candidate competency and fit at the senior level. Tools are a useful aid in forming an opinion, but a search consultant who knows his or her client, is experienced at interviewing and

assessment, and has access to high caliber candidates is not likely to be replaced by technology any time soon.