

# Separating gossip from facts

Steve Cooley gives his thoughts on ensuring the best candidate comes through the selection process



• Stephen Cooley

I was recently challenged by a chief executive: 'what's going on Steve? How on earth did XX get appointed as a chief executive? We all know they were poor, never delivered, weren't corporate and caused problems. What do we pay you lot for?'

The person mentioned had originally been a poor appointment as a corporate director and hadn't succeeded. They had just been appointed as a top tier chief executive. 'Gossip' said they had been given six months to move on as a corporate director. I had been stunned when I saw the announcement – they had certainly landed on their feet.

What could I say? The truth is I don't believe the consultancy did their job. I suspect they wanted an appointment at any cost and didn't dig too deep. Maybe I'm a cynic, but I knew this wasn't the first time this had happened. At least half a dozen top-level appointments in the last 12 months have raised questions. So how do you safeguard against this? And can consultancies continue to justify their fees if their track record raises questions. Finally, how do you, as a client, know what to look for?

Let's unpick this a little. A credible chief executive was raising legitimate concerns about a neighbouring authority. At a time when local government is entering into uncharted and unprecedented territory, with the biggest financial crisis since the mid-70's, he wanted to know how headhunters can claim to strengthen a process whilst advising on apparently poor appointments.

We must remember gossip is sometimes wrong or malicious. You have to be careful. There are many talented and highly capable leaders and managers who have fallen foul of their political masters, have carried the can for other's failings, have been in the wrong place at the wrong time or have alienated the press. So what do you do?

Assuming the issues about non-delivery are right, how should such 'hearsay' be considered? Let's be clear, 'gossip' or rumour should not be used directly and exclusively to exclude someone from a process. It is a dangerous path that allows hearsay to directly inform decisions - it will lead to

unlawful discrimination and a tribunal (probably quite quickly). Also, you may miss out on your most talented candidate.

A well constructed, outcome-focused person specification is a good start. Always have 'success' indicators and look for hard evidence of outcomes. The person who hasn't delivered will usually struggle, but not always. Sometimes, the more senior the person, the better the 'story'; they may well get through this first sift.

You can't ignore rumours – they may be well founded. So you must do the research before interview. Check out inspection reports, look at local press, blogs and forums, speak

to a range of people about the organisation, and take soundings. Use this to guide deep and informed probing. Back this up with tough but open questions; be fair and give people a chance to answer, contextualise and explain. If necessary, use assessment centres, personality and other psychometric tests, in-trays, role plays and deep referencing. None of this is rocket science. So why have there been such poor appointments?

The market is fragmented with downward pressure on fees. Plush offices and top salaries mean high fixed costs. In order to maintain revenue and margins, corners have to be cut or efficiencies made. A

thorough process, with deep research takes time and effort whilst less due diligence, sub-standard assessments and shorter interviews are often invisible cuts. The consequences only become apparent months after the person has started. So members have less or wrong information, and make poorer, less informed decisions and consequently weaker appointments. Services suffer at the very time communities can least afford it, and local government takes the hit. We don't think this is fair.

There are many candidates that can spin a good line, but deliver little. Similarly, there are those who have experienced career hiccups who have a lot to

## How to find the best candidates

- Better procurement: All recruitment processes generally look the same on paper. Don't just rely on proposals; speak to the consultancies, their clients, successful and unsuccessful candidates
- Take up references on the consultants
- Ask around in the market – which appointments have caused concern, who was the consultant; ask them about it
- Always keep consultant performance under review; set targets
- Remember it's the consultant, not the consultancy, that adds value
- Ensure there's a full due diligence throughout any recruitment process
- Be clear on what experience and skills you want; refer back to this
- Have an outcome not process-focused person specification
- Do the research, get the gossip and use this to inform your questions
- Always ask the difficult questions
- Have clearly structured, outcome and competency based interviews
- If in doubt, probe; use assessment centres or other tools
- Reference properly and thoroughly
- If there's been a compromise agreement, with consent, talk this through
- Remember, if the answers seem unbelievable, they might be
- If there are still concerns, have another interview
- Ask your consultant to detail their 'due diligence' on candidates. If you want more information, get more
- Be prepared to challenge and be challenged
- If in doubt, look again. Short term pain is better than long term problems
- Don't rely on hearsay, and don't just reject someone without clear reason – you might miss out on a star.

offer. You need a thorough process to identify both types of candidate. At this time, more than ever, you need to be more certain of why someone is the right fit for you.

If consultancies are the first line of defence, then we must all get better. Failure to do so gives us all a bad name. The poor appointments discredit us. Let's drop the excuses, resist the superficial and stop cutting corners. We should raise the bar together if we are going to pull through these extraordinary times.

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