



Working with Executive Recruiters

How to Tell the Good Ones and How to Get a Good Result

CV EXECUTIVE SEARCH | INSIGHTS | OCTOBER 2026

You just received an email from a recruiter. They want to talk with you about a great opportunity. What do you do? Is it for real? How do you know? Should you respond? Are you just wasting your time, or are you missing out on the opportunity of a lifetime?

There are lots of “executive recruiters” out there. Some are more professional than others. Those on the “retained” side of the business will be calling you because they are contracted with the hiring company to fill a senior, often multi-faceted, role. These searches are driven by the recruiter’s detailed assessment of candidate qualifications as much as speed to close.

The recruiters on the “contingent” side of the business generally handle more junior, often less complex roles. Speed to close is overwhelmingly the key driver for them.

Each of these recruiters is calling with a real opportunity, and the recruiter is a real conduit to the opportunity. Ultimately, it may not be the right role for you, and that’s fine, but it’s worth hearing that recruiter out to make that determination for yourself and to build a relationship that may bear fruit in the future.

There are, unfortunately, some recruiters with less scruples, the “resume-fishers.” They are not under contract with the hiring firm and may have no relationship at all with the hiring firm. They are simply hoping for you to send them a resume they can use to try to sell a contract. This is the area where the most questionable practices are introduced, and these conversations are, at best, a questionable use of your time

Let’s have a look. Let’s dig into telling the real deal recruiters apart from the others in a very crowded field.

The Initial Outreach

What should you look for in that initial email to you? Professionalism. Is the tone appropriate? Does the outreach message contain proper grammar? Did the individual clearly identify themselves and their company?

Don’t judge on much more than that. Don’t expect full information on the client and the role they are filling. The message may contain some details and that is great, but it may well not, and at this stage that is not a red flag. You should assume that the recruiter is trying to entice you, hoping for you to respond so that they may engage with you, and both inform you about the role and evaluate you.

However, if the message is not professional, is it fair to judge the recruiter on that? Yes, details matter. How serious are they if there are misspellings or grammatical errors in their outreach?

More importantly, did the recruiter identify themselves and their firm? If not, that's a big red flag. If they did, look them up online. If you can't find someone who purports to be a recruiter on LinkedIn, that is a definite red flag. Sometimes the initial outreach is sent over a made-up name and when you call back you are redirected to an actual human who "covers for" the imaginary recruiter. If you call back and are immediately redirected, seek clarity. Is there a real person that reached out to you or is the behavior somewhat less than fully professional?

Here's the hope: the tone was professional, the recruiter fully self-identified, you are able to easily find them online, and the opportunity they are representing is of interest to you. You respond to the outreach.

- **Good sign:** a professional, error-free message that clearly names the recruiter and their firm — and that you can verify on LinkedIn or the firm's website.
- **Red flag:** no self-identification, a message riddled with errors, or a recruiter you can't find online who gets evasive when you ask who they are.

The first conversation

When you first speak with the recruiter, they will want to ask you about your background. Expect that. However, they should be prepared to tell you more about the opportunity first. Remember, they reached out to you, they should tell you exactly why.

First and foremost, they should identify the role and, if able, the hiring company. They may start with a self-introduction, etc. and that is all fine. But quickly you should be hearing on whose behalf they are contacting you.

If the recruiter cannot tell you the hiring company's name, it's not a red flag, but a definite yellow flag. If they can't reveal the firm's identity, they should have a good reason and explain it to you. Perhaps there is an incumbent in the role, and that individual has not yet been informed they are being replaced. That is a reasonable explanation for discretion at this early stage.

Additionally, the recruiter should be able to share a fair amount about the role and should be able to answer basic questions, including a range for compensation. They may not know all the details of the role, and that's fine. In truth, it's a good sign about a recruiter's honesty if they say, "I don't know, I'll get back to you" about a detailed question or two. The recruiter should be able to share a job spec with you.

Finally, the recruiter should assure you of the confidentiality of your conversation. If they don't do so proactively, you should ask for such assurance. A good recruiter will protect your privacy. The last thing you want at this early stage is for your current employer to discover that you are taking calls from recruiters.

If the recruiter seems professional, has ID'd the client firm, seems generally knowledgeable about the role, assures you of confidentiality, and if the role seems interesting and appropriate to you, it is time to share more information about yourself. You will likely be asked for a resume and, if all the boxes are checked, that is appropriate, as well.

- **Good sign:** the recruiter names the hiring company (or gives a credible reason not to), answers basic questions about the role and compensation, and assures you of confidentiality without being asked.
- **Red flag:** They want all your information before sharing company details, no explanation for withholding the company's name, or vague, evasive answers to straightforward questions.

The Process Going Forward

The recruiter should get back with you for a follow-up conversation fairly quickly or should have already set expectations if there is some delay and then they should hit those expectations. A good recruiter will explain next

steps and describe where they are in the process. If it is very early in the recruiting cycle it may be a week before you hear the company's thoughts on your candidacy.

From here it is reasonable to get answers to your questions, further shared information and a more formal interview. After that, the recruiter should be able to connect you with the hiring company within days. If there is a significant delay, it might simply be scheduling issues, but the recruiter might be unsure of your fit for the role in favor of other candidates, or there may be some other reason for the delay. Regardless, the recruiter should set clear expectations and be in constant communication with you about feedback and any delays.

Of course, the client may have rejected your candidacy outright. If there is a delay, ask the recruiter directly for the cause and let them know you value honesty. If you are unlikely to move forward, a good recruiter will tell you that, rather than string you along.

You can help the process along, too. Respond promptly, be candid about your interest and any constraints on timing, compensation, or location, and ask direct questions instead of guessing. Transparency on your end makes it easier to tell a good recruiter from one who isn't.

From this point, the process becomes less about the recruiter and more about the hiring firm. The recruiter should remain your main logistical contact for the duration of the process, but hopefully, having come this far, the recruiter's credibility is established, and you are more interested in your fit with the company.

- **Good sign:** clear timelines that are kept, honest updates when there's a delay, and transparency when you're no longer a fit.
- **Red flag:** radio silence after the first call, missed self-imposed deadlines with no explanation, or a recruiter who won't tell you where you stand.

Summary

When a recruiter reaches out about an opportunity, it is important to evaluate both the message and the recruiter before investing your time. A credible recruiter will communicate professionally, clearly identify themselves and their firm, have an online presence, explain the opportunity and the hiring company as soon as appropriate, protect your confidentiality, and set clear expectations throughout the process. If the recruiter is vague, unprofessional, unable to verify their identity, unwilling to share basic role details, or slow to communicate without explanation, treat those as warning signs. By asking the right questions early and watching for professionalism, transparency, and timely follow-up, you can separate legitimate opportunities from resume-fishing or scams and decide whether the conversation is worth pursuing.



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