

The Great Divide

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Why do the simplest things take the longest to learn? Why would it take almost 10 years to come fully to terms with the fact that Executive Search Consultants only make money when they're on the phone?

Of course I am not alone. Actually, hundreds and hundreds – well surely the real number is thousands, and over the years maybe even tens of thousands – of short term careers either never get started properly, or quickly fall on the rocky soil of non-performance due to **NOT** discovering this simple truth. In fact, I believe these failures are due to this more than for any other single factor. Many thousands more never flourish; never truly thrive for lack of this discovery. Although perhaps not in the thousands, surely hundreds and hundreds of potentially great Search Consultants never realize their full promise, never claim true greatness for precisely the same reason.

No, I am definitely not alone. Finding the important simple questions and their simple answers can be one of the most challenging things in life.

Simple Question: *What is the single most important skill in Executive Search?*

Simple Answer: *Living and working on the telephone, at least 50% of your working day, your working week, your working career. (This is also known as the "4-hour day" answer.)*

The question may be made personal like this:

Can you learn to invest 50% of your work day, productively on the telephone in your market, speaking to candidates and hiring managers?

Here's another way to ask:

Is there any combination of things, in sum, that consumes more of your time at work than you spend talking to prospects, clients and candidates on the phone? If so, how can you be sure that performing – and continuously learning how to perform better – is actually your highest priority?

Part of my struggle to discover this simple lesson had to do with timing. When I first started serving MRI clients, I knew essentially nothing about Executive Search, and precisely nothing about the MRI family – having never heard of you. 1994, my first full year serving a small coterie of MRI shops, also happened to be right at the beginning of the longest bull market in capitalism's history.

Throughout the entire great bull market of the nineties I fought the 4-hour rule. I didn't get converted until early in 2001; and since, although I do convert well when I do, I did not fully realize its power, cause and effect flow and necessary simplicity until now.

One of the inexcusably difficult parts for me was identifying the action and outcome, front-end/back-end structure that dictates connected time in the market. Time on the phone, speaking, is the result of the number of calls and conversations you make. Once connected, you have to be able to accomplish your task in conversation, but then you have to move on to the next call. Thus planned, dialed and then completed calls are the front-end, time on the phone in the market is the back-end.

If you are to hit the magical 4-hour day, then you have to be able to be connected, on the phone, speaking to candidates, prospects and clients for about 40 minutes out of every work hour, 6 hours per day. If you log less than 40 connected minutes per actual clock-hour then you will have to invest more than 6 clock-hours to hit the 4-hour goal.

It appears that you have to be prepared, then, for each 3-hour half-workday period, with about 50 calls at the ready. Then, each morning, for 3 hours from 9:00 am to 12:00 pm you have to make your 50 outbound calls. This is non-stop, highly focused, intense work.

You will definitely need to break at lunch, but don't eat too heavy, and by all means, don't have a martini or a vodka gimlet at lunch! Why not? Because you have to be gearing up for your afternoon, that's why. There have to be another 50 or so calls planned and completed between 1:00 and 4:00 pm. Roughly 100 calls each day, or 500 per week. And time on the phone? That would be 120 minutes each morning and afternoon for a total of 240 each day. In a five day week, 1,200 minutes or 20 hours of connected time.

1,200 minutes, eh? That's a lot, and it's just one week.

In fact, it is the great divide. Those who can do it are almost guaranteed of surviving. If they continue to learn, those who cross the divide will thrive. On the other side there is continuous improvement, there is the fulfillment of potential and the achievement of greatness. Those who cannot, if they survive, will face either struggle or mediocrity. They will certainly find themselves topping out in performance long before potential is fulfilled or greatness attained. Time, on the phone, productively in the market, learning and growing, is the difference. It is the great difference.

For our purposes today, I am going to mention, but then quickly skip over the subjects of desk specialty, who to call, and what market to invest yourself into. These are excellent subjects, but are in fact not pertinent to the question here. The thing is, you will need to have a desk focus, a niche, and we have to assume for our purposes that you know what it is, are committed, and are not waffling around on this subject. You must commit to a specific desk area.

I can tell you this though, on the subject of desk specialty. I have seen many times how quickly a totally “dead market” can be resurrected simply by getting back on the phone. Most conversation about dead desk areas is much more due to failure to pick up the phone than it is to any actual market conditions. Also, when you are on the phone in a so-called “dead market,” consider that unless the industry you work is going to disappear, some of the firms in your industry have to be gearing up for the good times, and will need to hire performers now. Truly, dead markets tend to be the result of discouraged Search Consultants who spend more time off the phone than on.

Assuming you actually have a desk focus, the next question is how do you make your calls – or, what type of calls must you make? Here, again, the answer is much simpler than we tend to recognize. There are actually just three major break downs, or call types:

- 1. Recruiting**
- 2. Marketing (also called prospecting)**
- 3. Deal Making**

First, let’s lump the following calls together under “**Deal Making.**”

- Scheduling and Follow-up
- Preparation calls
- Debriefing
- Reference checking
- Closing or Decision-making calls

Deal Making, this third category, is not part of the great divide. Once you have activity on your desk there is no real difficulty in getting you to make these calls. They are truly back-end, not front-end. And although there is much for you to learn in mastering them, they are not the primary problem.

Simple Recruiting

The front-end is much more difficult to master. This is equally true for Project Coordinators as it is for Search Consultants.

Just how simple can we make a recruiting call out to be? Very simple indeed. What if you knew what your desk specialty was, and therefore had the actual right to speak to anyone in that space, with or without a Job Order? And think about it from your own point of view. How much do you think you would like to receive a screening call? I would hate it. Wouldn't you?

On the other hand, receiving a call from a recruiter who actually specializes in your area, and who takes his or her career counseling responsibility seriously, is a sheer delight. It's a real ego rush.

But again, how simple might it be? How about this?

- **“Hi, as an Executive Recruiter specializing in this area, I got your name from a co-worker and believe it would be wise for us to spend a few minutes so that I might know what type of opportunities to keep you in mind for, would that be okay?”**
- **“Great, tell me about your work, are you happy?”**
- **“Have you found what you were looking for when you signed up?”**
- **“When you look to the future, what sort of directions do you imagine or dream about for your career.”**
- **“Are there any urgent pressures where you are right now that might lead to you aggressively consider new career opportunities?”**
- **“What kind of opportunities would you be mad at me over, if I didn't pick up the phone and give you a shot at them?”**

Dreams, hopes, aspirations, job pressures, happiness, readiness to change, urgency. The truth is, if you just treated a candidate the same way you would your brother or sister, you'll do just fine. You just need to try to get through to about 50 people like this during a 3-hour period. It really is rather simple.

Simple Marketing

And the precise same holds true for marketing, with or without an MPC. But to uncover the simplicity here we have to spend a moment exploring your power, and your right to be on the phone.

Let's say you call a company with a great MPC, but the hiring manager doesn't have the time of day for you. He or she just isn't impressed, even though you specialize in their work space, and the talent you are introducing is perfectly qualified to help their firm improve its performance right now. What does this tell you? It tells you that the hiring manager you called is not interested in performance. And if this foolish soul reflects the leadership of the firm, then I can tell you that there are other employees in this firm who need to speak to a good recruiter who can help them find a new job!

You see, if you find a lousy company, you can be sure that there are at least a few good employees in the firm who would make awesome candidates, somewhere else. You have power.

You can find out everything about a firm, and do so as no other player in the game can. So, when you call, introducing yourself, the person on the other end of the phone would be wise indeed to at least be gracious.

There's more. In all the busy work of getting through the day, it is often hard, maybe even impossible to focus on the most important things. So, you can know in advance that the person you are calling is very unlikely to have focused the kind of effort on finding the best people for the firm that he or she should. When you call, you give them an opportunity to focus on the single most important area of all. This is a tremendous service and a true gain for them, if you simply approach your job with a sensitive, but confident understanding of the value you provide.

All executives desperately need to improve the talent mix of their firm or department. It is the greatest need they have, whether they recognize this or not. By calling, you offer the opportunity to center their thinking, while on

the phone with you at least, on the most important area of business performance, bar none. This is a great value.

So how does this awareness of value and power convert into a simple call? Easy, if they don't talk to you now, they will later. Know that. If they aren't ready to do business today, that's okay, you will be seeing each other over the weeks and months to come, no matter what.

You are a serious professional, calling with a critically important service. It is foolish of them to do anything other than treat you with respect. If they don't it just reveals their shallowness, or wrong headedness!

So when you call, think of calling one of your parent's friends, on their recommendation. If candidates were like brothers and sisters, maybe business prospects are a bit more like aunts or uncles. At least at first, when prospecting you will find there is a bit more distance, a bit more formality. Of course, if you serve your clients well, this formality and distance will disappear overnight, once they work with you.

Maybe candidates are more like classmates in school, where prospects are a bit more like substitute teachers, at first. But as you get to know them they end up being people just like you, and the sooner you treat them that way, the better.

Here are some simple examples:

- **“Hi, as an Executive Recruiter specializing in this area, it is really important that I introduce myself and my services to you, and even more important that I find out what kind of performers your firm most urgently requires. Can we spend a few minutes together?”**
- **“Great, tell me what makes the difference between the average worker in your company, and those that truly stand out and get the job done right?”**
- **“How high a priority has your firm made, how greatly have you focused on finding, attracting and signing on the type of performers that make an immediate difference?”**
- **How well have you positioned your firm in the market – what do you hear coming back to you, that people say about you?**

- **If I were representing you in the market, would it be a hard or an easy sell?**
- **“Where would you say you need top performers most urgently right now?”**
- **“If you could find simply the perfect performer, one who would be guaranteed to deliver whatever you dreamed of, and at a price completely of your choosing, where you place that person right now?”**
- **“Are you gearing up for the coming economic boom, yet?”**

The key to simplicity in marketing is to see the hiring manager as a business person that you know in your soul, needs great talent more than any other thing. And then, you need to call about 50 of these people during each half-day calling period where you focus on marketing.

Returning briefly to the recruiting call, another profound power to keep in mind is that each candidate, in talking about his or her career, and desires, can teach you more about your market than anyone else. Your knowledge of candidates and their desires, their readiness to move, makes you a very knowledgeable and well-informed person when you call to speak to hiring managers. When you listen and truly learn from your candidates, you make the call to hiring managers simply value packed. The stories of the candidates, and of your market that you learn from them, convert into raw selling power. Explore your industry with your candidates; pass the appropriate news on to your hiring managers. Simple, truly. And powerful!

What I have discovered about the front-end is that for each or our two call types – Recruiting and Marketing – there is a simple planning structure needed. But there is also a spiritual skill and a set of work habits to go along with the planning. That’s the order we’ll follow.

Planning

The planning structure is simply this: You need to have available the company names, individual names of the persons you will be calling, phone numbers, and a simple method to track call attempts and connected conversations, usually called “Presentations,” and outcomes.

It may well be that you will only require between 30 and 40 persons to call over the three hours in order to log your 2 hours of connected time, but most people seem to do better by planning up to 50 such contacts for each 3-hour half-day period.

Over the years MRI has always recommended Marketing in the morning and Recruiting in the afternoon. This is a fantastic structure, but you do not have to live by it if you don't want to. What you do have to do, though, is learn how to complete the calls needed in order to make your 4 hours.

What if you recruit exclusively, as do so many Project Coordinators? Then your planning is that much simpler. Each day you need the names and numbers of about 100 prospective candidates. Then make the same 4 hours a Search Consultant would. The same is true for the small, but growing number of Marketing Coordinators out there. You just need the names and numbers of around 100 prospective hiring managers for each working day.

Numerical Visualization

But these are the mechanics and I mentioned a spiritual skill above. The name of that skill is “**Numerical Visualization.**” It is critical, before you pick up the telephone for each of your 3-hour half-days, that you see all 50 calls completed, in your mind's eye. You must dedicate yourself to the accomplishment of this mission without reservation. You must hold nothing back. You must give your all. It must be a total, all out, balls to the wall commitment, with no room for failure. In fact, it must be so serious a commitment that if you don't finish, don't get off the phone; rather, stay late until you do finish.

But don't think I am focusing on the 100 people, I really am not. My focus is the 4 hours. If, for a half-day period, you make the honest connect time of 2 hours on 25 or 30 contacts, no problem. Ah, but if, in any given half-day, you have only made 33 calls and still don't have your 2 hours of connect time yet, don't go. Make those 17 additional calls!

This is why I believe that numerical visualization is a spiritual skill. It takes spirit, soul, to hit your 4-hour mark each day. If this were boxing, we'd use the term, “heart.” A boxer, who just won't quit even against a greater opponent; who wobbles, but just won't go down, and keeps coming back for more punishment, is a fighter with heart. Numerical Visualization that turns

into completed commitments is just such a quality. Where does this quality reside? In your heart; in your soul. It is a thing of spirit.

Work Habits

Once planned, committed and on the phone, there is truly but a single work habit that matters. Take no breaks between calls. I didn't say, "Take no breaks." I said, "Take no breaks **BETWEEN** calls." Breaking after each call simply kills connect time. Of course you can take a break, anytime you wish. But so many do it after every call. So much so, in fact, that the calls are more accurately thought of as work breaks between other activities! Ron Fink's **Smiley Face** article delves this point, beautifully.

What about email and the Internet? Ah, great question. The answer is simple. Don't spend precious calling time on them. You need a quick email break during prime calling hours? No problem, except how much time will it take? And are you going to write unique emails to each prospect when you should be on the phone? If so you will never hit your 4 hours! I urge you, no, **I URGE YOU, do your email work at other times**, and streamline it! Have standardized emails, and for everything else, be brief.

The Internet? All research and planning, most especially any Internet research, must occur at other times as well. Internet researchers are not paid what Executive Search Consultants are paid. The exception that even I can support is for those of you who can multi-task; for those who know how to do Internet research right while you make calls. You awesome techie types can find any person, any where, any time. You're scary. If you use the Internet while you're on the phone, and you make your phone time and other performance goals, then I have to support you. But for everyone else, like me, stay off the Internet while calling!

Which brings us right back to the planning and the spiritual skill. Your planning has to ensure that your calling is structured, ready, and able to flow continuously. The spiritual skill is that you must convert visualization into discipline and performance.

Breaks between each call are indeed deadly. But even these are not what stop you, if you have no plan in hand. Before you even have a chance to cross over the great divide you have to set yourself to work, plan in hand, to make your 2-connected hours out of each 3-hour half-day.

Day's End

What time should you leave for home? And also, how many hours should you work each week? I am never afraid to recommend that people work longer hours, and that they devote greater investment into their success. However, those who master the 4-hour day, with 2-connected hours in the morning, and another 2 in the afternoon, do not go home late or work longer hours in the office than they were before.

When not investing 50% of the work day in the market, performers are unhappy and often even depressed. They're often losing ground, or simply not making headway, and they usually don't seem to be able to figure out why. The dreams that were there at the beginning seem to disappear and the exciting career has devolved into just a job. It doesn't take much scratching, usually, to get to the well of unhappiness underneath the surface.

But when the 50% mark is hit, on the phone in the market, happiness seems to materialize; and without extending the number of hours worked by so much as a single extra hour! It is almost amazing, but it makes so much sense. You are there to work. If you aren't working, you won't be happy. One of the things we seem to have missed in our modern age is how very happy work can make us. And regarding the telephone, it doesn't have to keep you away from home. It just means you have to redirect yourself while you are at work.

Your Highest Priority

When you spend more than 50% of your time off the phone, your mind and soul cannot help but define your off-the-phone work as a higher priority than your work on the phone. Off the phone, you are not learning your market. You are not mastering your skills. You may, like so many others, actually be building the habits of failure, rather than the habits of success.

From my point of view nothing is so high a priority as ensuring that you are in the place you learn, where you perform – on the phone, for at least 50% of your work day. There is no other way to be certain that performing and learning, in the market, are your definition of work, your highest priority.

Can you hit 20 hours, 1,200 minutes a week, in conversation with your market? How about 260 hours for a quarter? If so, then you are probably well on your way down the road to greatness. If not, and if you still want all the greatness you can master, isn't it time you learned to do so?