

MY JOB IS  
TO «STEAL» PEOPLE



IMM

PHILIPPE RIBOTON RECRUITS TOP MANAGERS FOR INTERNATIONAL COMPANIES. HE SAYS THAT HIRING A HIGH-CALIBER SENIOR EXECUTIVE CAN TAKE UP TO SIX MONTHS, SOMETIMES EVEN A YEAR. HIS CLIENTS ARE MAINLY LOOKING FOR EMPATHETIC LEADERS WITH INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE AND DIGITAL SKILLS.

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«My home is in the plane,» says headhunter and HR Partners Managing Director Philippe Riboton, who helps global companies hire top managers around the world. The hardest thing isn't to find a suitable candidate, but to persuade him or her to accept the offer. His typical target is people who already have a great job and aren't necessarily looking for a new one. In addition, he frequently has to persuade them not only to change their work but also their residence, because they often have to relocate to another country.

**You started your career as a journalist. How does a journalist become a headhunter?**

It might sound surprising, but both professions have a lot in common. Like journalists, headhunters do interviews, write a lot and create stories. Seventy percent of our work is the same. I started out in a French daily newspaper as a reporter and then worked in the advertising industry.

In the mid-1990s I decided to start a business in the Czech Republic. I began to publish The Prague Tribune magazine, which was one of the first English printed media in this part of Europe. At the same time I also opened a branch of the large French HR group Synergie in Prague. We created one of the first recruitment agencies in the Czech Republic and a few years later in Slovakia. For more than 10 years I ran both the media and HR businesses alongside. Later, in 2005, I founded HR Partners Executive Search, which specializes in recruiting top managers internationally. We typically look for CEOs, CFOs, sales, marketing and HR directors.

**How hard is it to find people?**

It depends on the company's requirements. Our clients mostly want global leaders who have international experience from different countries and companies, possibly a foreign education and who speak multiple languages. My clients are companies from all over Europe, but I often look for managers all around the world. For example, I was recently tasked with finding a global director of an IT company based in Prague. They needed someone who had previously led large teams of software engineers and worked in multinational companies across different locations. This is already a rather complicated assignment, especially as there is fierce competition for people in IT. That's why we looked for a manager everywhere from the US to Europe.

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**How long does it usually take?**

Usually between two and six months, depending on how many countries we are looking in. Finding a suitable candidate takes much less time than persuading them to take the offer. The people I focus on aren't freely available on the labor market; my job is to «steal» them from the best companies. Before I approach them, they are usually not even thinking about changing jobs, so it's extremely important to build trust. On top of that, the new position is often in a completely different location and they may have to relocate to another country. When you go to someone with an offer like this, they have to trust you deeply to help them make the right decision.

**Have the business requirements changed since you began headhunting?**

Nowadays, companies are increasingly looking for people who have experience with business transformation, especially in the digital field. Digitalization is present in all disciplines, from finance to HR or marketing. That's why we almost always search for people with good digital skills. While previously it was common for directors to lead businesses through authority and fear, today there is a greater demand for empathetic leaders. Employees wish to be listened to and respected. They want to see that their employer's values and visions perfectly match their ideals. Especially the younger generation wants to see the impact of their work and at the same time requires more flexibility. And this also influences the choice of senior managers. What remains a key feature is leadership, that is, the ability to lead people. Every senior manager must be able to convince his subordinates of his vision, to show them the way and to connect them together so that everyone can pursue the same goals.

**Do companies also have special or difficult requirements?**

Yes, that also happens. For example, one of our clients in Istanbul recently asked us to help him find a CFO. And because the company went through a bad experience with some pure local manager, they wished to get a Turkish manager who worked outside of Turkey. Our task was to find someone who worked in the UK, France or Germany, for example, and to convince him or her to return home. And given the complicated political situation in Turkey, it was not easy. Another difficult place to get managers to go to is Ukraine, because of the conflict with Russia.

**Can a capable manager manage companies across different industries?**

It depends on the segment. Sometimes we offer people positions in fields other than where they originally worked. For example, in the past, banks mainly wanted people with experience selling fast-moving consumer goods. They liked managers who think more about the customer than the product. A good CEO doesn't necessarily have to be a specialist in a company product or service. But he must be good at finance, business and marketing, and be able to work with people from all departments across the company. At the same time, you need different managers depending on the company's situation. When it is going through a transformation, the profiles you look for are different than when it is stabilized.

**What role does age play? Can young people be successful in leading roles?**

I work in industries that require a fairly high level of leadership experience. It takes a long time to reach the top floors in areas such as fast-moving consumer goods, finance or real estate. But it is different in technology companies or e-commerce companies, where managers tend to be younger. They are usually from the generation of so-called digital natives, people who grew up with digital technologies and for whom this environment is natural. In these fields, it is not uncommon for people between the ages of 25 and 35 to hold high positions.

**Are managers' compensation demands increasing along with the general growth in wages?**

If we are talking about the Czech Republic, for example, wages have been increasing by six to eight percent per year recently, something unprecedented in Western Europe. And of course this is also reflected in the remuneration of managers. In the coming years, however, this growth will slow down as companies will not be able to afford a further significant wage increase without affecting the cost of their products and services. At the same time, money is not the only decisive criterion today. Employees are currently interested in various non-financial benefits, including flexibility. This is especially true for younger people. There are not so many of them among top managers, but they already have such requirements too.

**Do managers ever have exaggerated expectations?**

Sometimes, but it's not that common. Interestingly, managers' ideas about benefits vary



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from country to country. For example, in Central Europe, the Netherlands or Belgium, a company car is very important. And sometimes managers demand truly luxury cars with high standard equipment. But in France, for example, this is not important at all.

**How often do you disclose the name of the company to candidates?**

In about 50% of cases. We can disclose the company and position, for example, if a regional director is promoted or transferred to another country and his or her position becomes open. But often the current manager doesn't even know that the company intends to offer him or her a different role or part ways altogether. Then it is difficult to inform candidates about a specific position. In many cases it is also sensitive for the company. There are a number of reasons why this information may be initially withheld from candidates.

**Are there ever companies that strictly require a candidate of a certain gender?**

As gender equality is increasingly being addressed in the world, companies want female leaders

**Philippe Riboton (55)**  
Headhunter and CEO of HR Partners Executive Search, which focuses on recruiting senior executives internationally. In the past, he headed the Czech and Slovak branches of French company Synergie Recruitment as well as the English-language magazine The Prague Tribune. He has also worked as a journalist as well as in the advertising business.

more and more. In many countries there are even statutory quotas for the representation of women in management. For example, in finance, HR or legal affairs, we recruit more women than men. But it is still hard to find qualified female managers in technical fields, even though the situation is improving. Diversity is also a major issue in many Western countries.

**What happens if the manager you choose doesn't last long in the company?**

We always arrange a certain guarantee period with our clients. For senior managers it is usually around six months, sometimes even a year. And if a manager or company decides that it isn't working, we have a duty to find a new candidate.

**Have you ever not found a suitable candidate?**

Never. Not because I'm so good, but because I never give up. For example, recently we had a case that lasted more than a year. But in the end we did it. If I accept an assignment, I guarantee that it will be fulfilled. This may take some time, but I will always complete it.