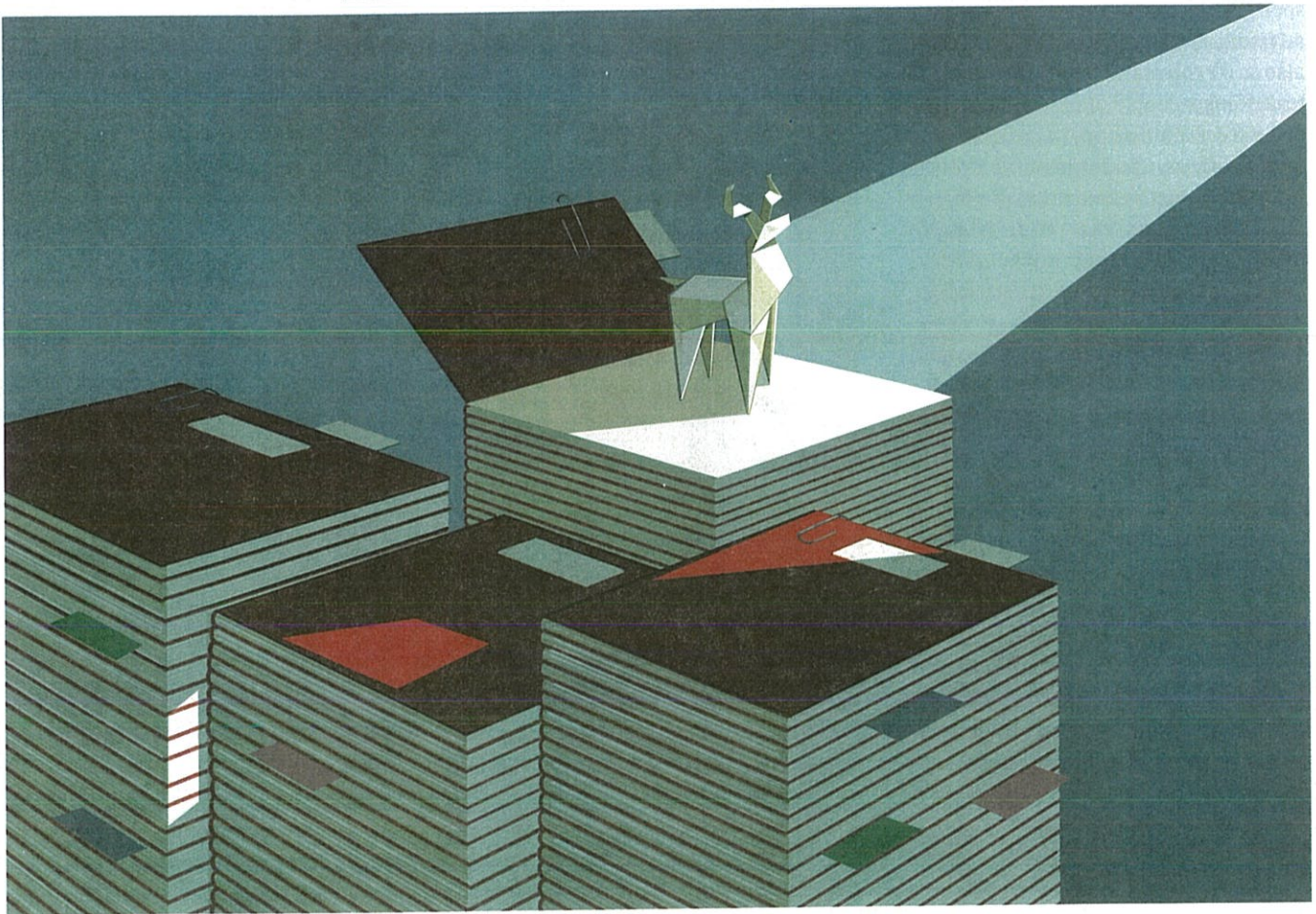


# E<sup>Advice & Inspiration</sup>perience



## MANAGING YOURSELF

### How to Stand Out to C-Suite Recruiters

A guide to how executive search firms assess candidates.

by Mark Thompson and Byron Loflin

WHEN VYING FOR a C-suite role, you'll need to win over many different stakeholders: board members, the CEO (existing or outgoing), executive peers, and external parties like customers and shareholders who might weigh in on the decision. But all candidates, even internal ones, must prepare for another set of increasingly powerful gatekeepers: professional recruiters and assessors.

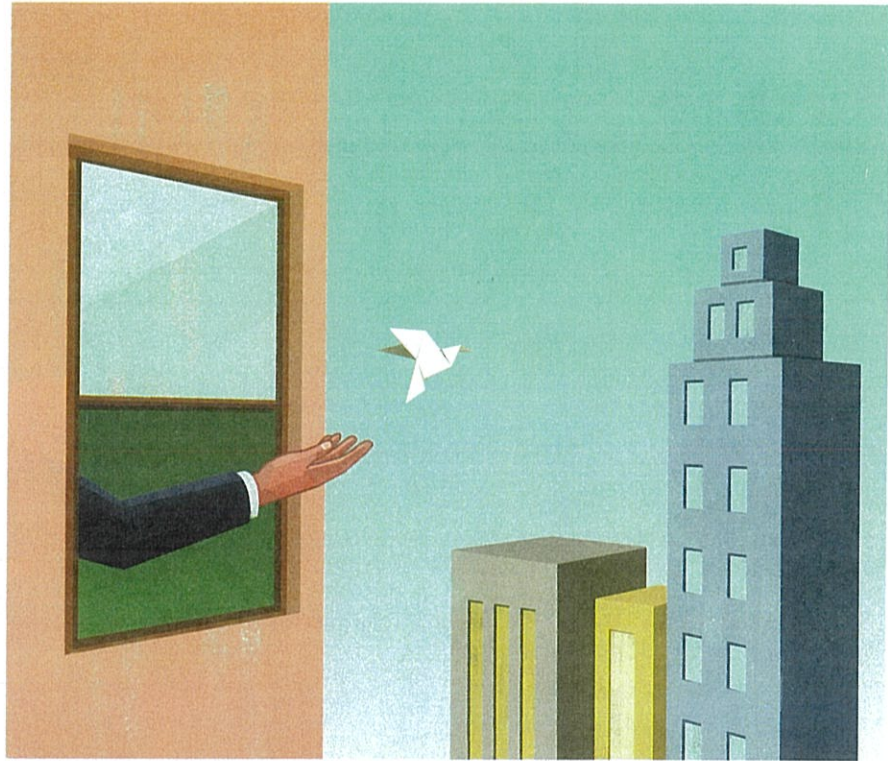
In our work coaching executives and consulting to companies, we've



## experience

seen a steep increase in the use of these advisers, not just to search for CEOs but also to fill top marketing, operations, technology, people management, and other roles at medium- to large-sized organizations. Candidates at this level can now expect to face small armies of outside experts who will drill down into their strengths and weaknesses and try to predict their potential for success. These might include representatives from leading search firms like Korn Ferry, Egon Zehnder, Russell Reynolds, Spencer Stuart, and Heidrick & Struggles or from assessment specialists like Assess International, Hogan Assessments, DDI, ghSMART, RHR International, MDA Leadership, YSC Consulting (now part of Accenture), and Mercer.

Few, if any, of these evaluators will have experience doing the job you're seeking. But they have conducted hundreds of tests and interviews, studied best practices, and applied frameworks grounded in social science. Companies are using them in increasing numbers to ensure that their most critical hiring decisions are based on data-driven analysis rather than gut instinct or bias. So like it or not, these firms hold sway over not only your chances of being appointed in a current search but also your future career opportunities, either elevating you into contention for other top jobs or taking you out of it. That's because their work feeds into both candidate selection and leadership pipeline development for many client companies. To impress these outside hiring experts (as well as others involved in the process), we recommend you prepare in five key ways: Adopt a development



mindset, craft a bold vision memo, anticipate every assessment, delve deep for interviews, and line up strong references.

### ADOPT A DEVELOPMENT MINDSET

The prospect of multipart tests and conversations with people who don't have deep expertise in the work you do can feel unduly onerous—a bit like a baseball player being coached for hours on hitting by someone who's never been up to bat. We implore you to shift to a more positive mindset and think of the process as an individualized career strategy session that will yield benefits even if you don't secure the target job,

because you'll learn something to help you win the next one. Getting ready for recruiters gives you the chance to formulate a personal go-to-market plan, glean insights from assessments, think through and flesh out your leadership story in interviews, and receive helpful feedback from reference requests. The process is almost always an eye-opener, helping candidates better understand how others perceive them—and how they perceive themselves.

As Qualcomm CEO Cristiano Amon puts it, even the most elite candidates need to build their skills, and a rigorous evaluation by search professionals, no matter the outcome, can show you where you should focus. "The most



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important thing for you to know is the distance between your areas of competence and your areas of incompetence, and then you can push the line forward,” he says, adding that if you’re not willing to do that, “I’m not sure you deserve the next promotion.”

### CRAFT A BOLD VISION MEMO

When James Citrin, who leads Spencer Stuart’s CEO practice, advises on succession, he asks all the contenders to write a five-page vision memo—what they’ll achieve and how, including strategy, operating moves, and financial performance. “Then the board can look at each candidate as a representation of alternative futures,” he says. If you’re up for a C-suite role, do the same: Develop a vision for your remit that tackles critical pain points, aligns with the company’s long-term goals, and shows you can execute and adapt.

When we proposed this to one client, Bill—a first-time chief financial officer contender at a *Fortune* 500 tech manufacturer—he balked. Bill worried that a vision memo might unwittingly stray or conflict with the CEO’s plan or tip his best ideas to peers vying for the role. We reframed the ask as a five-page “capital allocation strategy” memo—then a hot-button topic with the board since activists had been pressing many companies for more clarity. Bill did his homework—scanning the industry and conducting a quick listening tour with plant managers, sales leads, research and development, customers, and his boss and peers—and then over the next quarter outlined his recommendations for where to invest, harvest, or exit. He laid

out a working-capital plan with triggers, a pricing and supply-risk playbook, and a finance-modernization agenda (faster closes, cleaner unit economics, clearer decision rights). After running the memo by trusted colleagues and tightening the details on free cash flow, downside cases, and pacing, he presented it to the team evaluating him for the CFO role, discussing it in more depth with each subsequent interview. By the final round, recruiters no longer saw him as a strong controller but as an “enterprise CFO.” The CEO and board were especially impressed that he had challenged their existing capital plan as an activist might—an increasingly common stress test in his industry. Bill got the job, beating out three other candidates.

### ANTICIPATE EVERY ASSESSMENT

Decades ago, charisma, competence, and great communications skills might have been enough to win a C-suite role. Today, boards, CEOs, and other evaluators feel a responsibility to go deeper, with rigorous assessments that rate leaders’ skills, capabilities, alignment, and potential. These tools aim to depersonalize the process—not to strip away personality but to provide objective comparisons among candidates on a host of measures. The CEO prospects we’ve worked with have experienced 23 different types of assessments! We’ve identified several of the most commonly used and have advice on how to prepare for each, both before and during the evaluation process.

**Psychometric tests** measure candidates’ personality traits, cognitive abilities, and emotional intelligence. Tools

like the Hogan Assessment, the Big Five Inventory, and the Occupational Personality Questionnaire (OPQ) are popular in executive searches. Prepare by familiarizing yourself with these tools and reflecting on previous experiences where your personality traits influenced your leadership outcomes. Consider engaging with a coach or psychologist to better understand your strengths and areas for growth, and practice mindfulness techniques to enhance your emotional intelligence.

**Case studies and simulations** require candidates to work through scenarios or exercises designed to replicate real-world business challenges. Activities might include strategic planning, role-play, group discussions, and presentations. The aim is to evaluate how candidates think through difficult challenges, solve problems, and navigate complex topics. Practice analyzing issues, weighing options, and proposing actionable solutions under time constraints. Participate in workshops or business strategy games to sharpen your decision-making and critical thinking in dynamic environments. Rehearse how you would respond in a high-stakes situation, such as presenting to senior stakeholders or leading discussions with cross-functional teams.

**Competency assessments** are designed to evaluate specific skills and behaviors critical for success in a C-suite role. They often cover areas such as strategic thinking, financial acumen, decision-making, and leadership. Popular examples include Gallup’s CliftonStrengths (previously known as StrengthsFinder) and the Change Style Indicator. Prepare by conducting a

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self-assessment to identify gaps in your skill set, and seek targeted development opportunities such as executive education programs or mentorship. Engage in decision-making scenarios that stretch your abilities to think critically and lead effectively under pressure.

**Proprietary diagnostic tools** are used by search firms to evaluate candidates against the criteria that their research and experience indicates is most relevant. For instance, Korn Ferry uses the Leadership Architect tool and the Four Dimensions of Leadership and Talent framework to assess candidates, while Egon Zehnder employs its competency and potential assessment framework. Prepare by reviewing any publicly available materials or case studies related to these frameworks, and align your self-reflection or preparation exercises with the core principles of the company doing your assessment. For useful insights, consult with professionals who have undergone these assessments.

**Cultural-fit analyses** gauge how well candidates' values, behaviors, and leadership styles align with the company's norms, sometimes with evaluations such as the Values in Action indicator. Recruiters will probe adaptability, communication, and relationship building—how people lead day-to-day, not just what they deliver. Prepare by asking trusted colleagues and mentors for frank feedback on how you are perceived. Revisit your recent performance reviews for signals about your cultural impact, and mine employee engagement data to compare your team's scores with company benchmarks. Study the most-respected managers and clarify how your approach reinforces or complements

theirs. Over the long term, broaden your footprint—take cross-functional and cross-regional assignments, partner across business lines and levels, and stay current on industry shifts. Develop a clear leadership philosophy that you can articulate confidently in interviews, town halls, and boardrooms.

**360-degree reviews** gather confidential input from peers, subordinates, and managers to provide insights into candidates' leadership effectiveness, teamwork, and management skills. Most senior executives have already experienced a version of this tool before encountering outside recruiters. One of the best ways to prepare for a 360 is by proactively seeking informal feedback from colleagues beforehand to identify some of your perceived blind spots and areas for improvement. The simple, courageous act of inviting input often surprises—and consistently impresses—those you ask, while enhancing your performance and outcomes. You should also seek input on your projects and interactions and demonstrate your willingness to act on their comments, showcasing your commitment to growth and collaboration.

In some cases, the results of a 360 gathered during the hiring process and delivered to you by outsiders can sting—and even feel unfair. When Maya, a senior operations executive at a global medtech firm, was short-listed for the chief operating officer role, she felt pretty confident about her prospects until the results of the assessments landed with a jolt: While teammates found her to be efficient, decisive, and productive, they didn't see her as sufficiently collaborative. As one peer put

it, she “sets direction fast but narrows input too early.” Maya was initially defensive, particularly since she'd just delivered a year of great results, but soon accepted the feedback as at least *directionally* true and committed to addressing the issues raised by meeting one-on-one with key stakeholders and making a few key changes. Those included a 30-minute cross-functional preview two sprints before lock-in; a 72-hour window before any major calls to allow time for others to register dissent; and a rotating red-team seat to challenge plans. Within several months, as the COO search continued, her team's employee Net Promoter Score improved from +20 to a top-quartile +47. The recruiters' readout on her thus shifted to “invites input, still decisive, quality soaring,” and the CEO ultimately tapped her for the promotion.

## DELVE DEEP FOR INTERVIEWS

Executive recruiters are perhaps best known for running exhaustive behavioral interviews that explore candidates' past experiences, including how they respond to challenges and drive growth or transformation. To discern how you show up as a leader, they are likely to ask about *all* your prior jobs, bosses, and teams; your strengths and weaknesses; and your accomplishments and mistakes. As Michelle Riley-Brown, president and CEO of Children's National Hospital, puts it, the conversation “starts from the moment you're born, your education, your community involvement, your upbringing, to the leadership roles that you've held over the years. They're understanding who you are as a person.”



experience

Deepa, a gifted chief technology officer contender at a prominent U.S. consumer brand company, says the recruiters she faced went into similar depth: “It was uncomfortable how personal and even invasive this line of inquiry was....Often, I couldn’t tell where the conversation was heading—or what ‘right answer’ they thought existed.” While she was accustomed to talking about her work process and results, her interviewers were trying to map her behavior against that of leaders who, according to their data, were successful in the CTO role.

Our advice is to control what you can—that is, how you show up—and answer with disciplined authenticity. To prepare, contemplate your life and career in advance, reflecting on each role you’ve had, identifying patterns of success and growth, and building a small portfolio of STAR (situation, task, action, result) examples tied explicitly to the target job. Include setbacks and what they taught you. (As Steve Hasker, CEO of Thomson Reuters, notes, you need to be “ready to say, ‘Let me tell you about something I really screwed up—and how long it took to recover.’”) Then rehearse until your stories are clear, concise, and outcome anchored.

Deepa added one more step that sped her progress. Frustrated that she couldn’t clearly articulate her leadership journey, and that it wasn’t landing the way she intended, she began experimenting in private with an AI agent. She fed it anonymized highlights of her track record and the job spec and asked it to play the role of a skeptical assessor, using competency probes, follow-up questions, and counterarguments.


This approach isn’t for everyone, but as an engineer Deepa embraced it and grew more confident with every AI session. Only then did she “graduate to humans,” as she calls it, running live practice sessions with us and other mentors to refine the language, tone, and pacing. She didn’t engage in this preparation early enough to land that first promotion, but the process elevated her game, and she’s now thriving as the CTO of a much bigger company.

### LINE UP STRONG REFERENCES

Recruiters don’t just interview you; they triangulate you. They call former colleagues, direct reports, and bosses. Assume they will also contact people you didn’t list, back-channeling through industry contacts to surface additional insights and red flags. For this reason, you need a broad, credible bench of advocates inside and outside the company. Ideally you’ve been investing in relationships for years—across your current or target organization and through external networks of peers, mentors, and coaches. But you’ll need to devote extra time to curating with intent, picking references who have seen you demonstrate the exact capabilities the next role requires and briefing them on the position, why you’re a fit, and the specific examples of your work together that they might cite to help your cause. Remember, too, as ghSMART founder Geoff Smart notes, reference-surfaced weaknesses are rarely deal-breakers unless they involve illegal, unethical, or abusive behavior; more often, they confirm that the search is getting a balanced picture. “What we want to know

is that people generally think you’re a pretty awesome leader for reasons relevant to the job,” he says.

Hasker, for one, remembers being surprised by how extensively recruiters checked his references when he was an internal candidate for Nielsen’s top job (before he became CEO of Thomson Reuters) because he thought he’d already proven himself to be a leading contender. “There was a lot of rigor to the checks,” he recalls. But in hindsight, he acknowledges, “if I’d looked logically at my readiness, I’d have concluded there was nothing certain about it.”

**REMEMBER: THIS PROCESS** isn’t just about you. Organizational leaders are duty bound to vet all candidates—especially in volatile times—and they often turn to recruiters for help. You’re not merely interviewing for a job; you’re auditioning to help guide the enterprise’s next chapter. Treat the adventure as a strategy exercise: Come to learn, to be tested, to tell the truth about your journey, and to line up references who’ve seen you deliver. Combine a growth mindset with a sharp vision, fluency with assessments, and self-reflective stories that show how you lead when it matters. Do all that, and the hiring team will see an obvious choice to join their C-suite.  **HBR Reprint R2601H**



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