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### Finding the Key to Bypassing 'Gatekeepers' to Company Decision Makers

By **Lin Grensing-Pophal, SPHR**, February 2008

When HR consultants are client prospecting, connecting with a company's decision-maker is a must. However, the decision-maker is often protected by one or more gatekeepers whose role is to keep salespeople—including HR consultants—from making contact. It is possible, however, to get through the gatekeepers, as successful salespeople know and some HR consultants have discovered.

Before making plans to circumnavigate a firm's gatekeepers, HR consultants need to develop an appreciation for the role of a gatekeeper, says Eric Albertson, a marketing and sales executive and principal of Succeeding In Business in Portland, Ore., and Austin, Texas. "A gatekeeper is there for good reasons," he says. "I've been an executive at a number of companies and my gatekeeper has made my life tolerable, but my gatekeepers also knew what I was interested in or needed and would selectively let people through."

As with any sales endeavor, the key to success is making a connection that is compelling precisely because the offer is directly targeted at the prospect's need. But first, the HR consultant needs to get a foot in the door.

Chet Holmes, a "business growth expert," has bypassed gatekeepers to make direct connections with some of the top businesspeople in America, including Michael Eisner, former CEO of The Walt Disney Co.; George Zimmer, founder and CEO of The Men's Wearhouse; David Pottruck, CEO of Charles Schwab; Phil Purcell, CEO of Morgan Stanley; Carl Reichardt, chairman of Wells Fargo; and Alan Horn, COO of Warner Brothers.

When attempting to contact a company's decision-maker, HR consultants need to act important, Holmes says. "The dead giveaway that you are selling something is when you try to be charming to the secretary," he says. "I got the chairman of Wells Fargo Bank on the telephone by calling with a very authoritative voice and saying: 'Hi, this is Chet Holmes—is Carl in?' " he says. "If your voice has that tone of authority and you tell the secretary what to do—do not ask her—you are very likely to get right through," he says.

There are some other classic moves that can help HR consultants bypass the gatekeepers, Albertson says. "Bosses arrive early and stay late and they're often in the office over lunch; call then," he says. "Send a letter with a handwritten address and return address," he says. But, be careful because HR consultants who attempt to be too sneaky in bypassing the gatekeepers and getting directly to the boss may develop a bad reputation, he says. "Tricks don't work anymore," he says.

What does work for HR consultants is learning to differentiate themselves and what they have to offer from other vendors, and delivering that difference clearly and succinctly. The "elevator speech" is a brief description of what you do and who you do it for, Albertson says. It describes how a consultant provides value, benefit and quality to the potential customer or client. The speech needs to specifically differentiate the HR consultant's services from the services provided by competitors, he says.

### Use Existing Networks

Sally Haver is senior vice president of business development for The Ayers Group/Career Partners International, a division of Kelly Services Inc., in New York. The best way to get around the gatekeepers is not having to go through them in the first place, she says. Use network contacts to make a direct connection with the decision-maker by asking a contact to "provide a warm introduction."

Haver has benefited from a client—a chief operating officer and head of HR—who is seeking a new job because the company the client works for was acquired. "She is friends with [an executive] in a company that is a target of mine," she says. "As a thank-you for helping her, she has introduced me to [the executive], who I'm seeing in a couple of weeks," she says.

HR consultants should grow their networks, says Barry Flink, executive vice president and partner of Flex HR Inc., an HR consulting firm in Duluth, Ga. "As an HR consultant, you are also a CEO of your own firm," he says. "As a CEO you can join professional organizations like Vistage, an organization of C-level professionals who either own their businesses or are the definitive decision-makers for a business," he says.

Being an active participant in organizations where prospects belong also can help HR consultants bypass the gatekeepers. "You can market your services to other members of the group, without blatantly marketing, by attending meetings and taking advantage of the opportunity to serve as the presenter at a meeting. When you present, give actual examples of what your company has done for its clients, and it will be understood that you can do the same for your prospects, including your fellow members," Flink says.

### **Comfortable with Cold Calls**

In addition to working their networks, HR consultants must become comfortable with cold calls—reaching out to people they do not personally know—to grow their client lists. Cold calls can become less cold when they are fueled by the power of connections, says Jason Boltax, an HR consultant and principal of JHB Human Capital Management, an HR strategy consultancy in New York. "I try to meet people in industries or companies I would like to work with or learn more about," he says. "I try and find someone in a company through six degrees of separation and schedule a time where I can buy them coffee or lunch and pick their brains," he says. To increase the likelihood of engaging a company's decision-maker, Boltax has developed some "conversation starters" that are simple questions. Those questions are:

- How did you get to where you are today?
- What obstacles have you faced in your career?
- What do you like and dislike about your company?

By asking these simple questions, a consultant can learn a tremendous amount about an individual and their company while at the same time making a positive first impression, Boltax says. "Without ever asking for a job, lead or selling a product, nine times out of 10 I get a referral or am asked how I can help them," he says.

The wide availability of social networks like Facebook and LinkedIn also can provide opportunities for HR consultants. "Google the person you're trying to get to and then look in your LinkedIn contact base to see if you can get to him or her through less than six degrees of separation," Haver suggests.

### **Seek Contacts and Referrals**

Finally, HR consultants need to become comfortable asking for business and, as Holmes stresses, with being forceful without being pushy.

Boltax says that he has found introductions and referrals to be the best way to get a foot in the door and urges other HR consultants to overcome their fear of asking for introductions. "I live by a simple manta—'what's the worst thing that could happen?' " he says. The answer is being told "no thanks." Instead of focusing on a negative response, focus on the potential upside, he says. "In our business, it's a numbers game and in order to survive you have to be able to push on."

*Lin Gensing-Pophal, SPHR, is a Wisconsin-based business journalist with HR consulting experience in employee communication, training and management issues. She is the author of [Human Resource Essentials: Your Guide to Starting and Running the HR Function](#) (SHRM, 2002).*

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