

HR RESEARCH SERIES 2026 - REPORT R14 OF 10 (EXTENDED)

# Executive Search: A Framework for C-Suite Hiring

How to hire at the top, board process, search strategy, assessment, and the most expensive hiring mistakes in business.

Executive hiring is the highest-stakes, highest-cost, and most commonly mismanaged form of talent acquisition. A poor C-suite hire costs not EUR 51,000 (the average for professional roles) but hundreds of thousands to millions of euros in direct cost, strategic misdirection, and organisational damage. Yet the processes used to make these decisions are often less rigorous than those applied to graduate hiring.



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This report provides the framework for executive hiring that matches the stakes, a board-governed process, a rigorous assessment approach, structured search-partner selection, and the red flags that predict executive failure before the hire is made.

## Before the search, defining the brief

The most common cause of executive search failure happens before any candidate is contacted, a poorly defined success profile. Most executive briefs describe the role as it currently exists and add a few aspirational qualities. The result is a search for a version of the past, not a builder for the future.

Brief element	Common failure	Best practice
Role scope	Describes current role	Describes role needed in 18-24 months
Success criteria	Vague ('strong leader')	3-5 specific, measurable outcomes in years 1-3
Required experience	Replicate outgoing executive	Identify what's missing, not what you already have
Culture requirements	'Cultural fit' (undefined)	Specific values and working style, tested in assessment
Compensation range	Market rate (undefined)	Specific range informed by benchmarking
Timeline	ASAP	Realistic, 60-90 days for quality search

## Selecting and managing an executive search firm

Executive search firms range from genuinely transformative to expensively mediocre. The fee (typically 25-33% of first-year compensation) does not predict quality. Methodology, sector network depth, and partner quality are far better predictors.

Selection criterion	Questions to ask	Red flag response
Relevant network	Who specifically do you know in this space?	'We have a global database of X million candidates'
Assessment methodology	How do you assess fit beyond interview?	'We conduct thorough interviews and reference checks'
Candidate presentation	How do you present candidates?	CV only with brief commentary
Fee structure	What does the fee include?	Unclear on what's included, no performance clause
Post-placement support	What support post-hire?	'We're available if needed'

Selection criterion	Questions to ask	Red flag response
Track record	Success rate at 18 months?	No data, anecdotes only

## Executive assessment, beyond the interview

- **In-depth references (not box-ticking)**, 6-8 references including subordinates, peers and board members, structured around leadership impact and failure modes.
- **Psychometric profiling**, Hogan, MBTI or similar for development insight, shared transparently with the candidate, never as a pass / fail gate.
- **Leadership simulation**, half-day or full-day business simulation with external assessors, particularly valuable for CEO and CFO roles.
- **Board conversation**, final candidates should meet all relevant board members for independent assessment.
- **Culture due diligence**, candidate assessing the organisation as rigorously as the organisation assessing them.

## Red flags in executive candidates

Red flag	Manifestation	Failure mode
Ego without adaptability	Previous success replicated exactly	Cannot adapt to context, early culture clash
Reference avoidance	Limited referees, avoidance of stakeholder types	Hiding relationship or performance issues
Oversimplification of failure	Previous failures explained as entirely external	No self-reflection, repeats mistakes
Impatience with process	Resistant to assessment steps	Difficulty with oversight, process non-compliance
Only wants the role	No questions about challenge, culture, team	Joining for status, disengages after 12 months
Compensation anchoring	First or dominant concern is package	Mercenary motivation, leaves for better offer

## Board governance of executive hiring

**The most common board governance failure in executive search: the CEO manages the search for their own direct reports without structured board oversight. CEO-managed searches produce 27% more culture-replica hires and 31% more leadership team dysfunction than board-governed processes.**

## The first 90 days, making executive hires succeed

90-day priority	Why it matters	Typical failure
Stakeholder mapping and relationships	Political capital for future decisions	Too focused on early wins, relationships neglected
Actual vs. stated culture	Avoid early culture violations	Acting on stated values before understanding lived ones
Quick wins that demonstrate value	Build credibility before structural change	No wins, or wrong wins, change before trust
Team assessment	Understand capability before talent decisions	Premature talent decisions on insufficient evidence
Board / shareholder relationship	Alignment on priorities and metrics	Misalignment discovered at first board meeting

## Forward outlook 2026-2030

AI-assisted executive longlisting reaches commercial maturity in 2026, board-level executive assessment centres become standard for European listed companies by 2027, executive tenure stabilises by 2028, and by 2030 AI handles candidate identification while human judgment dominates cultural and strategic fit evaluation.

### Built for what's next.

tenperzent.com is the AI-native ATS designed for European hiring in 2026 - GDPR by default, EU AI Act compliant, free to start, €79/month to scale.

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