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Steve Lowisz is president and CEO of Livonia-based executive search firm Qualigence. His company has grown by researching the needs of industries such as finance, technology and pharmaceutical. "We're a prime example of being able to create good-paying jobs. There's still opportunity in Michigan."

HUNTER-GATHERER

Growing firm fills niche by recruiting executives

By: NAOMI R. PATTON
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On a side street, just off Schoolcraft Road in Livonia, sits a squat, brown brick building, virtually indistinguishable from the other squat brown brick buildings that surround it.

Inside sits what industry watchers say is the largest recruitment research firm in the country.

In eight years, Steve Lowisz, president and CEO of Qualigence, has: increased his staff from four to 77 employees; increased revenue from \$300,000 to \$10 million annually, and expanded the firm from its Livonia headquarters to opening offices in Cincinnati, Cleveland, Chicago and London.

Built largely by referrals, the company's formula seemingly defies Michigan's struggling economy. Lowisz and his staff also developed a niche and set a standard in the executive search industry.

"He's very, very customer services oriented," said Greg Kosch, president and CEO of Fifth Third Bank Eastern Division. "He and his whole team just have that passion."

Unlike a traditional executive search firm, Qualigence specializes in researching its clients' needs and identifying and recruiting so-called passive candidates, experienced workers in the market who weren't even looking for a job, placing them nationally and globally.

Lowisz, 36, said he works to establish a relationship with them on behalf of his clients. "If approached the right way, you may get them to talk to your client,"

TIPS FOR PASSIVE CANDIDATES

When you get a call from a headhunter:

- Take the call. Keep the headhunter's contact information. It's networking.
- Agree to meet the hiring company for lunch to establish a relationship for future opportunities.
- Always think about your next job and educate yourself about opportunities in your industry.

TIPS FOR RECRUITERS

Before you call the passive candidate:

- Thoroughly research your client's industry and marketplace.
 - Identify the passive candidate and build the relationship for current and future opportunities.
 - Work past a candidate's objections, such as they like their current job. Sell the new opportunity.
- Qualigence is hosting a seminar on recruiting passive candidates May 17. To learn more, call 734-432-6300, or register at www.qualigence.com.

- Naomi R. Patton

Lowisz said, adding they're more difficult to recruit because they're loyal to their companies. "It's about building a pipeline of candidates for the client," he said.

Lowisz, who grew up in Detroit and Dearborn Heights, began his career in the early 1990s selling office equipment. When asked to recruit sales associates, Lowisz hired a Chicago-based firm to research the market so he could identify the best candidates.



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A year later, Lowisz, who has an architecture degree from Lawrence Technological University, was working for the firm he hired.

In 1997, he struck out on his own and formed a new recruitment research firm with a partner. That partnership dissolved in 1999, and Lowisz founded Qualigence (a combination of quality and intelligence).

Lowisz, who says his firm is the largest

of its kind in the country, attributes Qualigence's large number of referrals to the quality of the work and its fee structure.

The company charges its clients hourly - not based on a commission from a candidate's hire. The client also owns all of the research, which can be accessed by the client on the company's Web site, www.qualigence.com.

Steve Lowisz, CEO of executive search firm Qualigence, left, speaks to client John Havenaar, who works as a human resources director for Whirlpool, one of his clients.

"The profit margin per deal is lower" than at many firms, Lowisz said. But, he added, the goal is to establish long-term relationships with the client.

Kosch met Lowisz when he worked for the Chicago firm.

"He understands the real inner workings of his client ... in deep detail," Kosch said of Lowisz.

While there are about 5,000 traditional executive headhunter firms in the country,

R.D. Whitney, Kennedy Information Recruiting and Career Media Group vice president, said research recruitment firms like Qualigence have created a niche.

"This has become sort of an outsource specialty," Whitney said. "Firms sophisticated like Qualigence take it to a whole new level."

Whitney said in-house recruiters are inundated with resumes and "good talent is getting lost in the shuffle."

In March, the Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Growth reported the state's unemployment rate hovered around 6.5%, well above the national average.

Qualigence has grown despite that because most of the company's clients are in the financial services, pharmaceutical and technology industries.

Lowisz said he has "insulated myself from what happens with automotive clients," by working with auto suppliers or as a third party with a traditional headhunter firm representing an automotive client.

In the past year, Lowisz also created two new companies: AQuire Corp., which helps a company's in-house recruiter sift through its online database of potential hires, and Executive Gateways Inc., which helps candidates not hired by one Qualigence client find jobs with another.

"We're a prime example of being able to create good-paying jobs," Lowisz said. "There's still opportunity in Michigan."

Qualigence clients also include Whirlpool, Merrill Lynch, Cisco and the Limited Brands.

John Havenaar, Whirlpool's director of Talent Acquisition and Global Human Resources, said he primarily utilizes Qualigence for research.

"They hit home runs," Havenaar said. "They gave us exactly what they said they were going to deliver."

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