Ask for the Number

A buyer's checklist for vetting a search firm.

GUIDE · DON'T DRIVE™

HOW TO USE THIS CHECKLIST

Ten questions. Ask before the engagement letter.

Most search firm relationships are agreed to in a conference room before the terms are in writing. The questions below are designed to be asked before the room agrees to anything. A firm that cannot answer them clearly is telling you something.

We answer all ten on this site. Ask everyone else to.

QUESTION 01

Their 24-month retention number, in writing.

Not a claim. Not a range. Not "most of our placements stay." The number, with the denominator - how many placements in the past 24 months, and how many are still in seat. This is the single metric that separates firms that produce from firms that place.

QUESTION 02

What the retainer actually funds.

Ask them to name, specifically, what work the upfront fee covers - and what happens if the search stalls after two months. If they cannot itemize it, the retainer funds the start of the relationship, not the completion of a search.

QUESTION 03

Who runs the search versus who sold it.

The partner who presented the pitch and the recruiter who manages the requisition are often different people. Confirm which one will be on the weekly call with you. Confirm who sources candidates and who conducts the structured screens.

QUESTION 04

Whether a written definition of winning exists before candidates enter.

If they begin sourcing before a written competency and outcome definition is complete, they are sourcing blind. Ask to see the intake document. If they do not have one, the search will produce candidates who match the job description - not candidates who can do the job.

QUESTION 05

An evidence file per finalist, or impressions.

Ask whether you will receive documented behavioral evidence and documented red flags for each finalist - in writing, before the presentation call. If the answer is a summary conversation, the evaluation is an impression, not an assessment.

QUESTION 06

References run against the definition, or references run for comfort.

Ask how references are structured. A reference framework tied to the role's performance outcomes will produce different information than a reference call designed to confirm the hire. If they cannot describe the structure, the references are a formality.

QUESTION 07

The integration plan past the start date.

Ask what the firm does after the offer is accepted and the hire starts. If the answer is nothing, the fee buys a candidate, not a hire. Placement is not placement if the person is gone in eight months.

QUESTION 08

Whether intelligence work gets re-billed inside the search.

Market mapping and competitive research are often included in retained search language and then invoiced separately as the search progresses. Get the scope of what is included in writing before the engagement opens.

QUESTION 09

Whether they will tell you when NOT to hire them.

A firm honest enough to say 'we are not the right fit for this search' is rare. Ask for a specific example of an engagement they declined, referred out, or walked away from because the search fell outside their capability or coverage. If they cannot name one, they have never said it.

QUESTION 10

Whether their pricing survives being written down.

Ask for a written engagement agreement before any work begins. If the terms are different in writing from what was described verbally, the verbal conversation was not the real one.

CLOSING

We answer all ten on this site.

Ask everyone else to.

Our 24-month retention is published. Our engagement agreements are itemized. The practitioner who sold the search runs it. Every finalist arrives with a documented evidence file. We run references against the definition of winning. We advise passes. We tell you when we would not hire.

If you are evaluating other firms, use this list. The gaps in their answers will tell you more than their pitch deck did.

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qualigence.com/how-we-engage

The numbers behind the method.

60%+

Fortune 500 companies trust us with executive selection

85%

First-year retention on placed executives

1999

The year Steve Lowisz founded Qualigence
