

The Engagement Model Chooser

Bring the problem, not the model.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

The model should follow the problem.

Most buyers pick an engagement model before they understand the problem. They choose retained because a colleague did, or hourly because the budget is tight. The right model is the one that matches the actual scope, timeline, and stakes of the search - not the one that is most familiar.

Use the guide below to match your situation to the right structure. If your problem does not map cleanly, that is the conversation to bring to a Practice Leader.

MODEL

Retained Executive Search

When to use:

The role is complex, the talent pool is thin, or the stakes of a wrong hire are high enough that speed matters less than certainty.

Full-cycle search with an upfront commitment. The retainer funds the research, the sourcing, the screening, and the structured evaluation - before a single candidate is presented. Every finalist comes with documented evidence. The decision is made against a written definition of winning.

Not for: roles with readily available talent and clear specifications. The retained model is not cost-effective when a structured contingent search can produce the same quality.

MODEL

Contingent Search

When to use:

The role is clearly defined, the market is accessible, and the organization is comfortable with parallel searches.

No upfront fee. Paid on placement. Works best when the role has clear specifications and the talent market has available candidates who match them. The risk is shared - the firm only earns on a successful close.

Not for: senior, confidential, or complex roles where the search requires significant upfront investment in research and relationship development.

MODEL

Subscription (Embedded Recruiting)

When to use:

You have consistent monthly hiring volume and need a dedicated practitioner without a full-time internal hire.

A monthly retainer for an embedded recruiter who operates as part of your team. Best for organizations with predictable, recurring hiring needs where continuity of process matters as much as individual searches.

Not for: organizations with irregular or project-based hiring volume. The subscription model is most efficient when the seat stays busy.

MODEL

Project-Based (RPO)

When to use:

You have a defined hiring program: a facility opening, a class to fill, or a surge that exceeds your internal capacity.

A fixed-scope engagement built around a specific hiring program with defined deliverables, timelines, and volume. The engagement ends when the program is complete.

Not for: ongoing, indefinite recruiting needs. Project-based engagements have a defined close.

THE FIVE MODELS (CONTINUED)

MODEL

Hourly Research and Sourcing

When to use:

You need pipeline-building, market mapping, or sourcing support without committing to a full-cycle search.

Billed by the hour. The scope is defined by the client. Transparent pricing, inspectable process. Used by organizations that have internal recruiting capacity but need specialized sourcing or research for a specific target market.

Not for: organizations that need full-cycle search support. Hourly sourcing produces a pipeline, not a placed hire.

THE SIXTH STRUCTURE

When the problem is not a hire. It is the hiring system.

Some problems do not map to a search model. The confidential replacement. The role that has failed three times in two years. The organization that needs selection discipline installed before the next search opens. These are not search problems. They are system problems.

The Sixth Structure is a custom engagement built around the actual problem. It may begin with the Hiring Discipline Diagnostic. It may involve a full GDD system installation. It always starts with a conversation about the problem - not the model.

Bring the problem, not the model.

Every model above is a structure for solving a problem. When you are not sure which problem you have, that is the conversation to start. 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
