vice,’ says Ms Sarch, a former economist. ‘Headhunting helps ensure that equal opportunities are realised when used to back up recruitment advertising. Some people will not respond, because they are too busy to read the adverts, or they don’t think they are suitable. Some people may not have enough confidence to apply, because of gender, age or disability, but we can go out and find them.’

She is adamant that good headhunters represent an effective long term investment, saying ‘if you are working with the public sector or with charities, you have to find the best people for the post as people are expected to do half a dozen jobs at the same time.

‘Recruiting someone to a top job is a big commitment, and the costs are very high whether you use a personnel officer – if they still exist – or go through an agency or an executive search consultancy. The costs should be balanced against the likely outcome, and you should pick the right headhunter for the job – the one who specialises in your sector. Regardless of whether the post pays £30,000 or £100,000, I charge a minimum fixed fee of £15,000 for searching for an executive, or £7,000 for selection, which is effectively recruitment advertising,’ she says.

‘We also help organisations ensure that they have got their selection policies right, their equal opportunities policies right, and their interview procedures right. If the organisation has an inexperienced interview panel, then the whole thing is not worth a bean.’

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How to build the skills they seek

According to Yvonne Sarch, if you wish to get headhunted, or to increase your visibility within your organisation, you have to consider actively what it is about you that makes you different.

First of all, you have to ensure that you have the basic elements in place: the relevant qualifications, up-to-date knowledge, and the fact that you are performing at a high level.

From that starting point, you must work on the things that will add to your visibility – your career plan and your activities outside of work. It is important to have a personal development programme.

Opportunities may indeed come along as flukes, but if you have not set out your objectives, you won’t recognise them when they offer themselves, and you won’t know how to deal with them either. You need to work it all out before. We are not brought up to do this, and it makes us feel self-conscious.

For the first part of your working life, you are getting yourself through the door. Then you have to add to that in terms of your personality and professionalism, gaining presentation and communication skills, line-management skills, and operational skills such as having budgetary responsibility. Then you begin to have some decision-making roles, and subsequently you have got to show that you are a risk-taker, especially in the fast-changing environment of healthcare.

That is the stage when you can add to your value with courses such as finance for non-financiers. We look for people who have a real understanding of how the accounts work. A lot of people until recently have been able to slip through the net without this, but that is no longer possible now that people need really to understand the management of areas such as contracted-out services.

Add-on value is going to take you on further.

People-management skills, such as really understanding team building and professional development – both for yourself and for the people around you up and down the line – are also essential.

As people move up the line they need more general corporate skills than professional skills. It involves moving from the particular to the general. This means that you are going to have to mix with colleagues from other institutions to find out what goes on behind their closed doors. Organisations like Women in Management and the City Women’s Network are useful here, as are professional organisations.

Such networking helps you discover where the trip-wires are, whether you are being tripped up by yourself or your organisation, and where the solutions lie. The other thing to encourage, although others may disagree, is that you stay within corporate structures. While we are being told that the world is breaking up into producers and customers, setting up small enterprises – which women are particularly good at – can be counter-productive for your career. Hang in there for as long as you can.

The people that I see who make the grade are those who have the capacity for work, which unfortunately does not happen for some people. Having the perseverance and determination to achieve is absolutely essential.

Having curiosity – wanting to know why and how something happens and wanting to be there when it does, wanting to know how the world works – really makes the difference between the ones that get there and the ones who don’t. That’s the common denominator.

Intelligent flexibility also counts – not being afraid of change, yet not looking at change for change’s sake. It’s about knowing the difference between when to go with the flow and when to make a stand through an informed decision based on self-confidence, knowledge of the organisation and knowledge of your objectives.

You can approach headhunters yourself, but your CV must be properly set out, with a database of your career – the names of organisations worked for and what you did – on the front page, with the second page comprising bullet points outlining your work achievements. Your CV should give a picture of you which means that the interviewer has no surprises when they meet you. While interviewers can’t ask you for personal details about marital status, etc, they will make assumptions, so tell them anyway.

It is very helpful to show the number of O-levels you have got, and the subjects of your A-levels, and everything else you have done to date. Your A-levels show your starting point, and whether you have stuck to the same area of knowledge. Matters of added interest, such as articles published, should be put at the end.

This is the format that will get read. General statements, such as ‘I am a good communicators and enjoy challenges’, simply get ignored.

Once armed with this CV, you should find a copy of Executive Grapevine, which lists the headhunting agencies and outlines the areas that they specialise in and the type of people they look for. You should be able to find a copy through your library.

Then you should make a telephone call to the agency and target a named consultant to write to with your CV. If your latter comes in looking as if it is just on spec, then the most junior researcher in the agency will deal with it.