

SECURING THE BEST TALENT



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Marlborough is an AESC-accredited retained executive search firm, engaged by airports worldwide to assist with their senior-level management appointments. There's increasingly a growing recognition within the sector that finding the right candidate is tougher than ever before, and it's necessary to cast the net as far and as wide as possible, as Richard Lewis, managing director, Marlborough, explained to Ross Falconer.

While Marlborough is a practice dedicated to the aviation and travel industry as a whole, the airport sector has traditionally been its strongest market. It might perform a dozen or so assignments in a typical year with primary and secondary airports alone, filling C-level positions as well as functional Director roles within, for example, Operations – in fact Marlborough has completed three recent appointments and has two additional in progress) – Commercial, Marketing as well as specialist functions including Heads of Real Estate, Retail, Regulatory Affairs and Customer Service. “Traditionally, the majority of these roles would have been filled with experienced executives from the aviation world. However, we’re increasingly appointing candidates from outside the sector. This introduces ‘garden-fresh’ thinking to the industry and it’s heartening to see that aviation is once again regarded as a ‘sexy’

industry capable of attracting the very best talent – wherever it originates,” said Lewis. In their quest for diversity as well as industry-defining experience in their executives, airports are increasingly turning to professional search firms. A typical shortlist may include three or four external candidates plus one internal candidate identified as suitable for the role. “In this case our involvement might ultimately endorse the decision to hire the internal candidate through comparative analysis. It sounds obvious, but the golden rule is to always hire the best person for the job,” commented Lewis. “We are retained to manage positions within the £75k to £300k salary bracket. At this senior management level it is universally recognised that the value-add from a professional search firm is worth its weight in gold. A specialist ‘head-hunter’ will have an infinitely greater appreciation of the human capital element as well as the cultural requirements of the role.”

DEMAND FOR ‘EXTRAORDINARY’ EXECUTIVES

In the past 12 months Marlborough has experienced, on three separate occasions, a situation when, from a final shortlist of four candidates, two were selected. The first for the job at hand, the second so strong a candidate, the client didn’t dare risk waiting 12 months to re-contact them for fear they would be unavailable and instead brought forward a particular strategy by one year to capitalise on the talent. Lewis explained: “This demonstrates the crucial difference a professional search firm can create in terms of our deep knowledge of the culture, systems, strategy, values and leadership that exist within client organisations – and sharing that knowledge with prospective candidates. As a result, the bond between a head-hunter and his client and candidates is incredibly strong.” Lewis reports that the market is definitely on the rise and Marlborough has noticed a

significant upturn in enquiries since the start of Q3. Demand for ‘extraordinary’ executives is very high and Marlborough is going further afield to secure this talent, as well as searching outside the traditional aviation sectors. “Previous experience gained within an airline or airport environment is becoming less critical in today’s market. Even the stalwart, ‘bankable’ jobs such as Operations will, I am certain, before long be filled by talented executives from broader industrial or commercial sectors. Many of the jobs performed at an airport today are already filled by executives from outside the aviation sector – e.g. C-level roles, sales, marketing, finance, HR, customer service, retail, etc,” explained Lewis. The human relationship element – interpersonal and intrapersonal skills – plus a customer services mindset are increasingly seen as ‘must-haves’. Lewis reports a move away from a knowledge of ‘things’ and more towards

personality, a knowledge of people and the complex relationships we hold with one another. Social media is playing a part in this. His advice to airports is to always hire the best person you can and don’t put a price on finding such talent. “Set out what you’re looking for and stick to it – prepare yourself for a long-haul process if needs be, involving a global search. Assemble a shortlist comprising diverse cultures, talents and experiences. Be prepared to take the gloves off and fight to get the person you want and need – defend your choice passionately. Don’t let anything get in the way of blocking the hire of a talented individual into your organisation. Dare to be different – break with the mindsets of old and don’t accept mediocrity or engage an average candidate because it fits with someone’s false timetable. The defining word you’re looking for in any candidate, at any level is: ‘attitude’.

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