Better the Devil They Know?

(Or The Great Executive Hesitation)

Is it just me, or are people generally more hesitant than usual when it comes to making a job change?

From our vantage point in executive search, we have noticed some fundamental changes in the senior executive market this year.

Let’s be clear about which market we mean. We are talking specifically about Civil Society. Because that is where we have been handling our highest volume of roles, it is where we have seen these trends emerge most starkly.

What exactly are we noticing?

First, it is incredibly hard to get people to look at what we used to call a level transfer. Few people seem interested in moving sideways to another organisation, no matter how great the brand or how compelling the opportunity.

It is taking more time, and far more stage management, to steward candidates through an entire selection process without them withdrawing.

More people are pulling out after informal stakeholder sessions. More people are getting cold feet. More people are turning down final job offers.

We used to worry about the search and relax about the selection. Now, we are confident about finding the candidates, but we have to meticulously plan for, and coach people through, the selection itself.

It never used to be like this.

The Realities of 2026

When we pooled our insights, we learned that candidates are deeply concerned about moving to a role or organisation that might change soon after their arrival.

They are witnessing upheaval everywhere. We see this ourselves in the frequency with which clients tell us they are changing their target operating models.

People also seem less confident that broader economic conditions will improve anytime soon.

They are viewing job security through the lens of cost-of-living pressures, sandwich-generation caring responsibilities, and ongoing uncertainty around, for example, tax changes.

The strongest candidates are on high alert. They are hesitant about taking unnecessary risks.

To put it simply: better the devil they know.

The Blind Spot of "Business as Usual"

Because we have all been living with so much macro-level change for a few years, I wonder if we, as leaders, have become desensitised to it.

Most clients are quite "business as usual" when they hand us a new brief.

But the reality is that recruitment is the place where the psychological effects of ongoing uncertainty show up.

My team knows that I talk a lot about emotional engagement. In our profession, the word "emotional" can sometimes cause people to switch off. The idea of emotion seems at odds with the rather transactional nature of running a recruitment process.

But if twenty-plus years in this profession have taught me anything, it is how people really make career choices based on the risk a move presents to their lives.

We may not even be aware of it, but it is happening all the same.

The more experienced we get, the fuller and more complex our lives become. When people make career decisions today, they are managing the risk of that change on top of everything else they have going on.

It is an inevitable result of the pressures everyone has faced in recent years. It is a part of life, but it is also a major risk for a hiring organisation to ignore.

The Three Stages of Commitment

In my experience, candidates move through three distinct phases when they engage with the idea of a new job.

The first is the in-principle commitment. An opportunity is presented, they like the brand, and they like the role. Some happily sign up on that basis alone. An application comes in.

The second stage is intellectual commitment. This is the point where a candidate makes a conscious decision to do their due diligence. They start investing time in checking finances, assessing vision and values, and evaluating the quality of leadership, the Board and people they would be working with.

For many years, the problem in search was having too many candidates in the field at that first stage. If you made heavy demands on them too early, they simply withdrew: this was bad news. We like the intellectual commitment stage because it means applicants are serious and taking accountability for their own risks.

But this year, we have a new challenge to manage at the third stage: emotional engagement.

This is the point at which someone feels in their gut that a move is good, safe and right for them and for others in their life. Only then will they actually take the job.

I used to notice people reaching this emotional stage around the time I met them for a first-stage interview. Today, it is taking people much longer to get there.

The Risk of the Informal Session

In the past, stakeholder sessions and informal conversations after the shortlist could feel routine and even quite performative.

Now, candidates are using these sessions as a critical part of their sense-making and due diligence journey. Crucially, they are doing this at the exact stage of the process where the stakes are equally high for the hiring organisation.

What this means is that a seemingly innocuous informal session has the power to cause a top candidate to retreat if new information comes to light, or if the chemistry feels off.

In fact, the smartest candidates (the very people we all want to see appointed) now expect a flawless, and flawlessly consistent, experience if they are to complete the journey.

Who Is Actually in the Market?

We want people to feel that, even at a time of turmoil, it is possible to make great career decisions that take them forward. In fact, I would go further and say it can be a brilliant time to make a move, especially if you are ready for promotion. Yes, you do need to do your homework.

But de-risking career moves for candidates means recruiters must focus their energies differently.

When we look at current fields for CIO, COO, or CFO roles, for example, we are predominantly seeing two distinct candidate pools:

1. Those looking for a step up.

For this group, there is good news. Your toughest competition might just be sitting tight on the sidelines. These candidates will typically go all the way for a material gain: a better brand, a substantially larger salary, or a clear step toward their ultimate goal. They are also highly responsive to flexibility that fits their lifestyle. Anything that offers more security is also viewed positively.

2. Those compelled to move.

This group is moving because of restructuring in their current organisation, or because they sense change is coming. The spectre of a restructure always prompts strong performers to consider their options early. However, this group is also highly prone to withdrawing their interest the moment things settle down in their existing roles. They come in and out of processes unexpectedly.

The Rise of the Honest Broker

So, what can we do to boost confidence and signal to the candidate pool that making a move is safe?

Well, first we have to encourage hiring organisations to retain an open mind and be pragmatic. In these market conditions, the most experienced candidates hold the cards. Showing flexibility on the client side is often what encourages them over the line.

Simultaneously, we must demand greater honesty from candidates during the search phase and preliminary interviews about their personal priorities and actual level of commitment.

Recruiters have a new role to play as a true partner to both sides. The role of the "honest broker" has never been more important.

In return, offering absolute honesty and clarity to candidates is paramount. This means being able to substantiate or explain new information a candidate might pick up during the process.

It also means understanding what is really happening when a candidate raises a sudden issue or introduces new information to a negotiation late in the day.

What looks like a simple, transactional question is rarely about facts or data. I often find it a sign of a candidate trying to buy the time they need in which to complete their deliberations and reach that all-important "emotional" engagement stage.

Respecting this, as opposed to writing it off as game-playing or a loss of interest, could mean the difference between a role being filled or remaining vacant after a lengthy and costly process.

And finally, being open to talent looking for a step up may be helpful this year.

Respecting the Market

It is important to respect the market; after all, none of us can change or influence it. It is what it is.

We do not know when the magic moment of change that everyone is waiting for will come, when these decisions will suddenly be free of risk or easy to make.

In the meantime, we can adapt our approach, the way we think about senior recruitment, and the judgements we make during the process to create the conditions that facilitate success.

Recruiters need to shift the relationship with their clients to build trust and confidence in their advice. As a profession, we should take responsibility for the unique insights we gain every day and be thoughtful about how they can be used to deliver value.

In the past, we have hardly made life easy for ourselves. Most of us have given the advice our clients need from us far too late in the process. It is much harder to do that credibly and without it being perceived as a move to duck accountability if all should fail.

The Shifting Sands of Search

It may be that the conditions we are all working in are giving rise to a different type of search firm: one that stays abreast of trends and developments, and can act on them in real time.

Last year, I wrote that the number one skill recruiters will need for these times is problem-solving.

Executive search must be about proper investment in shared outcomes for the Sector, trusted relationships, and the ready availability of deep expertise and guidance.

We have always been brokers and negotiators. Increasingly, we are also psychologists.

In 2026, context is everything. Roles that look routine on paper are anything but in reality. Filling them requires a deep understanding of the forces shifting the ground beneath our feet.

We are no longer an industry paid to match CVs to descriptions. Our priority as professionals is to understand the constantly shifting pressures on client organisations and be able to match specific demands to a hesitant candidate pool.

Making the best leadership appointments will require true partnership that navigates shifting sands.