

What do stars, top athletes and successful executives have in common? Talent agents.

Top artists and athletes are stars in their particular field because they focus on their strengths. One of their secrets is so common-sense: they spend little time on the other vital elements of their careers, preferring to rely instead on their trusted agents. The impresario, manager or talent agent, as we call it, fulfils multiple roles so that the capabilities and potential of their “stars” are fully exploited. For the past three years, an increasing number of executives have hired talent agents in order to get access to the same level of support to continue to go from success to success.

In this special interview article, **Serge Roux-Levrat** and **Hans C. Steckling** tell us what talent agenting is all about and why it is revolutionizing the way top executives manage their careers.

What’s talent agenting all about?

Serge Roux-Levrat (SRL): For us at getTalent, our main mission as talent agents is always to help our client executives be as successful as they can be in their current positions. And we do so in a number of ways. For example, we help them assess the strength of their leadership teams, recruit top talents, coach some of their direct reports and improve the level of (active) engagement of their employees. We also play a key role, of course, in the strengthening of their executive/personal brands.

Hans C. Steckling (HCS): Many executive search professionals have become trusted advisors to a number of executives during their career progression. Unfortunately, it has predominantly been in a “reactive” role, with the main focus being on meeting the needs of the corporate clients who pay the fees. At HCS-CONSULTING, we focus on the executive and the corporation. Applying successfully the

talent agenting concept for a number of years, we at HCS-CONSULTING typically start by taking a new kind of situation analysis and then focusing on bringing the executive’s talents and ambition in line with job requirements or opportunities.

Why would a successful executive need a talent agent?

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HCS: Demands on executives for performance are high and seem to be ever increasing. Only the very gifted “automatically” take the necessary time and effort to further their personal growth and their desired career progression. For many, there is nothing wrong at taking a professional helping hand to accomplish the same.

Getting objective advice and assistance, beyond what even top corporations offer for executive development, can be very useful for both parties. This includes the subject of executive branding as well. And, by the way, we hear more often than in the past: “It’s lonely at the top!”. At the same time corporations are starting to realize that talent agenting can represent a new and very desired way of enriching executive development programs as well as increasing retention.

SRL: In fact, talent agenting is as important to a top executive as private banking is for their wealth. It makes all the difference between a career that is strategically managed and one that experiences unnecessary ups and downs. For example, uncertainty is a reality these days. Everything may look fine right now; you are treated like a star. But what will happen if your company is acquired by a competitor or a private equity firm? Will you be among the executives chosen to lead the resulting

company? Maybe, maybe not! It's worth remembering that the average tenure of CEOs keeps reducing. It used to be over 7 years. Now it is barely 4 years. And this trend is also true for division, country or functional heads.

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A talent agent can help a successful executive weather well those uncertain and critical times. Executives can't be as good at managing their careers as we can be. After all, it's our core business. Secondly, as an executive, it is difficult to consider opportunities without revealing your name. Using a talent agent, then, guarantees you complete confidentiality. Finally and most importantly, because it's lonely at the top: you need to have access to a trusted advisor who can assist you in a wide range of issues and help you release the best of yourself and your team in a sustainable way.

When should an executive hire you? While he is employed or unemployed?

SRL: I have to say that over 90 percent of the executives we represent are high-flyers. Their careers are on the ascendant and have no immediate need to change jobs! A top executive should never wait that a career-threatening event hits him or her to hire a talent agent. While unemployed, the brand value of an executive

diminishes quickly and almost on a daily basis. Hence, the best strategy is to anticipate and manage one's careers strategically!

HCS: Agenting must not be confused with outplacement services. We mostly deal with executives who have no immediate need to change their jobs but who have “done act 1” and are considering “act 2”. Increasingly top talents are driven by the desire to “do something quite different”. Experiencing and influencing another corporate culture, industry, functional capability, or any combination thereof is the name of the game. It's also an ideal opportunity for companies that want to enrich their management teams through strategic recruiting. Obviously a challenge for traditionally structured and operating executive search firms!

What is the difference between talent agenting and outplacement?

SRL: These are two different services that are targeted at two different pools of executives. With talent agenting, we are retained by an executive (and not his/her company) who is working successfully. Our primary mission is to help them be as successful as they can be as well as minimize the impact of the career-threatening events that will inevitably hit them. It involves helping them build their executive brand value and become accomplished Human Capital Multiplier (HCM) Managers, for example. In the case of outplacement, we would work for a company who would pay our fees and have for our mission to assist executives in transition, i.e. usually those no longer

“needed” by the client company. As offering such services would put us in many conflict-of-interest situations with our talent hunting activities, we do not offer outplacement services at getTalented.

HCS: Outplacement services are an excellent tool for managers who get into a situation where they are “forced” to make a career change. The initiative comes primarily from the employer. There are firms specializing on outplacement. HCS CONSULTING, however, focuses on talent agenting. It is predominantly driven by the individual, preferably in cooperation with the employer who will obviously benefit from the agenting process considerably as well.

Which executives are you targeting with your talent agenting services?

HCS: Hard to specify! For us at HCS-CONSULTING, the strongest demand, however, comes from the broad population of “new management generation” that took charge in recent years. Again, they are very busy repositioning businesses, creating growth and satisfying stakeholders.

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Their own needs are often not sufficiently responded to and, after a while, it may cause frustration. There is practically no age restriction, either way. Talent agenting clients have in common that they –like “stars” – want to exploit their full potential and still advance.

SRL: Our target clients are mostly highly-performing C-levels executives (e.g. CEOs, COOs, CFOs, CTOs, CMOs), top investment bankers and management consultants who work hard to deliver exceptional performance within their current companies. They want to be in better control of their careers, not suffer unnecessary downtimes, brand themselves effectively in the fiercely competitive internal and external talent markets, and reach their dreams in a more sustainable manner! They are overwhelmingly aged between 40 and 60.

What additional key benefits do you bring to the table?

SRL: Expertise, confidentiality, and passion for example. getTalentEd is highly competent in the people side of strategy execution. Hence, we can genuinely help our clients unlock the full potential of their teams. In fact, the roles we assume as talent agents differ significantly from that of the more traditional executive recruiters who are paid by companies, or that of the executive coaches who aren't positioned to deliver all the services that we offer. Indeed, as talent agents, we fulfill quite a variety of roles: we are in turn or concurrently analysts, encouragers, coaches, marketers, brainstorming partners, truth deliverers, and/or negotiators.

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What we also offer is the capability platform, professional reach, time and expertise to scan the world for opportunities that could represent the next step up for our clients whenever necessary.

HCS: First of all, you need a deep belief that people and talent (i.e. human capital) make all the difference. We bring extensive experience in talent evaluation and cultivation, objectivity, own business management understanding, an ability to listen as well as a genuine passion for and interest in people. Our selected network of experts, working “behind the screen” enjoy the trust of many clients. By now, the track record is impressive.

Are women as open to the talent agenting concept as men?

SRL: Oh yes, they are as wholeheartedly embracing this service as men. They have realized that an agent can really help them build their executive brand value and reach their true potential. They also appreciate, and perhaps even more than men, the value that an agent can bring to them during compensation negotiations. This is reflected in the fact that about 50 percent of our clients are highly successful women executives.

How do you charge for your services?

HCS: At HCS-CONSULTING, our agenting program also consists of various components that will be carefully chosen depending on the individual needs. It may include a situation analysis, talent assessment, 360° feedback, benchmarking, followed by a

series of sparring partner (or coaching) sessions, etc.

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Each component has a fixed fee, agreed in advance and charged monthly.

SRL: We work on an exclusive retained basis. At getTalentEd, each contract contains a basic level of service (e.g. a strategic leadership assessment review, a standard brand value assessment, and/or regular monitoring of next-step up opportunities) that is supplemented by a number of additional services that are tailored to the exact needs of our clients that may change over time. Apart from a small retainer, most of our fees are paid as services are delivered. At all times, our clients are in full control of the number and intensity of the services they use.