

Filling the chief's chair

The board may not want it to happen on their watch. But sooner or later, it will. How do you replace the irreplaceable? Robin Murray Brown looks at the opportunities and the pitfalls of recruiting a new chief executive.

➤ A trade association chairman confessed, in the course of the search for a new chief executive, that this was the one thing he had not wanted to have to do during his chairmanship. After some fourteen years as a committee and board member, he feared his ambitious plans for his two years in office might be diluted – and, at worst, ruined – by this responsibility.

His concerns are far from uncommon, even if his honesty was. Yet making such appointments usually creates many more opportunities than problems, and is often the defining legacy of a successful chairman. But there are a few guidelines to bear in mind.

Think about the future

Whether the previous chief executive has moved on or retired, or whether it is a case of replacing a failed chief executive, the temptation is often to think only in terms of what has gone before. Although comparisons may be of some use, the real question should be a forward-looking one: “What kind of chief executive do we need to deliver our strategy?”

Because, just as times change, so will a trade association's ideal chief executive. Developing member services may require different skills and experience from those needed to spearhead a high-profile lobbying campaign or merge two associations into a new body. The attributes which may have made the last chief executive just right may well not be what the future demands – and this is the perfect time to recognise that.

Aim high

Be careful not to sell your association short. If you don't set your sights on someone with ambition and energy – and this certainly is not an age issue – you're admitting something rather telling about your association. Chief executives now are a different breed from the club secretary stereotype of the past, engaging fellows though they were, and we are all the better for it.

In the same vein, the other trick is not to recruit in

your own image. Being a great chief executive of the Widget Manufacturers' Association is not the same as being able to run ABC Widgets plc – and it follows that the attributes needed to do each job well are different too.

Involve others and listen to their opinions

The fact that most chief executive appointments are made, in the end, by a selection panel leaves many board members and chairmen feeling that involving others is the last thing they want to do. If only they could be left to get on with it by themselves!

But ‘other people’ are what trade associations are all about, whether it means other trade associations, consultants or simply business and personal contacts. Consider organisations with similar boards and similar membership, campaigning or operational goals. Think charities, professional institutes, colleges and universities. Learning from others' experiences is an easy but valuable skill – hence the role which headhunters with a track record in the trade association field may have to play.

One easy way to do this is to invite an outsider onto the selection panel as a ‘non-voting’ member. As an impartial but informed observer with no axe to grind, such a person can provide a helpful reality check for the very reason that they are not too close to the subject.

Recruiting a new chief executive is often the catalyst for an association to move forward, and should be seen as such. It does require a high degree of concentration and commitment but, despite their initial nervousness at the prospect, most chairmen and boards find it a rewarding responsibility rather than a burden. Above all, getting it right does create a legacy which others will recognise and be thankful for. ●

Robin Murray Brown is a vice president at A.T. Kearney Executive Search. He can be contacted on 020 7468 8455 or robin.mbrown@es.atkearney.com