

John Spurling

Bohill Partners' Non-Executive Chair, John takes us through his 34 year career in executive search that started by a chance encounter on the golf course, and shares his wisdom, experiences, and career reflections.

“ How did you get into executive search?

Like many others, I got interested in executive search purely through chance. When I left school, I worked as an assistant golf professional and the first person I ever gave a golf lesson to was a co-managing director of a headhunting business. When I decided to end my golfing ambitions, I asked this individual what he thought I should do. To my surprise, he suggested that I might join his business. Although I didn't, this led me to look at alternative routes to get into the industry. I joined my first recruitment firm aged 25 and apart from a

year out doing an MBA at Edinburgh University I spent the remainder of my career (34 years) in the industry.

Is there a decision that I would've changed in my career and why?

The one thing I might've changed over the years, was to have worked within, or started my own head hunting business. The last 25 years of my executive search career was spent within major global businesses. There are many positives to this environment, but perhaps the one downside was that I didn't get to explore the stimulation of a smaller more entrepreneurial environment

where I might have had more of a say on strategy and the feeling and pride of building something from scratch. To a certain extent this is being fulfilled with my role at Bohill Partners and other Non-Executive positions now.

What is the most important attribute needed when hiring for senior leadership?

I don't think there is one single attribute, but more a combination. What has impressed me most about some of the successful leaders that I have met over the years is their positive can-do attitude and solutions driven approach. They invariably have analytical mindsets and strong convictions, thinking one or two steps ahead most of the time. The one ingredient that isn't always evident is what I might describe as emotional intelligence. The ability to read a room and have the self-awareness to understand their impact on others. This to me is the icing on top of the cake when it comes to the full leadership package.

Which headhunters do you think are getting it right?

The headhunters who view their careers as a marathon, rather than a sprint, are the ones who get it right. They really view themselves as advisors in both directions ie to the client and the candidate. They stay aligned with their principles, not afraid to give constructive advice in an empathetic way, and treat everyone with the same respect regardless of their status. They are not in it for the transaction but the professional respect.



Real estate is known as a people business. How do you think this will change with technology and AI?

I do believe that technology and in particular AI will have a significant effect on both the real estate and many other industries. This is both very exciting but also slightly concerning as well. AI will save time and short circuit a number of tasks which will have an impact on workforces going forwards. The real estate industry has a strong reliance on people to people interaction so it may not be as badly affected as some other industries, but it will not be immune.

If you didn't work in executive search, what would you be doing and why?

I was keen on becoming a child psychologist as I had some first-hand experience with this in my earlier years which made a very profound and positive impression on me. I also love sport. One of the reasons for doing an MBA was to see if I could find a way into the sports industry. I think I would have enjoyed working in the Real Estate industry too. I've always had an aptitude for numbers, enjoy transactions and like people interaction so perhaps something on the investment or development side might have suited.

Who has been most influential in your career?

Many people have been influential in my career starting with my first recruitment boss, Steve Oldroyd, who taught me that having strong structure and systems combined with energy and graft is a good formula for success. I also learned a great deal from

WORDS OF WISDOM

What advice would you give to those looking to build a career in real estate?

Find an area of real estate that really interests you and has strong growth prospects. Then try and become a real expert in this area. Cultivate your personal brand image internally and as time goes by externally. Remember that an interaction or conversation today may be valuable in the future. I love Warren Buffett's quote *"it takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to destroy it"*. Over the years, I have met and interviewed countless people. One skill in my opinion that is grossly underrated (and perhaps in short supply) is listening skills. To all young people I would recommend working on engagement and listening skills.

What advice would you give to someone looking to find the right allies/mentors in the business?

Having the right sponsors or mentors is incredibly valuable. Everyone, at every stage in their life and career should have the philosophy of a growth mindset. One should never stop learning. My advice is to find people who have valuable experience that you can learn from, and perhaps are slightly different in style and characteristics to you. You will learn more from these people. Finally, seek people who are prepared to give you strong and at times blunt advice. Invite this too as you will get much deeper insights.

many of my fellow partners at Heidrick and Struggles and Spencer Stuart picking up techniques and tactics over the years. However, one person who stands out in particular in terms of my career development is a lady called Claire Huffington, who is a life coach. I went to see her in my early 40s and she really helped me to understand myself better and learn how to cope more comfortably with the work life balance equation.

What is the biggest challenge for junior professionals working their way up?

I know this is going to sound a little bit old-fashioned, but I think the biggest challenge for younger professionals is not trying to accelerate their careers too quickly. Maybe it's driven by the world we live in nowadays of instant gratification, heightened by social media, but my sense is there is a greater restlessness and impatience in the younger generation these days. Attitude and being a team player is so important. Putting the company first rather than yourself. This is how people get recognised and rewarded rather than self promotion. I like the Abraham Lincoln quote which says *"don't worry when you are not recognised but strive to be worthy of recognition"*. I'm still striving!

What is something I'd like to get good at in the future?

I would love to learn to play the piano well. Sadly, I am musically inept so I'm not sure I will manage to achieve this! ■ ”