

# Star Search

A healthy economy and shrinking labor pool have attracted more headhunters to the golf course industry

BY PATRICK QUINN

**F**our years ago, Rick Fogarsi considered changing jobs. The construction and grow-in specialist had just finished supervising the grow-in at Brookshire G&CC outside Lansing, Mich., and he was thinking about re-locating.

Fogarsi admits he finds the routine of day-to-day maintenance "a little boring." He had nearly decided to leave Michigan and go to work for Billy Casper Golf Management when he received a phone call from a headhunter. Would he be interested in talking to the owners of the Golf Club at Apple Mountain in Freeland, Mich.? They were looking for a superintendent to oversee the last few years of construction and to grow in the course.

Fogarsi's phone call was the product of a growing trend: A go-go economy, a shrinking labor pool and an average superintendent job tenure of less than eight years have made executive recruiters, more commonly known as headhunters, more popular in the industry.

Fogarsi was interested in the offer, and at the recruiter's behest he completed a multi-page questionnaire about his background and employment history. The document went not to the course owners but to the recruiter, who used the results to screen applicants based on criteria provided by the owners.

Attractive job openings typically draw more than 100 résumés in the current competitive environment, and reducing this mass to a manageable half-dozen is among the chief services provided by recruiters.

*Continued on page 68*





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*Continued from page 66*

The screening document also allowed Fogarsi to note his compensation requirements.

"It asked what I expected in the way of a bonus and in the way of a vehicle," Fogarsi says. "It told them a lot about me and about what I was looking for, which meant we were all better prepared when we sat down to do the interview."

The first interview lasted almost four hours, and the recruiter sat in. Shortly thereafter, Fogarsi found himself hired and happily immersed in the details of Apple Mountain's drainage system.

Blissful outcomes are never guaranteed. Fogarsi, however, had the benefit of working with a qualified recruiter, Executive Golf Search, a search firm devoted solely to the golf course business and headed by two former presidents of GCSAA, Jerry Faubel, superintendent of Saginaw CC, and Bruce Williams, superintendent at the Los Angeles CC.

More superintendents are finding themselves approached by, and often working with, executive recruiters.

"More and more companies are using third-party sources for employees," says Dave St. John, a partner in GreenSearch, an Atlanta-based executive search firm in the green industry. "It has, historically, been somewhat rare in the golf course industry, but it's becoming a little more common because of the tightness of the labor market."

GreenSearch is an example of the most common type of company in the business today: the retained executive search firm — a company hired, typically by the would-be employer, to seek out potential employees, screen them and present a short list of candidates to the client. These firms collect their fees from the employer, usually calculated as a percentage of the new employee's first-year salary — commonly 25 percent. Thus, a firm that places an employee at a salary of \$60,000 would charge the employer \$15,000. (The fee is not paid by the employee.)

How well a recruiting firm performs its job is often a function of how well it knows the industry it is attempting to staff. A recruiter with years of experience at placing finance and banking personnel is probably not

the best bet for a club thinking about a new superintendent.

"We've learned there's a strong network of superintendents, a fairly select network that ensures that the word gets around very rapidly when an attractive position opens up," St. John says. GreenSearch has found a place in the market through specialization.

"It's all we do — consulting and search work in the green industry," St. John says. "We work with a number of different segments of the industry — landscape installation and management, interiorscapes for businesses, nurseries and golf courses. We spend a lot of time on business development, attending turf trade shows and association meetings. It's a matter of people in the industry getting to know you. Conventional corporate recruiters rarely have time for that."

Faubel and Williams have 65 years of superintendent experience between them, but Faubel believes the company's greatest strength lies in the clubhouse.

"We have dealt with boards," he says. "Some corporate recruiters may have sat on a board at some point or have some cursory knowledge of board operations, but we've been dealing with boards all our lives."

When they take on a search, the first thing Faubel and Williams do is go to the club.

"The key is finding out what the committee wants and what the club is like," Faubel says. "We interview the committee and the green chairman, and we tell them what they can expect at their club for their position and their salary. Then we select a number of skilled people with the talents to do the job, and let the interview committee do what it does best."

Recruiters and clients stress the importance of determining precisely what the client is looking for. Several sources cited studies indicating that more than 90 percent of placement failures can be attributed to a faulty understanding of client expectations.

"A high number of executive-level failures are caused by a poor cultural fit between the client and the candidate," says Susan Roberts, chief administrator of the National Association of Executive Recruiters. "Often, it's caused by clients not fully understanding what they want or need. Retained search peo-

*Continued on page 70*



*Continued from page 68*

ple try to build an ongoing relationship with the clients to learn their client's culture to head off a bad fit."

Once the client's wishes are clearly understood, however, recruiters can often arrange relationships that last for a long time.

"It's ludicrous that the average superintendent changes jobs every seven or eight years," Faubel says. "Some people want to move around, of course, but when we put a superintendent in the right position, he or she can be at that club for years. Almost everyone

we've placed over the years is still in their positions."

For both employers and would-be employees, there are a few common-sense guide-

lines to observe when working with recruiters:

- Obtain references of a recruiter and investigate its history.
- Ask where the recruiter obtained your name or learned of your job opening.
- Find out if the search firm conducts independent background checks, or simply collects and passes along résumés.
- Learn the company's confidentiality policies.

Employees, for example, should obtain assurance that their résumés will not be posted on Internet job boards without their permission. Faubel's firm first asks if the current superintendent is still on the job.

"If the person is, does the person know he or she is leaving?" Faubel says. "If the answer is no, we say, 'No thanks.' We're not about to go in and work behind a superintendent's back." ■

*Patrick Quinn is a freelance writer from Lawrence, Kan.*

### On the Hunt

More superintendents are finding themselves approached by, and often working with, executive recruiters, including:

- Atlanta-based GreenSearch. Contact 888-375-7787 or [www.greensearch.com](http://www.greensearch.com)
- La Quinta, Calif.-based Kopplin Search. Contact 760-564-0231 or [www.kopplinsearch.com](http://www.kopplinsearch.com).
- Saginaw, Mich.-based Executive Golf Search. Contact 517-797-0677.

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