



Career Path Counselling

How to become a Head of Research

Are you ambitious, process-driven, interested in new technologies and methods? Do you value the importance of background intelligence, market news and data in informing a search? Above all, are you a people person, interested in candidates and how to best capture their stories? A career within research could be right for you. Research Consultants/Heads of Research are not just spreadsheet maestros, above all they have excellent communication and people skills. They know their markets and are able to see how their team can contribute to each search to make it even better and more profitable.

It is possible to remain research-focused and still rise through the ranks to Partner level. So how do you best do this?

1. Be excellent at research

This may seem obvious, but you're not going to get promoted unless you're truly excellent at what you do. Take pride in your day-to-day work and try and go the extra mile in each area: finding candidates in unusual places, developing more thorough search methodology, really analysing the client brief and delivering what they ask for and more. Then there are the communication skills: delving into candidates' backgrounds, really getting the best out of them, being able to persuade a reluctant person to throw their hat into the ring, deciding who doesn't fit the brief, however pleasant/experienced they may be.

2. Be excellent at execution/delivery

If you can, get involved in assignment execution early on. Heads of Research need a complete grasp of an assignment process end-to-end, and there's only one way to get this – do it. Consistently present solid shortlists, learn how to interview face-to-face, liaise confidently with both clients and candidates alike.

You may be called upon to communicate with the client about how a search is going, or justify a possible change of direction, which can initially be daunting but is great practice for a more senior position.

3. Know your market

Build market knowledge and consider this when search planning.

Good research and delivery skills are transferable across many sectors; this is why most search firms don't specify sector experience when they are looking for new non-fee-earning staff. They figure that they can teach the sector but not the profession.

That said, it almost goes without saying that the better you know your market, the better you can search within it. If a firm has had a recent takeover, there might be staff that are looking to move; if a firm has dropped on their profits, they might be considering redundancies. Keeping up with all of this not only helps with your assignment research, but also means that you can chat knowledgeably with your candidates and clients and understand their concerns better. And obviously it will impress your boss. They will be delighted if you show an interest in their specialism and ask them for tips and insider information in the field.

4. Build your network

If you have good personal links, then your job is half done already. At the start of each search, you can potentially pick up the phone and get recommendations which may well form the basis of your shortlist. And if you help someone else, they will remember and return the favour. You will eventually find that you are already connected to most of your potential longlist, and that some of them spring to mind the instant that you hear a new brief from a client.

It's always worth making connections with people, even if you feel initially a bit shy: communication with like-minded individuals gives the day a boost, and you never know when these links might pay off – sometimes years down the line in my experience.

5. Develop your management & leadership skills

Heads of Research are responsible for hiring and managing new research staff, sometimes based in different locations. You will get a taste of this if you offer to mentor new starters at your firm, and take the time to consider what motivates them, and what challenges they face. Make sure that you are always on hand to help colleagues and juniors – with either small niggles or bigger picture work concerns. The best thing that you can do to develop this skill is to listen properly to what people are trying to say, without giving your opinion:

“Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply.”
(Stephen R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*)

Leading a team is a necessary ability, but a Head of Research needs to also be able to lead at a company level. This means keeping a handle on multiple projects at once and being prepared at any moment to give a quick overview of how things are going to senior management. It means giving a steer to a large number of people and keeping an eye on how they are all doing – in other words, spinning a lot of plates.

6. Be strategic

Setting research strategy is a fascinating, challenging and endlessly changing task. Due mainly to new technologies, we are on the brink of a completely new way of running assignments. As a HoR you need to stay ahead of this curve. To do this you need to keep your ear to the ground – join the Executive Research Association (ERA), attend training courses and conferences, speak to other researchers at different firms and compare techniques, read articles and follow thought leaders on LinkedIn.

Don't be afraid of suggesting new ways of doing things to your managers.

7. Be aware of the bottom line

Develop your commercial awareness: this applies on a wider level, for example being aware of the global market and the fluctuating costs and value of your firm's services. It is just as important within your company: develop an awareness of how much is spent on salaries, bonuses and resources. A good place to start is with the assignments that you are currently working on: how much staff time is spent on them? Are there more streamlined, effective ways of working that might deliver better results?

At the end of the day, if you can suggest ways to increase profits then you have proved yourself worth listening to.

8. Make your intentions clear

Finally, you can't get promoted if no-one knows that you want it. Make it clear during your annual review and on other relevant occasions. Ask how your firm can support you in your ambition, and how long they think it might take. Can they outline potential future steps? Smaller firms may not be able to accommodate your career path, so you may need to consider moving on for this next foothold. However small firms have been known to create a Head of Research role in order to keep on a trusted staff member.

Case Study: Ella Milward Hamylton, Director, Milestone Research & Operations
(also see our '2 Minute Expert Interview')

"I had been a Real Estate Finance Researcher, but the market crash of 2008 put paid to this. I was freelancing while I applied for permanent roles in a competitive market. An upside meant that I had opportunities to problem-solve and multi-task in a large range of organisations (not all of it good - being put on the spot by my Consultant to tell our client, a bank, why they should move their team to Abu Dhabi, without preparation, was hairy!). When I went for yet another job interview, this time for a Researcher at a Comms/PA search firm, I listened as the MD listed the long list of research problems that they needed to solve. 'You know, you actually need a Head of Research' I said to him confidently. They had invented the role and offered me the job before the end of the interview."

To discuss any of the above in confidence, get in touch 07477 875764

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