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Filtering out interim imposters will increase the certainty of your project's success

By all accounts we're now living in the fake news era. In business, as in life, it seems fewer things than ever are certain. But that doesn't mean demand for certainty is falling. Quite the opposite, in fact, if the people we meet in senior level roles are anything to go by. These executives are continually searching for strategies and approaches that deliver increased certainty of outcome, particularly for complex projects.

When these projects fall outside business-as-usual, or are in some way critical and urgent, they often demand skills, talent and experience the organisation doesn't have; resources it may not even need permanently. That's why there's a healthy market for interim executives.

Finding interims today takes just a few clicks. More people than ever self-identify with the word. LinkedIn and Google searches will reveal competent-looking people in seconds. But less-easy is what comes next: thoroughly vetting and credentials-checking those found.

LinkedIn profiles and CVs are self-published tools. Everyone looks impeccable, but nothing can be taken as-read. Proper due-diligence is vital. But this takes time to do thoroughly. And when there's a degree of urgency involved - as there so-often is - it's just too tempting to skimp on vetting and press on, regardless.

Giving in to that urge is a sure-fire way to lower certainty of outcome, raising the risk of failure.

The best interims will deliver over and above the project expectations. But there are fewer than most people imagine, and they often have limited availability. A large proportion will synchronise their assignment exits and entries with care. Understanding who these people are, and when they will be thinking about something new, takes a significant time investment.

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Careful screening is not just about checking their capabilities, integrity and achievements. It's also about understanding their personalities and what makes them tick as individuals. This only happens over several encounters, often after many months, and is a critical part of the qualification process.

Getting to know them personally is the only way to precision-match an individual to the assignment in question. And if you're not getting a precise match, how is that adding to certainty of outcome?

What, then, can you do to improve the odds? Here are some examples of what we look for when someone seeks Osprey Clarke representation as an interim.

We begin by probing the individual's motivation. Are they committed to a longterm career as an interim? Or are they filling in time between employed positions? We will ask about the when they have walked away from potential assignments, as well as those where they were successfully appointed. Both can be revealing in many, useful ways.

All interim assignments change once underway. Sometimes this is fundamental and by design; occasionally, it's sudden and by surprise. We probe to understand the interim's history of such situations. We want to understand how they approach ambiguity and deal with unknowns.

We may ask how they feel about fees linked to the pro-rata salary of a permanently employed executive. If they don't flinch at the idea, it's a sign that they haven't understood the interim value proposition or their own worth. On that point, we'll ask about their personal value proposition. We won't use that term, but we will be looking to see if they've thought about what it is that only they can bring to the table. What evidence they use to underpin their claims. No clear articulation of this is another warning sign.

If you are confident enough to do-it-yourself, and can invest the time, asking questions like these will help qualify an interim executive's credentials and capabilities. For everyone else, there are the interim service providers (ISPs) – intermediaries like Osprey Clarke, who act as match-makers.

However, all is not what it appears here too. Ten years ago, ISPs were almost all boutique-scale specialists that did nothing else. Now, squeezed on fees and lured by the prospect of higher margins, many generalist recruiters have entered the market.

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They've copied the language and promises of ISPs and can be superficially attractive. And they're much less selective in adding CVs to their books.

- Here's a ten-point checklist you can use to filter out the pretenders from the real thing.
- Personal recommendations are best. Ask trusted colleagues and associates for their views on a potential provider.
- Alternatively, the Institute of Interim Management curates an annual ranking of the best ISPs. Ratings are based on votes from 40,000 interims working at all levels.
- When you've narrowed down your choice, look for evidence of successfully placing interims in organisations like yours. Also look for on-the-record client testimonials.
- Request six client references you can call. Pick three randomly and call them.
- Ask about the ISP's process for finding, vetting, understanding and engaging their interim community.
- Does the ISP actively encourage you to meet them? This is the best way to ensure your project brief is optimised; not just to get the job done effectively, but also attract the best interim on the best terms.
- What steps do they take to ensure the right match? Once underway, what do they do to ensure an assignment is successful? Do they carry out postassignment audits and share the feedback with you?
- A portfolio of trusted, well-known interims trumps a huge database of CVs every time.

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- Invoicing should be transparent to all parties, so you can see who is getting what.
- Be wary if presented with any CVs offering just enough firepower for the job. These are contractors, not interims. Certainty of outcome rises when someone 'over-qualified' is in charge.

Following the approach, we've outlined here should give you a solid foundation to avoid the imposters. It will take you much closer to that elusive certainty you're looking for in project delivery using interim executives.

But if you're still not ready to risk a DIY approach, get in touch. we are confident we can take you closer still.