

Laws of Attraction

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Management recruiting and drug discovery may seem worlds apart, but they both depend on an ability to recognize proper *activity*.

Much as scientists struggle for years to detect active, effective, and safe molecules, those of us in executive search spend our professional lives screening the best business and scientific managers for our clients, formally and informally. We do so with an eye to a company's immediate and future needs, attempting to catalog the potential of individuals across the progression of their careers.

The two endeavors—discovering new medicines and identifying the most talented executives—can be viewed, on a finite scale, as analogous. Drug hunters identify molecular activity; headhunters track leadership activity. The odds of discovering and developing the next multimillion dollar drug are staggering, and so is the probability of recognizing exactly the right person for a particular position, in a particular company, at a particular time. Understanding the similarities between screening, selecting, and developing drugs and screening, selecting, and developing executives will help companies address the obstacles currently encumbering drug development.

On the most simplistic scientific level, without activity there are no hits, without hits, no leads—in other words, no products. In the same way, without leadership activity there are no management teams, no companies, and no products. Scientists and recruiters alike who are committed to the highest technical and professional standards must be rigorous and intuitive when evaluating fit—whether the binding of a molecule to a target or an individual to a company. Scientists match drugs with targets; recruiters endeavor to partner leaders with organizations.

HIGH-THROUGHPUT RECRUITING

Recruiting, just like R&D, begins with the search for signs of life, followed by the arduous task of determining *toxicity*—management and leadership flaws and their potential effects on an organization. (See “Scientific Recruitment Correlations.”) Will a nominee's abilities eventually lead to the desired endpoints, or will those traits with prolonged exposure—the *dose*—result in fatality for the company? Is he or she safe and effective or life-threatening?

Everyone understands that toxic drugs can kill patients. Only when everyone accepts that compromised management hires derail companies can the industry build executive teams capable of overcoming the challenges of drug development. Despite major setbacks, scientific advancement thrives, whereas biotechnology has not yet fostered the broad and diverse pool of leaders the sector requires. No longer can this mandate be postponed in favor of traditional hiring practices. Enriched leadership talent is the key to success, and the only possible solution for reversing the current market trends. (See “R&D Advice.”)

By identifying leadership activity early, the recruiting process can be effectively cultivated or discouraged, creating the potential to make the best possible hire or to avoid setbacks. As with molecular activity, leadership activity requires superior efficacy, viability, and nontoxicity to ultimately win approval, help patients, and generate shareholder value.

R&D ADVICE

Underscoring our proposed parallel, we share some paraphrased words of wisdom from various R&D gurus:

This Decade (be realistic): Timing is everything. Know when to be opportunistic and when to be patient in the courting process.

Get a Map (know the mechanism of action): Understand the talent pool and the diversity of backgrounds that can be effective in a range of roles.

Guts Count (drug hunters have a nose): Intuition can complement even the most conclusive data.

Run the Test (reproduce the experiment): Assess the chemistry between the nominee and his or her potential colleagues early in the process. Can this reaction be sustained?

Pull the Plug (kill the project): Recognize the red flags associated with poor follow-up, inflexible negotiating skills, incongruent references, absence of common sense, or lack of courtesy. Halt the process when necessary.

Lose the Silos (integrate R&D): Build a team by understanding the strengths and weaknesses of each individual.

Protect Scientific Integrity (don't settle): The best people want to work with other top performers. Don't compromise interpersonal or intellectual activity for a quick fix.

Take the Shortest Route (design smart trials): Pursue the most expeditious and straightforward approach to recruiting.

Watch the Ball (define end points): Closely evaluate your own needs and realistically contrast those criteria against the skills of the available talent pool. Understand that practical obstacles do exist (location, working spouses, schooling, compensation) in managing the search process.

Pick Your Battles (the FDA is not the enemy): Undertake a search with realistic expectations and a versatile organization chart, allowing for the greatest flexibility around applicable skill sets.

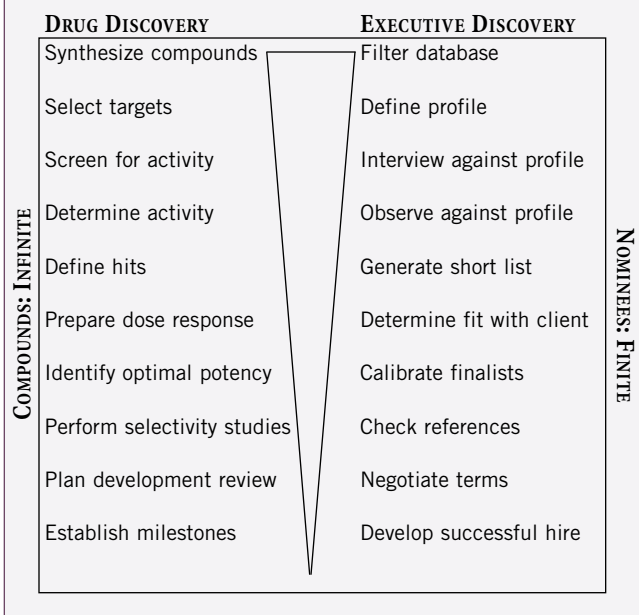
Lose the Ego (know what you don't know): Hire to complement the organization, not to create a superficial marquee around one individual who contributes in name only.

Best in Class (second place doesn't count): Do what it takes to get the best person on board. Use agile timing, practical flexibility, and competitive compensation packages.

THE RIGHT STUFF

In the same way that an active molecule might not have therapeutic effects, not all leadership activity is constructive, hence the difficulty of evaluating talent in various personality types. Those unlikely to succeed are fairly easy to spot, whereas the superstars, though few and far between, are refreshingly obvious. Our challenge is to make judgments about the majority, many of whom are vital contributors to an organization whereas others consistently underperform. Although it is easy to overlook individuals without energy, enthusiasm, or intellect as well as those lacking charisma or polish, people with less-than-positive style or comportment are often the most memorable, standing out for conspicuous reasons. Inspiring or not, such activity readily provides more information than the absence of activity. Both scientists and recruiters require data, above or below the norm,

SCREENING FOR SUCCESS




to determine whether or not a molecule, or an individual, can eventually be effective.

Hiring managers go to great lengths to define qualifications around a particular position. When they "fall in love," however, well-defined specifications are often abandoned in favor of presence and intellect. The interpersonal and intellectual activity of an individual prevails over experience, credentials, and even nepotism. If six Harvard MBAs of similar age, academic standing, and experience are considered for a strategy role, the most progressive managers will invariably attempt to hire the individual with the most personality, polish, and cerebral energy. Activity, far more than any specific requirement, frequently determines who will be most sought after and who is less likely to advance.

SCREEN OR BE SCREENED

Moving at a relentless pace, working 24/7, driven by our gadgets and our deadlines, people often judge others—and are judged by others—on first impressions alone. To succeed today—whether as a vendor, a financier, a CEO raising funds, or a talented person climbing the career ladder—one must make an impact. As in molecular screening, leadership activity varies by degree. Although logic favors intellect, dynamism, and grace, excellence comes in many forms. However, everyone shares the one common denominator: activity.

The industry's number-one priority should be to embrace a new standard for assessing leadership activity—much as technology provides novel tools for screening compounds. Only when we are able to attract a diverse talent pool, distinct from resident R&D expertise, will we witness a wealth of successful companies—and approvable drugs. When all is said and done, the standards for creating a blockbuster drug and evaluating a leader look very much the same. 

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