

Questions to **Ask a Recruiter** **Before You Hire** **Them**

The questions to put to any recruitment consultancy before you engage it, and what good answers should tell you.



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01

Introduction

Finding the right person for your organisation can be difficult, time-consuming and, without care, expensive. Recruitment has changed quickly. Job boards, aggregator sites and one-click applications make it easier than ever for people to find and apply for roles, which is good for job seekers but creates a real problem for whoever has to review the response.

A job advert will usually do its own job well and attract a large number of applications. The difficulty is that only a small fraction of those applicants are genuinely suited to the role, and someone has to find them.

This guide sets out the questions to ask a recruitment consultant before you engage them, and what a good answer to each should tell you.

**The right
recruiter
welcomes
hard
questions.**



02

Why the Choice of Recruiter Matters

Identifying the right applicants means filtering out everyone else, which typically includes:

- the unqualified and the underqualified
- those claiming qualifications or experience they do not have
- serial applicants who apply for almost everything
- applicants whose CV has been rewritten around your job description rather than their real experience
- people with no genuine intention of moving
- those who have simply applied for the wrong job
- those who seem unsure what role they are applying for
- and sometimes the overqualified, who may not stay

Few hiring managers have the time to do all of that properly alongside their day job. Recruitment also takes time and money, and at the end of the process there is still a risk of not finding the right person, or of settling for the best of a weak field. A poor appointment usually costs far more in the long run than a well-run search, and can mean starting again.

That is why many employers work with a professional recruiter who knows their sector. A good recruiter understands the market and the mechanics of recruitment: the pitfalls, the paperwork, the compliance requirements and the people who misrepresent themselves. They can spot a strong CV and a misleading one, identify the best-suited candidates, handle the initial sift and first interviews, and manage the detail, leaving you free to run your organisation.

Choose carefully. During the early stages of a search, your recruiter is the face of your organisation to the market, and their approach reflects on you. The questions that follow will help you make an informed choice.

03

How Do You Choose the Best CVs?

Reviewing applications is the most demanding part of recruitment. A single advert can generate a large volume of CVs, and more still if the consultant has a strong network.

Separating the genuinely relevant from the superficially relevant is essential, but when many applicants have similar backgrounds, qualifications and experience, it is easy to get wrong. Ideal candidates can slip through at this stage. You do not want to miss someone who is poor at writing a CV but would be an excellent problem-solver in your organisation.

An experienced recruitment consultancy should have its own method for working through a high volume of applications. That method should include controls to identify:

- genuinely suitable applicants whose CV shows many of the qualities required, and whose experience holds up on closer inspection
- applicants who have copied language from your job specification into a CV that appears to match almost perfectly, without the real experience behind it
- applicants who show some relevance to the role, but whose CV does not stand up to closer scrutiny

A recruiter worth engaging will be happy to explain what they look for. Many will point out warning signs and indicators of potential you might not have considered yourself.

ASK FOR THE METHOD

Ask the recruiter to talk you through how a recent shortlist was built: how many people were considered, how they were assessed and why the final few were chosen. A clear, specific answer is a good sign.



**Ask how they
choose, not
just **who**.**

04

Have You Recruited for Other Organisations in Our Sector?

Every sector has its own recruitment needs. In some roles, skills transfer easily between industries. In others, a very specific skill set is needed for a very specific environment.

It is worth knowing whether a recruiter has worked in your sector and handled similar roles. The best recruiters should be able to give you an overview of what the market looks like and what the role typically requires. Do not hesitate to ask for examples of comparable assignments, and for references from clients.

Previous success in your sector is an advantage, but it should not automatically rule a recruiter out if they have not worked in it before. Just as an outstanding candidate can be hidden behind an unremarkable CV, a capable recruiter can be new to your sector. If they are reputable and professional, they should be able to learn your requirements and adapt. It can work well for both sides, and you may find that over the years they have worked with a similar organisation after all.

What should a good answer include?

Specific examples of similar roles, an understanding of the skills and qualifications that matter in your sector, and a realistic view of the current candidate market. If the recruiter is new to your sector, look for evidence of how they will learn it quickly.

**Great
candidates do
not always
write **great**
CVs.**



05

Are Cover Letters Still Relevant, and What Makes a Good One?

A cover letter or supporting statement can be a useful tool for both recruiter and candidate. A CV is limited as a way of assessing personality and motivation, and a well-written letter can fill that gap. It can give a deeper insight into the candidate and also help flag weaker applications.

For example, warning signs appear when industry terms are spelled correctly on the CV but repeatedly misspelled in the letter. A complete mismatch in writing style between the two documents can raise further questions, although a professional recruiter should be able to tell when the difference is simply down to a template. A template is more acceptable for a CV than for a personal letter.

Some candidates use the cover letter as a way to insert every keyword from your advert, hoping to pass an applicant tracking system. Writing tools now make it easy to produce a polished, keyword-matched letter in minutes, so a good recruiter looks past the vocabulary to evidence of real experience and genuine motivation.

If your recruitment consultant dismisses cover letters altogether, ask why. Even if they give a reasonable and plausible answer, think carefully about whether their approach gives you enough insight into each candidate.



**Your recruiter
is the **face** of
your
organisation.**

06

Do You Check References and Qualifications, and When?

Experienced recruiters are well aware of how often people exaggerate or invent qualifications and experience on their CVs. Reference and qualification checks act as a final filter towards the end of a process, confirming that the ideal candidate is as strong as they appear.

Qualifications

A good recruiter should recognise which qualifications need to be verified, based on the client, the candidate and the role. It may be unnecessary to ask for someone's A-level results from decades ago if they have since held a succession of professional roles that can be verified. Conversely, if a candidate claims a doctorate but has never worked at a level that would use it in twenty years, questions need to be asked.

References

Employer references are different, and each recruiter will have their own approach. Some prefer to speak to a previous employer by phone. Others accept a written or emailed reference, which is usually the most convenient and least intrusive option for the referee.

There is also a need to avoid burdening former employers with repeated reference requests, so some recruiters wait until an offer is being made before taking references up.

The simplest approach is to ask your recruiter what their process is and why. If they have a sound reason for working the way they do, there is no cause for concern. Just make sure any specific requirements you have are agreed in advance, before the search begins in earnest.

AGREE CHECKS UP FRONT

If a qualification, professional membership or particular reference is essential for the role, say so in the brief. It is far easier to build checks in from the start than to add them at offer stage.

07

What Involvement Will I Have in the Process?

It may seem counter-intuitive to stay closely involved when you have engaged a recruiter to run the process. However, a good recruiter should keep you, and your HR team where relevant, informed throughout. The right level of involvement depends entirely on you. Some clients want regular updates at every stage, while others prefer to step back and only become involved at interview.

At the start of any campaign, discuss both sides' expectations around involvement. You need a clear picture of what the service includes. Ask:

- Do you simply review CVs and then invite a small number of candidates to interview with us?
- Do you carry out first-stage interviews before introducing candidates to us?
- Will someone from your team join our final interviews and help with the final selection?
- Will you help prepare any assessments, such as psychometric tests or job-related tasks?

The best approach is to ask for a written recruitment schedule, question it, make your own suggestions and confirm you are happy with the final version. This should be a collaborative exercise, using the recruiter's expertise to agree the best plan of action.

Once the plan is agreed, you can decide on your level of involvement. A good recruiter should then tailor their reporting and communication to suit you.

“

A clear schedule turns a supplier into a partner.

**Agree the
checks **before**
the search
begins.**



08

How Much Will the Service Cost?

It is good business practice to discuss how the recruiter's commercial model works and what it will cost you before any work begins.

Recruitment consultancies use different models. Some work on a retained basis, with a retainer paid up front and a further fee on completion. Others charge a percentage of the appointed candidate's salary on placement. Some ask for a fixed fee, with a deposit paid in advance. Check the terms before you sign, and remember that asking detailed questions about fees is entirely reasonable.

You also need to understand what happens if the appointment does not work out. The new employee might not perform as expected, or might leave after a few weeks, perhaps to accept another role they applied for months earlier.

Find out in advance what the protocol is for restarting the search. Will there be an additional fee, is there a rebate or free replacement period, or can the recruiter simply return to the runner-up from the original shortlist?

What should I ask about fees?

How the fee is calculated, when each payment is due, exactly what is included, and what happens if the successful candidate leaves early or the appointment does not work out.



**Transparent
fees are a
sign of a
confident
partner.**

09

Your Pre-Engagement Checklist

Use this list when you meet a prospective recruitment partner. Clear, specific answers to each question will tell you a great deal about how the recruiter works and whether their approach is right for your organisation.

- ✓ How do you screen applications, and what controls do you use to spot keyword-matched or misleading CVs?
- ✓ How do you make sure strong candidates with weak CVs are not missed?
- ✓ Have you recruited for other organisations in our sector, and can you share examples or references?
- ✓ If you are new to our sector, how will you learn it?
- ✓ Do you use cover letters or supporting statements, and why?
- ✓ Which qualifications do you verify, how and at what stage?
- ✓ How and when do you take up references?
- ✓ What does your service include, from shortlisting to final interviews and assessments?
- ✓ Will you provide a written recruitment schedule, and how will you report progress?
- ✓ How is your fee structured, when is it payable and what does it include?
- ✓ What happens if the appointed candidate leaves early or the appointment does not work out?

**Precision
over **volume**,
from first sift
to offer.**



10

Choosing the Right Recruitment Partner

The right recruiter will welcome every one of these questions. Their answers should show a clear method for assessing candidates, an understanding of your sector or a credible plan to learn it, a proportionate approach to checks, a service shaped around your involvement and fees that are transparent from the outset.

Maxwell Stephens has specialised in facilities management, estates and workplace recruitment since 2006, from offices in London and Darlington. If you are planning an FM appointment and want to ask us these questions directly, call 0207 118 4848, email info@maxwellstephens.com or visit maxwellstephens.com.

THE EVIDENCE

What the Data Says

What UK data shows about hiring timescales, early leavers and the value of specialist recruitment support.

30%

30% of UK organisations that recruited rated recruitment/search consultants among their most effective attraction methods.

[Source: CIPD, Resourcing and talent planning report 2024](#)

12 weeks

The average time to hire in the UK climbed to 12 weeks in spring 2026, up from 10 weeks in autumn 2025.

[Source: Totaljobs Hiring Trends Update, 2026](#)

0.42

Structured interviews have the highest mean validity of common selection methods (.42) in the Sackett et al. meta-analytic update.

[Source: Sackett et al., Industrial and Organizational Psychology, 2023](#)

41%

41% of UK organisations that selected candidates in the past year said new recruits always, mostly or sometimes resigned within their first 12 weeks.

[Source: CIPD, Resourcing and talent planning report 2024](#)

450+

Maxwell Stephens has completed more than 450 client engagements across sectors and regions.

[Source: Maxwell Stephens, 2026](#)

Sources were checked in September 2026. Select a source to open the original research. Maxwell Stephens figures are drawn from our own published vacancies and placement records.

CASE STUDY

See It in Practice

Supporting the Expansion of Campbell Lutyens' FM Department

Campbell Lutyens, a global private markets advisory firm, appointed Maxwell Stephens to recruit an Operations Facilities Manager in London, a hybrid role spanning facilities, operational improvement, change and risk. After detailed market research we approached 46 potential candidates, screened them against the role's technical and behavioural requirements and presented six. The client interviewed three, took two to a second stage and appointed its preferred candidate. When we contacted the appointee about a year later, they reported being extremely happy in the role.

It shows the transparent, evidence-based shortlisting method this guide encourages you to ask any recruiter to explain.

[Read the full case study](#) · [Browse all case studies](#)

FROM THE BLOG

Related Reading

- [Choosing the Right Recruitment Agency: A Partnership That Lasts](#)
- [How to Get the Best Results from a Recruitment Consultant](#)
- [5 Steps to Shortlisting the Right Candidate](#)

MAXWELL STEPHENS INSIGHTS

Continue Reading

- [Why Specialist Recruitment Matters in Facilities Management](#)
- [The Executive Guide to FM Recruitment](#)
- [The Hidden Cost of Poor Facilities Management Hiring](#)

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Planning an FM, estates or workplace appointment? Talk to us in confidence, or read how comparable searches were run.

[Contact us](#)[Case studies](#)

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Recruitment

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