maxwell stephens
Recruitment

INSIGHT

How Retained Executive Search Works in FM

Introduction

Most senior FM hiring failures are judgement failures, not sourcing failures. The right candidate was often reachable. What went wrong was the brief, the assessment or the decision itself, usually made under operational pressure.

Retained executive search exists to reduce that risk. One search partner is committed to the assignment, works the whole market rather than the visible part of it, and is judged on the quality of the appointment rather than the speed of the first CV.

This guide explains how retained search works in facilities management and estates, from the first briefing conversation to the months after the new leader starts. It covers:

- What retained search is, and how it differs from contingent and advertised recruitment
- When it is the right route, and when it is not
- Each stage of a search, and what good looks like at each one
- How candidates should be assessed, and why searches fail
- How to choose a search partner, with questions to ask before you commit

The stakes are real. According to the Recruitment & Employment Confederation (REC), a poor hire at mid-manager level on a £42,000 salary can cost a business more than £132,000. At Head of or Director level, with a portfolio, a supply chain and a compliance record in the balance, the exposure is wider still.

What Retained Executive Search Actually Is

There are three common routes to a senior FM or estates appointment. They differ in who they reach, how candidates are assessed and who is accountable for the outcome.

Advertised Recruitment

The organisation, or an agency on its behalf, advertises the role and assesses whoever applies. Its limit is that it only reaches people who are looking, and at senior level many of the strongest people are not.

Contingent Recruitment

Contingent recruiters are paid only if their candidate is appointed. Several agencies often work the same role at once, which rewards speed and volume. For a scarce or sensitive appointment it tends to produce overlapping CVs, uneven assessment and candidates approached by several firms about the same job.

Retained Executive Search

In a retained search, one firm is appointed exclusively to fill the role. The fee is typically paid in stages across the assignment rather than only on appointment, so there is commitment on both sides. The client commits to the process, and the search partner commits the time to map the market, approach people directly and assess them properly.

The practical differences for a hiring organisation are:

- One accountable partner, rather than several competing suppliers
- A defined process with agreed stages, milestones and reporting
- Coverage of the passive market, not just the people currently applying
- A record of who was approached, and why they were or were not taken forward

maxwell stephens
Recruitment

People who drive progress

When Retained Search Is the Right Choice

Retained search is not the answer to every vacancy. For a well-defined Facilities Manager role in an active market, advertising or a contingent brief may be quicker and entirely adequate. The case for retained search grows with the cost of getting the appointment wrong.

Situations Where It Usually Earns Its Place

- **Senior appointments.** Head of Facilities, Director of Estates, FM Director and COO-level roles, where the leader will shape strategy, budgets and risk.
- **Confidential appointments.** Replacing an incumbent who is still in post, or hiring ahead of a restructure, merger or contract change that has not been announced.
- **Scarce profiles.** Roles that need a narrow combination, such as higher-risk residential buildings, NHS estates compliance, or leading an in-house team through an outsourcing decision.
- **High-risk appointments.** A leader inheriting a compliance backlog, a failing contract, a major capital programme or a regulator's attention.
- **Replacement searches.** A previous appointment has not worked, and the organisation cannot afford a second failure or the visibility of re-advertising.
- **Multiple leadership hires.** Building or rebuilding a leadership team, where each appointment affects the others and the balance of the team matters as much as any individual.

When It Is Probably Not Needed

If the role is well understood, the market is active, confidentiality does not matter and a delay would not create operational risk, a retained search may be more process than the appointment requires. A good search partner will tell you so.

maxwell stephens
Recruitment

Every senior hire is a risk decision

Briefing, Discovery and Market Mapping

The first two stages decide most of what follows. A search built on a weak brief will produce a well-run process that finds the wrong person.

Stage 1: Briefing and Discovery

Discovery goes beyond the job description. A search partner should speak to the hiring manager and to the people the new leader will depend on, typically finance, HR, operations and, where relevant, the board or estates committee. The aim is to establish:

- What the role must deliver in its first year
- The operational reality: portfolio, contracts, compliance position, team capability and budget
- Where stakeholders disagree about priorities, leadership style or seniority
- The non-negotiables, and the areas where the organisation can flex
- What the package can realistically support, tested against the market

The output should be a written brief and candidate profile that everyone involved in the decision has agreed before a single candidate is approached.

Stage 2: Market Mapping

Mapping identifies where suitable people are likely to sit: in-house FM and estates teams, FM service providers, consultancies, comparable sectors and adjacent disciplines. It produces a target list of organisations and named individuals, and confirms any organisations that are off limits.

Mapping also tests the brief early. If the profile does not exist at the proposed level or package, or exists only in a handful of organisations, you should hear that now, with evidence, rather than after weeks of quiet activity.

maxwell stephens
Recruitment

References tell you what a CV cannot

Direct Approach and the Shortlist

Once the map is agreed, the search moves into the market. This is where retained search differs most visibly from advertising.

Stage 3: Direct Approach

The search partner contacts people on the target list individually, with an honest account of the role. Many will be settled in their roles, and some will suggest others.

Movement is on many people's minds: according to Hays' 2026 UK research, 62% of respondents plan to move jobs in the coming year. That does not mean they will answer an advert, and a direct approach is often the only way to reach them.

A good approach is discreet, specific and two-way. It explains why this person, why this role and why now, and listens for the candidate's own motivations.

Stage 4: Assessment

Interested candidates are assessed in depth by the search partner before the client sees them. That means structured interviews against the agreed brief, testing of claimed experience, and early, frank conversations about motivation, package and notice.

Stage 5: The Shortlist

A shortlist should be small and considered. For each candidate, expect:

- A written assessment against the brief, not a CV with a cover note
- Clear strengths, gaps and risks, stated plainly
- Their motivation for the move and any competing processes
- Package position and notice period

Alongside the shortlist, expect an account of who else was considered and why they were not put forward.

Assessment: Capability × Context × Motivation + Evidence

We assess senior FM and estates candidates on three dimensions, multiplied rather than added, and then test all three against evidence. A candidate who is strong on two and weak on the third is a risk, not a compromise.

Capability

Can this person do the work at the level required? For a senior FM or estates leader that means compliance knowledge, contract management, financial control and leadership of teams and supply chains. It also means judgement: how they prioritise when statutory compliance, cost and service all compete.

Context

Has this capability been shown in a comparable environment? Leading a single-site corporate headquarters is different from running a multi-site healthcare estate, a university campus or a national soft services operation. Look at scale, complexity, regulation, governance, the in-house or outsourced model and the pace of change.

Motivation

Why does this person want this role, now? Strong motivation is specific: the challenge, the organisation, the next step in a career. Weak motivation is general: a better package, an escape from the current employer, or simply being asked.

Evidence

Every conclusion should rest on something verifiable. Useful questions include:

- What exactly did you own, and what did your team or supplier deliver?
- What was the compliance or condition position when you arrived, and when you left?
- Tell me about a decision you got wrong and what you changed afterwards.

maxwell stephens
Recruitment

Senior FM hiring is a judgement call

Interviews, Referencing, Offer and Onboarding

Stage 6: Client Interviews

Client interviews should build on the search partner's assessment rather than repeat it. Agree the panel, the stages and who makes the final decision before the first interview. Give each interviewer defined areas to test, and use a practical exercise where it adds insight, such as reviewing a compliance summary or presenting a first-year plan for the estate. Keep dates fixed and feedback prompt, because senior candidates read a slow or disorganised process as a signal about the organisation.

Stage 7: Referencing

For senior appointments, referencing should be substantive, not a formality after the offer. Speak to people who have seen the candidate under pressure: former line managers, peers, clients and, where appropriate, people who reported to them. Test the specific claims made at interview.

Stage 8: Offer and Counter-Offer Management

Counter-offers are common when a valued leader resigns. The risk should be discussed from the first conversation, not discovered at resignation. A search partner should understand the candidate's motivations well enough to know whether a counter-offer would genuinely address them, and keep everyone aligned through the notice period.

Stage 9: Onboarding and Follow-Up

The search does not end on the start date. Good practice includes:

- Staying in contact with the appointee through notice and the early months
- A structured check-in with both the client and the appointee
- Raising early concerns openly, before they become failures

Confidentiality

Many senior FM and estates searches are confidential. The incumbent may still be in post. A restructure, an outsourcing decision or a contract exit may not yet be announced. Candidates, in turn, are often senior people who cannot be seen to be looking.

How Confidentiality Is Protected

- The client is not named at first approach; the role is described in enough detail for a candidate to judge interest
- The organisation is named only to credible candidates who have agreed to discretion
- Documents shared with candidates are limited to what is needed at each stage
- Current employers are referenced only with the candidate's consent, usually at offer stage
- Knowledge of the search inside the client is restricted to the people who need it

Confidentiality Runs Both Ways

Senior candidates trust the search partner with their careers. A partner that protects candidates' confidentiality is also one you can trust with your own. Ask how candidate information is held, who sees it and how long it is kept.

Where Confidentiality Breaks Down

Leaks often come from inside the client organisation rather than the market: a wider interview panel than necessary, a draft structure chart left in circulation, or an internal candidate who hears indirectly. Plan internal communication as carefully as the external search, including what the incumbent and team will be told.

maxwell
stephens
Recruitment

Commercially credible Operationally informed

What to Expect and What to Ask For

A retained search should be transparent. You are paying for a process, and you are entitled to see it working.

Reporting

Agree the reporting rhythm at the start. A regular written update, supported by a call, should cover:

- Organisations and individuals approached since the last update
- Responses: interested, declined and why, and people recommended
- Candidates in assessment and where each one stands
- Risks to the timetable, the package or the brief
- Actions needed from you

Market Feedback

Market feedback is one of the most valuable outputs of a search, even when it is uncomfortable. Ask for:

- How the role and your organisation are perceived by the people approached
- Whether the package is competitive for the profile you want
- Where the brief is too narrow, or asks for a combination that barely exists

What You Owe the Process

Commitment runs both ways. Keep decision-makers available, give feedback on shortlisted candidates promptly, and tell the search partner early if the brief, budget or timetable changes. Timelines matter: according to Totaljobs, the average time to hire in the UK climbed to 12 weeks in spring 2026, up from 10 weeks in autumn 2025. Delays on the client side are usually the easiest to remove.

maxwell stephens
Recruitment

The brief decides the outcome

Common Reasons Searches Fail

When a senior search fails, the cause is rarely a shortage of candidates. It is usually a failure of judgement or process somewhere along the way. The reasons we see most often:

- **An unclear or disputed brief.** Stakeholders want different things, and the disagreement surfaces at final interview.
- **A moving target.** The brief changes mid-search, often after seeing the first candidates, without the map being reset.
- **A package set without market evidence.** The organisation discovers late that the profile it wants costs more than it budgeted.
- **Hiring the CV, not the context.** A strong candidate from a very different environment is appointed on reputation, then struggles with scale, governance or culture.
- **Motivation not tested.** The candidate accepts a counter-offer, or leaves early because the role was not what they wanted.
- **Slow decisions.** Long gaps between stages lose the best candidates to other processes.
- **Too many voices.** Large panels without clear decision rights produce a compromise appointment.
- **Thin referencing.** Concerns that a proper reference would have surfaced emerge after the appointment.

Warning Signs During a Search

- Shortlisted candidates look like people you could have found by advertising
- Updates describe activity but not outcomes or market feedback
- No one can explain why particular candidates were not taken forward
- The search partner agrees with everything and challenges nothing

maxwell stephens
Recruitment

The right leader steadies the whole team

How to Choose a Search Partner

The right search partner combines sector knowledge with assessment discipline and the candour to disagree with you. The quickest test is the first conversation: does the firm ask about the problem the role must solve, or only the job title and salary?

Questions to Ask Before You Commit

1. Which comparable FM or estates appointments have you made, and at what level?
2. Who will run the search day to day, and who will speak to candidates?
3. How will you map the market for this role, and when will we see the map?
4. How do you assess candidates, and what will we receive for each one?
5. How often will you report, and what will the reports contain?
6. What will you do if the market tells us the brief or package is wrong?
7. How do you protect confidentiality, for us and for candidates?
8. How do you manage counter-offers and notice periods?
9. Which organisations can you not approach because they are your clients?
10. What happens if the appointment does not work out?
11. What contact will you have with the appointee after they start?

Signs of a Good Partner

- Challenges the brief with evidence rather than opinion
- Is specific about process, stages and reporting
- Talks about retention and outcomes, not only placements
- Can point to case studies of similar appointments

Final Thoughts

Retained executive search is a method for making a high-stakes decision well. It starts with a brief the whole organisation agrees, covers the whole market rather than the visible part of it, and tests every candidate for capability, context and motivation against evidence.

For senior FM and estates appointments, the case for that discipline is strong. These leaders are responsible for compliance, safety, budgets and the daily experience of everyone who uses a building. A poor appointment is expensive and slow to reverse.

Before your next senior appointment, ask three questions:

- Does everyone involved in the decision agree what this role must deliver?
- Do we know what the market can offer at the level we are proposing?
- How will we know, with evidence, that our preferred candidate can succeed here?

Maxwell Stephens has specialised in FM, estates and workplace recruitment since 2006, with offices in London and Darlington, more than 450 client engagements and an active network of more than 50,000 FM professionals. Of the candidates we place, 95% are still in role after 12 months. If you are planning a senior appointment, we are happy to talk it through in confidence.

What the Data Says

What UK data shows about hiring timelines, the cost of a poor hire, candidate mobility and the role of search consultants.

- 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
- A poor hire at mid-manager level on a £42,000 salary can cost a business more than £132,000, the REC found.
  Source: Recruitment & Employment Confederation (REC), Hiring mistakes are costing UK businesses billions each year, 2017
- 62% of respondents to Hays' 2026 UK research plan to move jobs in the coming year.
  Source: Hays UK Salary & Recruiting Trends 2026
- 30% of UK organisations that recruited rated recruitment/search consultants among their most effective attraction methods.
  Source: CIPD, Resourcing and talent planning report 2024
- 95% of candidates placed by Maxwell Stephens remain in role one year after appointment.
  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.

See It in Practice

Executive Recruitment Partnership with HPS Services

HPS Services provides specialist soft facilities management services to the purpose-built student accommodation and build-to-rent sectors, and was entering a period of significant expansion. What began as a conversation about salary benchmarking became a retained executive search partnership, with Maxwell Stephens appointed to recruit a Managing Director, a Business Unit Director for Seasonal Turnaround Services, an Operations Director and two Operations Managers. We invested time with HPS's senior leadership team to understand its objectives, culture, leadership structure and the operational demands of the sector, then ran targeted search and a structured assessment covering leadership capability, commercial acumen, financial understanding and cultural alignment. The appointments strengthened the senior leadership team, and the Business Unit Director went on to deliver successful seasonal mobilisation programmes and year-on-year revenue growth.

It shows a retained search for several linked leadership appointments, built on discovery with the client and structured assessment rather than volume.

Read the full case study at maxwellstephens.com/case-studies/hps-services

Related Reading

- Retained vs Contingent Recruitment in Facilities Management
  maxwellstephens.com/blog/retained-vs-contingent-recruitment-in-facilities-management
- The First 100 Days in a Senior FM or Estates Role
  maxwellstephens.com/blog/first-100-days-in-a-senior-fm-or-estates-role
- Interim or Permanent? Choosing the Right FM Appointment
  maxwellstephens.com/blog/interim-or-permanent-choosing-the-right-fm-appointment

Talk to Maxwell Stephens

Planning an FM, estates or workplace appointment? Contact us for a confidential conversation, or browse more case studies.

A FINE POSITION TO BE IN

maxwell stephens
Recruitment

Maxwell Stephens Recruitment is registered in England and Wales No. 02660883

CONTACT
t: 0207 118 4848

w: www.maxwellstephens.com
e: info@maxwellstephens.com

LONDON
Golden Cross House
8 Duncannon Street
Strand
London
WC2N 4JF