

WittKieffer

Executive Mobility and Hiring in a Pandemic

A New Era in Executive Recruiting



Introduction

In the middle of the global pandemic, WittKieffer reached out to our clients and executives across healthcare, education and other industries that we serve to gauge their sentiments on executive jobs and hiring. Beyond anecdotal information, we wanted to know what they are thinking about in the COVID-19 era and, more importantly, how they are acting and making decisions differently than in the past.

Are executives staying put or looking for new positions?

Are they willing to relocate for a new job, or perhaps lead remotely instead?

What factors are truly important to executive candidates as they consider job changes today?

Are clients still hiring? If so, how aggressively?

Are they using video and other technologies to aid recruiting?

Are they open to hiring executives to lead remotely?

We received input from well over 1,000 leaders in response to our questions. The following resource shares nine themes gleaned from both executives and clients—collecting their opinions on critical issues in executive job mobility and hiring practices.

One thing is for certain: it's a new era in executive recruiting.

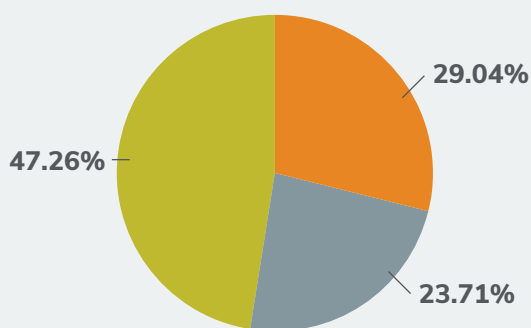
01



Executive jobs have changed – some permanently.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created disruption across industries. Whether in healthcare, education or the life sciences, the pandemic has dramatically shifted executive roles. More than half of the executives we surveyed noted that their jobs have changed recently and may not change back. COVID is “fundamentally altering what work is performed and how we perform it,” [experts say](#).

Which of the following describes the state of your job roles and responsibilities?



- They have changed permanently in the last several months
- They have changed recently but will change back once the current crisis subsides
- They have not changed recently

Our findings align with [research](#) that suggests that the majority of workers' jobs have changed during the pandemic, some permanently. At the executive level, leaders are taking on responsibilities that are new and different to them. This presents welcome opportunities but also significant work-related challenges.

For all organizations, it may be necessary to review and update leaders' job profiles, taking into account COVID-19 era responsibilities and whether they are permanent. As the pandemic persists, the following questions arise: If jobs have changed, do executives need to change with them? Are the right executives filling the right roles?

02

The executive search process has changed.

Most search firms today are conducting startup sessions, interviews, committee meetings and more via Zoom and other video conferencing platforms. Clients are comfortable with the digitizing of materials, online survey tools and even virtual tours.

A new McKinsey [survey](#) notes that COVID-19 has accelerated the adoption of digital technologies by many years, pushing organizations past a tipping point and into new ways of behaving. For executive recruiters and hiring managers, there is no going back to the way things used to be. “Even after the pandemic, we’ll need to make better use of digital resources in executive search,” one client noted. “Efficiencies, cost savings and confidentiality are the drivers.”

Organizations must get used to [search practices](#) which leverage technology to streamline processes – they’re now the norm rather than the exception. Said another client bluntly, “Search firms must continue to evolve.”

What changes to the search process would you want to continue after the restrictions to COVID-19 end?

Utilizing video conferencing tools for all initial candidate interviews	77.97%
Wherever possible, leveraging technology in lieu of face to face meetings	71.19%
Digitizing and virtual sharing of materials in advance of candidate presentation meetings	71.19%
Using online survey tools to gain feedback from search committee members and constituents	68.36%
Using virtual tours and video presentations to provide candidates insight into the client organization	48.59%
Employing psychometric tools and leadership assessments to round out the picture of candidates	30.51%

03



Video technology is an essential recruiting tool.

While executive search firms have conducted interviews via video conferencing for more than a decade, this trend accelerated into high gear during COVID-19. Our data indicate that there is a comfort level among clients to using video in all phases of the recruitment process—even to the point of hiring “sight unseen”. Small but significant, 13% of respondents (and 17% in education) would make a hire based only on virtual interviews.

Video will be integral to executive recruiting from here on out, saving time and money and facilitating more interaction with potential hires. (More than eight in 10 recruiters are already using video interviewing, [reports suggest](#).) This means that relationships with candidates will change—how does an organization develop meaningful connections with candidates via Zoom? As one of our clients lamented, many executives present themselves better in person than through a computer monitor. “Candidates need coaching if this is going to be the way of the future,” the client said. Organizations looking to hire will need to understand how candidates present themselves differently virtually versus in person, and how much stock to put in this online performance.

How effective have you found video interviewing to be for leadership talent?

9.04%

Only effective when no other alternatives are available

48.59%

Works well for the initial conversation with a candidate

29.38%

Works well for all but the final round with a candidate

12.99%

Works well for all interview rounds; would hire based on video interviewing only

0%

Is superior to in-person interviews

04

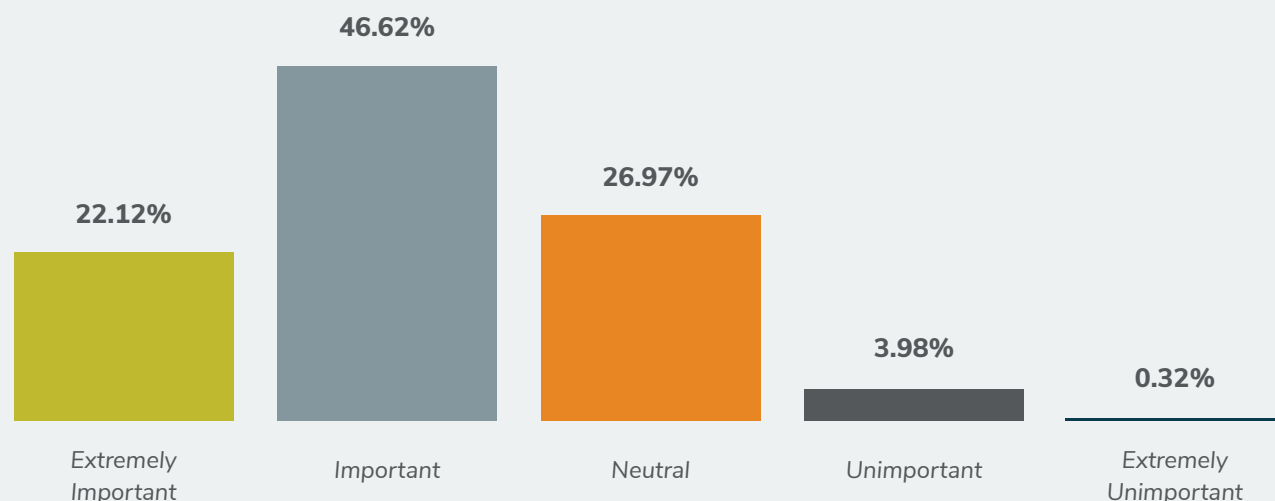


With “sight unseen” now an option, candidates still value in-person meetings.

While video interviewing is widely used to move searches forward, only a small segment of candidates felt face-to-face interactions were unimportant in hiring.

The findings suggest that candidates still desire face-time with potential employers. There needs to be a connection, a trust established. A hiring organization must find whatever means they can to build that trust and relationship with a potential hire. Even in the COVID-19 era, they may need to meet a preferred candidate in person to secure a commitment.

How important are face-to-face interactions when supporting a career move?



05



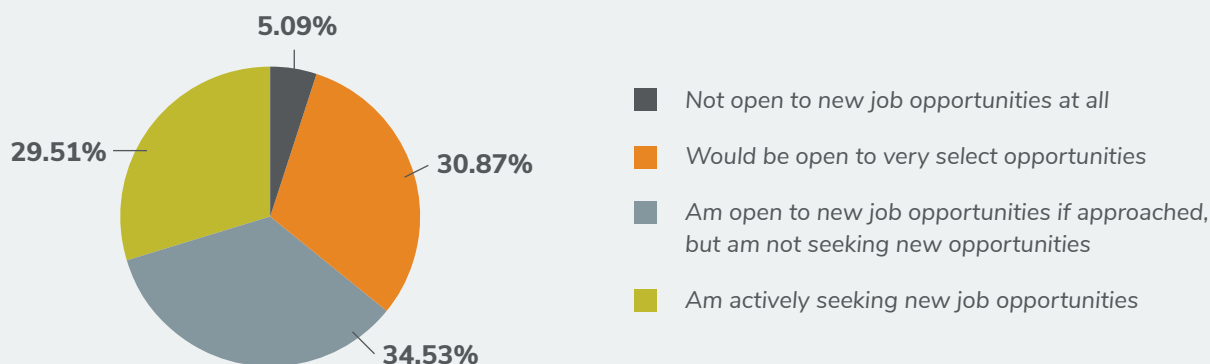
Leaders are looking for new roles.

Somewhat of a surprise, almost all executives surveyed noted they are willing and able to take a new position right now. A significant segment are “actively” looking. As one of our clients noted, “There are too many excellent, high-level executives looking for opportunities,” though not enough available positions.

The data suggest that executives in the COVID-19 era are seeking new opportunities, perhaps to find more meaning in their work or to reinvent their careers. Crises “jolt us out of our comfort zones, and lead us to ask big questions about what matters and what is worth doing,” [writes](#) management expert Herminia Ibarra.

Another client noted, “Leaders today are more interested in opportunities to truly make an impact.” For organizations looking to hire key executives, they may want to appeal to candidates’ core motivations and values.

How open are you to a new job opportunity within the next 6-12 months in light of the global pandemic?



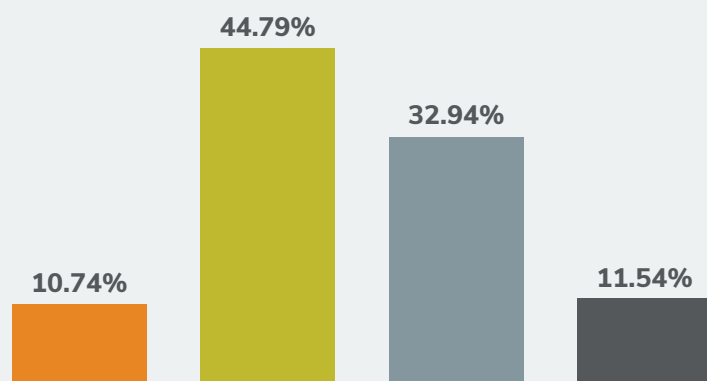
06



Executives are ready to relocate.

Executives amid the crisis are not hesitant to pick up stakes and move. If it means taking a role with a new employer, a significant majority of individuals surveyed said they are open to relocation—even across the U.S. or internationally. This aligns with [research](#) that indicates that COVID-19 is prompting many individuals – and especially the highest wage earners – to move, often to less populated areas. The crisis has also prompted many professionals to look to relocate as a [step closer](#) to retirement, or as a means of living closer to family members.

How open are you to relocation for a new job opportunity, with a new employer, within the next 6-12 months?



- Not open at all
- Open to relocation in select locations
- Open to relocation across the U.S. for the right opportunity
- Open to international relocation for the right opportunity

Regardless of the ongoing crisis – and perhaps because of it – executives are willing to relocate for a career change. As a result, organizations that are starting an executive search, and their executive search partners, can cast a wide geographic net to build a strong slate of candidates. They will want to ensure that executive candidates have truly [considered](#) the entire life cycle of such a major career change – especially how the relocation fits into their broader career plans and priorities.

07

Candidates are prioritizing team, mission and location.

Executives want to work for a great team—this truism is borne out in our data. For whom they will be working, and where they will work, are key factors for executives who are considering new roles. Mission also matters in a time when leaders are looking to find meaning in their work.

Surprisingly, work-life balance places low on the list of criteria respondents say are important when considering a career move. Perhaps this is an indication that the pandemic era is one in which [“work-life integration”](#) is required.

Our findings suggest that a hiring organization can leverage its leadership team, mission and values, and location as recruiting chips, knowing that candidates will be open to a new position if these conditions are right for them. Compensation, while important, is unlikely to be an executive’s primary motivation for considering a new position.

Which top three criteria are most important to you when assessing a new job opportunity during the pandemic?

The leadership team	55.77%
Alignment with mission and values	53.94%
Location of the position	50.28%
Reputation of the employer	35.80%
Stability of the employer	32.06%
Opportunity for financial stability, better compensation	29.12%
Opportunity to advance and/or perform more challenging work	26.81%
Opportunity for autonomy	8.67%
Opportunity for better work-life balance	7.56%

08

Leading remotely is no longer a remote possibility.

A sizeable majority of our clients said they are more open to having team members work remotely than prior to the pandemic. There has been a sea-change in the acceptance of remote work – [some experts say](#) that workers are actually more productive at home. “We are working more effectively remotely than I expected,” said one survey respondent. [According to PwC](#), the trend toward more employees working from home will continue after COVID-19.

Organizations are also willing to hire leaders who would work remotely without relocating. This is a remarkable trend. It opens the door to recruiting executives who prefer not to, or are not able to, move to a new city or region. Top candidates may request to work from afar.

If organizations hire leaders who work remotely, important questions arise: Can executives lead teams effectively while remote? Do they need training to become effective at leading virtually? Will they appreciate the [different practices](#) required to build trust with their teams and to lead successfully?

Are you more open to team members working remotely in light of COVID-19?

84.18%

More open than before the pandemic

0.56%

Less open than before the pandemic

15.25%

About the same

Are you open to hiring leaders who would work remotely without relocating to your offices or facilities?

38.42%

Not open at all

53.67%

Somewhat open

7.91%

Very open

09



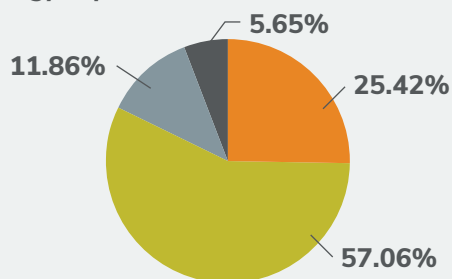
Recruiting has paused but the need for great leaders has not.

“COVID-19 is both creating and cancelling jobs,” one survey respondent noted. A majority of our clients (especially in education) told us they are recruiting essential positions only.

While many organizations have certainly pulled back on their recruiting efforts, they indicate that they need great leaders as much as ever, if not more—and COVID-19 has created an unprecedented opportunity to hire exceptional executives, [experts say](#).

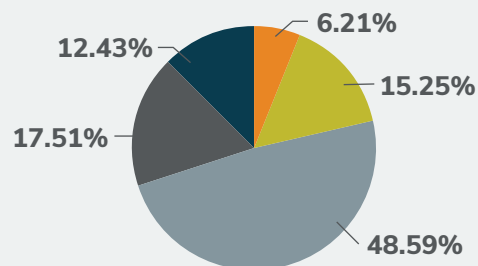
Hiring organizations must see the present time as a chance to meet their strategic leadership needs for the short and long term. As COVID-19 dissipates and business conditions improve, they will need to reconsider which positions are “essential” to meet their future goals.

How would you describe your executive recruiting strategy at present?



- We have a hiring freeze at present
- We are only hiring for essential executive positions
- We are recruiting for all positions as usual
- Other

How have recent events impacted your demand for leadership talent?



- Significantly decreased our needs
- Slightly decreased our needs
- No change
- Slightly increased our needs
- Significantly increased our needs

Conclusion

One survey respondent acknowledged of the current pandemic, “This too shall pass.” We indeed hope that the effects of the pandemic continue to fade and we enter a post-COVID era. Even if life returns to a semblance of normal, the question remains whether the executive search and hiring landscape has irrevocably changed.

As our data make clear, there are new norms in executive mobility and hiring practices. These include:

- Executives during the COVID-19 era are actively looking for new positions—whether this means they would move to a new location or stay where they are and lead remotely.
- Though the pace of their hiring has slowed, hiring organizations are moving forward by leveraging video and other digital technologies, even to the point of hiring executives who they may not have met in person.
- There is still a dire need for great leadership, as the current pandemic has only exacerbated the challenges that organizations face.

Will these trends continue once COVID-19 is under control, workers begin returning to their offices, executives begin travelling again and the “next normal” has been established?

We believe that most of the changes brought about by the pandemic will be permanent. Employers and executives have gotten a taste of a different type of leadership recruitment that is more flexible and technology-driven. They are familiar and comfortable with procedures and practices that are representative of a new era in executive recruiting.

Methodology

In August 2020, WittKieffer conducted two online surveys to take the pulse of, respectively, our executive candidates and clients in our core industries, including healthcare and education. For the executive survey, we reached out to more than 7,500 executives by email; for the client survey, we emailed more than 4,400 individuals who were current or recent clients of WittKieffer. In all, 1,257 executives responded to the executive candidate survey, while 177 leaders responded to the client survey. Responses to the surveys were anonymous. Collected data from each survey has been shared in this report.

Executive Survey (n = 1,257)		Client Survey (n = 177)	
Healthcare*	69.05%	Healthcare*	42.37%
Education	30.95%	Education	57.63%

**includes Academic Medicine, Managed Care, Life Sciences and Nonprofit sector*

WittKieffer

WittKieffer is a global executive search firm dedicated exclusively to organizations that improve quality of life in healthcare, education, the life sciences and the not-for-profit sector. Its industry-specialized consultants deliver solutions across the leadership continuum – experienced, emerging and interim – that build long-term partnerships and successful outcomes. The firm understands leadership, people who lead and the impact they have on organizations and society. WittKieffer—leading the way forward for 50 years.

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