

Working With Recruiters: What Engineers and Employers Need to Know

by Kevin Parmenter, Power Sources Manufacturers Association, Phoenix, Ariz.

You're a power system designer named Pete Power. One day, out of the blue, you get a phone call or email from someone you've never met before. The message is something along these lines:

"I'm Art Burford with Burford Solutions and I have an exciting, high-paying position at a leading corporation for someone who has background in power electronics and design. Would you be able to recommend someone for this position you might know?"

If you take or return Art Burford's call, he will be thrilled. His reaction will be as if you just found his lost wallet. He'll be as excited as your neighbors' Chihuahua if you walked in the door with a steak.

Of course, the message is sincere. The person calling you is a recruiter and he wants to make a commission by placing you or someone you know in any open position he may have. This recruiter may work directly for a company. Or he may be employed by an independent recruiting agency that is (hopefully) working under contract to a company that's looking to fill a position.

Let's say your immediate response to Art is "pick me – pick me!" Maybe your current assignment is as exciting as watching the grass grow. Perhaps you work for the pointy haired boss in the Dilbert cartoons. Or say you got laid off from a company and you really need a job.

Once you send in your resume you might not hear anything back unless you call. What happened? Where did your best buddy Art Burford go? When you call Art back the phone the second time, the conversation may go something like this:

Pete: "Art! – this is Pete Power"

Art: "Um, yeah... Power ummm Pete...spell your name again? Let me look that up in my database, let me see... [sounds of papers shuffling and keyboard noises in the background]...oh yeah Pete, they decided to go with someone who had experience in miming to boy scout troops about synchronous rectifiers."

Pete: "What? I spend all my weekends as a volunteer miming to underprivileged children! I can't put everything in my resume, Art. Why didn't you call me back to discuss this?"

This type of exchange happens every day. Why was Art so uninterested when you called him to follow up? After all, he seemed like he was initially so impressed with you.

It's a simple matter of priorities. Art works for Art, first; then for his client, second. His interest in you, the job candidate, is a distant third on his list of interests.

In the beginning when Art called, he was assembling the desert tray of candidates' resumes to shove under his client's nose. Typically, he gives these resumes to the client's human resources (HR) group and eventually they may be seen by the hiring manager. But as long as the client picks someone off Art's "desert tray," he gets paid and he is happy.

Remember, companies often work with multiple recruiters for the same positions and why not? They only pay when something happens. So your chances of getting picked are much lower than you think.

Given all these factors that are potentially working against you, can working with a recruiter be a positive experience? The answer is yes, if you know what to look for in a recruiter and how to effectively work with recruiters.

Understand the ground rules. Recruiters work for the companies that give them job openings to fill. As sad as it may seem, they do not work for you—remember this no matter how happy and friendly the recruiter seems at first. Unless you are retaining them and paying them directly, they work for someone else (especially themselves).

This means that the recruiters are not out there trying to find you a job or waking up thinking about you. This may be better than the alternative: Bad recruiters will attempt to force fit a square peg into a round hole just so they can get paid a commission quickly. As a result, bad recruiters will try to pressure candidates into taking any available positions and/or salaries just to get a deal done. If you detect this, put the recruiter on your do not call list.

Work with multiple recruiters. You should have as much loyalty towards a particular recruiter as that person has for you. Since some recruiters work more closely with some companies than others, you can get more coverage by working with multiple recruiters. But this is only true to a point. Work with too many recruiters and you may carpet bomb the world with your resume. Ask the recruiter(s) you are talking to these simple questions: For which companies are you approved as a recruiter? And do you have a contract with those companies? If they don't have a contract with companies you are targeting, it will be difficult for them to get you any traction with those companies.

Also ask the recruiter if they are working on a retained basis. If not, the company may be using six external recruiters for the position. A retained search means they will get paid no matter what once they find the right individual for that position. Also, the company will retain only one recruiter. That means your chances of getting a position at that company just went up greatly because they are not looking at multiple recruiters all shoving the desert tray of candidates at them.

Choose recruiters that know the industry. Make sure the recruiter has experience and relationships in the industry and with the companies you are interested in. If you want a new position in power electronics you won't get far if the recruiter usually works in the pharmaceutical industry or places office workers. Avoid recruiters who are just playing around in engineering because nothing else is going on in their usual area of specialization.

Set expectations. Once you find someone who can demonstrate he or she has connections to the power electronics industry, then it's time to establish mutual respect for one another. Ask what the recruiter will be doing to respect your time and experience and then respect the recruiter's ability to get you an audience. Tell the recruiter that he/she gets a chance to impress you, but if this person doesn't keep commitments then you will not be taking future calls. Set expectations for calling back, checking in and informing of status. If they don't do what they promise, drop them and don't call them back.

DO NOT give up on other sources. Always remember this point. The recruiter is simply another avenue for obtaining interviews, but not the only one. Keep your LinkedIn connections and other networking options active. Just because you have a recruiter after you does not mean that it's the only way to find a job. In fact, if you are not careful with recruiters it could become a negative that they are working with you. Remember the hiring company has to pay a fee and would rather find you without having to pay a fee. In fact, the hiring company might pay you less because they have to pay Burford Solutions for finding you.

This is money you would rather put in your pocket. So be dog-gone sure Art is going to do something for you before he puts your potential earnings in his wallet. If they are bringing you and the employer value, they should get paid—if not, they should not. Employers don't want to have to pay for something they can have for free. If it's between you and a candidate that they don't have to pay a fee for—all else being equal, guess who wins? You want the recruiter to get you something (like an interview with the company) that you can't get yourself. You don't want the recruiter to be a boat anchor for a company who would have found you anyway.

Demand performance from the recruiter and let them know you will not call back if they don't perform. You may even request that the recruiter not hand out your resume if that person can't add value. So be a good, responsible and respectful candidate, but don't be a pushover or allow the recruiter to do a snow job on you.

Keep the lines of communications open. If you change jobs, make sure you let the recruiters you respect know where you are and how to get hold of you. During a job search, let the recruiters know if you have a dialog on the phone or in person with a prospective employer and let the recruiters know how the interview went. If it went badly, let them know that too. If the head of HR had lots of duck photos on his wall and you went on for 30 minutes about how much you love duck hunting—only to find out that Mr. Big shot VP of HR is a life member of the Audubon society—whoops. You might want to tell the recruiter who brought you this opportunity about the disaster.

Like many things in life, it all comes down to the golden rule—treat the recruiter as you would like to be treated and foster an environment of mutual respect. With the current environment of outsourcing, cost cutting and the

economy being what it is, recruiters might just bring you the next opportunity you are looking for. Give them a chance. However as the late President Reagan said, "Trust but verify."

You can decide for yourself if recruiters are a necessary evil, a burden or the best thing ever. By their performance, the recruiters will determine your perception of them so let them know the ground rules and how they will be judged. Then, hold them accountable for doing what they say they will do for you that you can't do for yourself. It's up to you to ask recruiters to articulate what they can do for you and then tell them that they will be measured on how they perform. If they don't perform, then refuse to work with that recruiter or agency.

Beware of unsavory characters. As in every walk of life and every business, there are some unscrupulous individuals working as recruiters. A number of years ago, an (unnamed) agency contacted me as a hiring manager to work with them and I told them I might. They immediately started sending me resumes rapid fire. I admittedly did not have time to even look at all the resumes they sent to me and ultimately, I hired an individual on my own.

But three months later, the agency called to ask how I was planning to pay them! Pay them for what? The recruiter had found out that I had hired someone in the resume minefield that they laid for me to hit. I contacted legal and put them on the case. We did not have to pay them, but I will never use that agency again.

So beware of any unethical recruiters, protect yourself, and (if you're a hiring manager) the company you work for. After my unfortunate experience, I worked with my company's Legal department to add a disclaimer to our website to guard against the "resume minefield" tactics that we were subjected to. I recommend that your company take similar steps as well to protect itself and avoid potential grief in the future.

Good luck with your search and be careful!

About The Author



Kevin Parmenter has over 20 years of experience in the electronics and semiconductor industry. Presently the director of Advanced Technical Marketing for Digital Power Products at Exar, Kevin previously led global product applications engineering and new product definition for Freescale Semiconductors AMPD - Analog, Mixed Signal and Power Division based in Tempe, AZ. Prior to this, he worked for Fairchild Semiconductor in the Americas as senior director of field applications engineering. In this role, Kevin led the FAE team in the Americas region plus three regional design centers.

Previously Kevin held various technical and management positions with increasing responsibility at ON Semiconductor and in the Motorola Semiconductor Products Sector. Kevin also led an applications engineering team for the start-up Primarion where he worked on high-speed electro-optical communications and digital power supply semiconductors.

Kevin serves on the board of directors of the [PSMA](#) (Power Sources Manufacturers Association) and was the general chair of APEC 2009 ([the IEEE Applied Power Electronics Conference](#).) Kevin has also had design engineering experience in the medical electronics and military electronics fields. He holds a BSEE and BS in Business Administration, is a member of the IEEE, and holds an Amateur Extra class FCC license (call sign KG5Q) as well as an FCC Commercial Radiotelephone License.