



With no end in sight to their difficulties in finding headteachers who have the right credentials, schools are increasingly turning to recruitment agencies. **Crispin Andrews** reports

# Heads and schools – finding the perfect match

It's time for the governors to make a decision that will determine the future of their school. As they make their final deliberations, the candidate in front of them – a sort of headteaching equivalent of Roy Hattersley – looks quietly confident.

He knows he is the safe bet. Experienced and knowledgeable, he ticks all the boxes. But will a perennially straight bat and a reliance on the tried and trusted practices of the past be enough to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow? After so long in the game, does he really have the personal drive and ambition to give your school the sort of dynamic leadership it needs to move forward in the rapidly changing world of 21st-century education?

Outside, also awaiting the result, is an altogether different animal. Imagine Tony Blair in 1994: full of energy and potential, but without a proven leadership track record. His dynamism has wowed the selection committee, but they are a conservative lot, so will they be willing to take a risk on appointing someone to the top job who's only ever been a deputy? Whose ass is on the line if he turns out not to have what it takes? Surely we should go with the certainty, albeit limited, that's offered by Roy?

This is the sort of dilemma that more and more schools will face over the next few years when looking to appoint new headteachers. With many – particularly primary heads reaching retirement age, and others on their final run, and



“Academy sponsors who have say, 12 academies, are now appointing their most experienced and successful principals as executive principals with responsibility for a particular region, with the principal of each academy reporting to them,” he says. “This provides them with someone who can bring the newcomer up to speed. This system is also employed by federations and other school partnering arrangements.”

It’s far harder for state schools to recruit teachers to the top job than it was a quarter of a century ago, according to recent research. Analysts at Education Data Surveys recently showed how 40 per cent of all headships in inner London and the east of England were re-advertised last year. Across the country, 35 per cent of posts in primaries and 27 per cent of secondary posts needed more than one run before someone was appointed – almost double the 1993 figure. The *Times Educational Supplement* reports a national average of only five applications for primary headteacher posts.

Executive recruitment consultants can help by designing a process that reaches those candidates who would not otherwise consider the opportunity. “Most senior leaders will not thumb through the *TES* in the staffroom to find their next job,” John Carter says. “They are more familiar with their laptops these days, so we will put an online advert in the *TES* or the *Guardian* to catch their attention.”

Sue Singer, an education specialist with Saxton Bampfylde, another recruitment consultancy, believes that today’s headteacher crisis is a direct result of the shortage of teachers recruited in the late 1970s and early 1980s, meaning a smaller pool of fifty-somethings in education. Currently, a third of headteachers are over 55, and with 56 the average retirement age, the situation could get worse before it gets better.

A direct approach by a recruitment consultant can help schools find the right person. Randstad uses geographical criteria to locate the right person, as the impact of the recession on the housing market may mean people are less willing to sell up and relocate. It also takes a candidate’s school improvement record into account: “Have they turned around a failing school, have they helped a school go from

not looking to move on – schools, it seems, will have to look beyond an experience-based evaluation of the best candidate for the job. And with their vast knowledge of the latest practices, education recruitment consultants could prove to be increasingly valuable as the search for the right leader becomes ever more difficult.

“You need to get a balance between experience and potential when looking for a new head,” says John Carter, principal consultant with Randstad Education, who argues that with new leadership structures in place where experienced headteachers have executive authority over a group of schools, appointing a candidate without previous headship experience need not be too much of a risk.



good to outstanding, how is their impact reflected in GCSE results or Ofsted performance?" asks John.

For Saxton Bampfylde, research is the key, and consultants use established networks of contacts to seek out people who might be interested in the post. "We meet them first and then make recommendations to the selection committee," says Sue, "so when they come to interview, both parties are better informed."

But do incumbent headteachers and senior leaders enjoy a speculative approach? The answer according to Corrina O'Beirne, a consultant for Navigate, is a resounding yes. "Ninety-nine per cent react very positively; they are flattered," she says. "School leaders are not used to being approached like this, and so an element of intrigue is there driving them to find out more about the post on offer."



John Carter believes that schools should take context into account when looking at a candidate's track record in school improvement. He recalls one headteacher who took over a school in special measures and after two years had led it past the 30 per cent GCSE A\*-C mark. He says: "On the surface it may look like a marginal success, but it was a particularly tough gig. Sometimes stopping the rot and turning things around is the most difficult thing to do."

Recruitment consultants do what school staff doesn't have time for: deal with adverts, reply to unsuccessful candidates, provide more detailed feedback. It is also their job to sell the post, and John Carter believes that approaching a targeted candidate directly is more likely to succeed in uncovering the right person for the job, adding that many of the people he contacts have seen the advertisement but were too busy, or did not have time to respond.

Leadership appointment service TES Prime also seeks out exceptional candidates, including those who might not at first be looking to move. This, it believes, is particularly

important in secondary schools where quality of applicant rather than quantity of responses is more of an issue.

This strategy worked at St Augustine Webster Catholic Primary School in Scunthorpe, which, due to the decreasing pool of practising faith headteachers, found it difficult to get a response to its initial advertisement. Three weeks into the campaign, the school's recruitment manager recommended that a supplementary search campaign be conducted. He contacted 40 headteachers and deputies at similar-sized Catholic schools, which led to three quality applications, all of which were shortlisted. The governors of the school appointed first time.

Some say that schools find it harder to recruit since government made the National Professional Qualification for Headship mandatory. "They (senior leaders) can only

do that qualification in the year before they apply for a post, so that drastically reduces the pool," says David Fann, head at Sherwood Primary in Fulwood in Lancashire. Recruiting headteachers is especially difficult in that county: 35 per cent of its primary schools and 17 per cent of its secondaries had trouble finding one last year. Like many others associated with teaching unions, David – a spokesperson for the National Association of Head Teachers – blames workload and poor remuneration for the recruitment crisis.

John targets advertisements at the profile of the required individual as a way of flushing out the best candidates. "It's not about putting forward a glossy brochure about wonderful new buildings

or a distinguished history, but presenting the challenge, outlining the sort of individual needed, and then telling them what's in it for themselves."

Corinna agrees that in the current environment potential candidates need to be convinced that the new challenge is do-able. "It's important the opportunity is presented as distinctive and different," she says, "an advert needs to bring the role to life, and clearly present the key current challenges and the direction in which the school is going, so a potential candidate can work out whether the post is right for them."

According to John, the open nature of headteacher recruitment can also be an issue for some headteachers and senior leaders, who do not wish to be seen to fail publicly, or invest time going through the application process if there is already a favoured candidate. "Most senior executive recruitment is undertaken confidentially, but headteachers need to be seen by a range of stakeholders, governors, senior staff, parents and maybe even pupils, and doing this with several candidates on separate days would be difficult for a school to organise," he says. "Academy sponsors may

want to take candidates out to lunch or dinner, but to do so separately, if there were six or seven candidates, would be unwieldy.”

Sue adds that some incumbent heads may be reluctant to chase a new job and then fail publicly, out of fear of the destabilising effect this knowledge might have on staff at their own school. John Carter would like to see someone trial a more confidential approach to headteacher recruitment, but in the meantime believes that it is the job of a recruitment consultant to convince a potential candidate to get over their initial reluctance to get involved.

In the long term, schools can't just settle for any old headteacher. With Ofsted breathing down their necks brandishing league tables, and government strategies that are about as consistent as a WAG's hairstyle, they have to find the right person for the job. And that's where recruitment consultants can once again, be invaluable.

Jonathan Day is a partner for leadership consulting with leadership advisory firm Heidrick and Struggles. He helps to fit candidates' character and experience with the individual cultures of different schools. Jonathan recalls recently appointing a bursar at a school with many managerial challenges. “They needed someone who could look after financial issues, be diplomatic with parents and act as clerk to governors,” he says, explaining that many capable candidates would have not been able to cope in an environment where they were serving more than one master, and executive authority was unclear. “The school needed someone who could deal with a high level of ambiguity in their working life,” he adds.

Schools have distinctive cultures. They are small and intricate social systems, almost like families, according to Jonathan – and this creates unique challenges when seeking to appoint a headteacher or senior leader. “This is why there's often about a year of transition after a head is appointed, before things settle down,” he says.

Another school Jonathan recently worked with needed change after the retirement of a long-serving headteacher. He was part of the fabric of the place, but the governors realised they needed to appoint someone younger and more dynamic who could drive change without losing sight of the things that made their school unique. “They couldn't appoint a clone of the previous head; they needed someone to deal with new issues that the departing head never faced, and who could appeal to a much broader clientele base,” Jonathan says. “Things like monitoring the school's charitable status and making the place more accessible.”

The only way to get an insight into a school's culture, Jonathan believes, is to spend time there. Heidrick and Struggles' full search programme develops a role profile for client schools that matches candidates' characters to schools' cultures and needs. Their consultants meet all candidates and rate them according to strengths and weaknesses, before setting up informal meetings with the school selection committee. Where parents are involved in the selection process, Heidrick and Struggles consultants offer them coaching in interview technique and sometimes do

the same for children who are part of the selection process, albeit more informally. Jonathan says the process can take six to nine months, from the original approach to sealing the deal with the school's favoured candidate. “During this time we will have gathered a huge amount of information about the school that the new headteacher can use to familiarise themselves with what is going on, once in post,” he adds.

Saxton Bampfylde consultants also spend time with their client school to find out its ethos and vision for the future and to understand what governors – and in the case of academies or religious schools, the sponsors – want from their headteacher. “How much change is needed and how important is a candidate's faith to sponsors?” These are the sorts of questions Sue needs answering before she can start looking for suitable candidates.

The TES Prime recruitment team also helps schools look at the bigger picture, determining key priorities and helping define current leadership team dynamics, to identify the type of leader a school needs and the person that will best fit into the role. An experienced team of recruitment advertising designers and copywriters produce bespoke materials that accurately target the people a school wants to see.

Christine Whatford is chair of the interim education board in Tower Hamlets, London, where TES Prime helped St Paul's Way School Secondary recruit a new headteacher after one failed campaign. She says: “There was a smooth transition and [TES Prime] were very responsive to the needs of the new situation and the demands I made of them.” These were to find someone capable of improving a National Challenge school, overseeing a £27million Building Schools for the Future programme and playing a key role in a major regeneration project. “They were particularly good at keeping candidates up to speed and on board when last-minute changes had to be made to process and timetable.”

At Friesland School in Nottingham, TES Prime helped to appoint a new headteacher, after the previous incumbent decided to move on after 14 years in the post. Chair of governors Brian Wimpenny says: “The initial screening of all applicants was very useful in shortlisting, as all of the governors find it very difficult to compare experience. TES put it into context. Keeping a focus on the profile throughout the process was a good discipline.”

For most recruitment consultants, the screening process is relatively straightforward. Heidrick and Struggles take a candidate's CV and discuss achievements during face-to-face interviews. Finalists then discuss their leadership style in more detail, so consultants can make a match with school ethos. Saxton Bampfylde employs an occupational therapist to conduct psychometric tests, should a school want a deeper insight into a candidate's suitability for the particular job. “Some like it; some don't,” says Sue. “It gives the selection panel some pointers to bring up during interview.”

Technical interviews are also a key part of Navigate's screening process. Before a candidate is put forward to the selection panel, an experienced headteacher takes them through a series of questions designed to work out whether their aptitudes match the requirements of the role. “This



interview helps bring the paperwork to life,” says Corinna. “It helps the candidate prepare for selection panel and the panel to get a deeper understanding of the individual in front of them.”

When a school needs a temporary solution, getting the right person is doubly important. Maybe the incumbent headteacher is ill, has gone on maternity leave or has left at short notice, or the school needs a short, sharp impact to get it to a place where a new permanent headteacher can take it forward. Geri Walker at Randstad Education deals with interim management in a wide range of situations. She has at her disposal a network of experienced headteachers who have chosen interim management as a career path. Each of her candidates is interviewed face to face and assessed against strict criteria to meet safeguarding requirements and make sure they’re up to the job.

“They have a proven track record in school improvement, and have the professional qualities to make an impact, quickly,” she says, explaining how she too matches the client school’s circumstances to the candidate’s character and qualities. “An interim headteacher will need experience of the type of school they will be working in and the situation it finds itself in,” she adds. “They will need sensitivity to this situation, good diplomatic skills and enjoy a challenge.”

Recruitment consultants support selection. It is still up to the school itself to decide which candidate they prefer – whether the solid dependability of the Roy Hattersley type or the untried youthful vigour of the budding Tony Blair is more to their liking.

With demographics against them, John urges schools to broaden their horizons as to who they are prepared to consider for the top job. “There is no longer an endless carousel of existing senior heads ready to go into a new job, so if you have a narrow view of what you want in a market short of candidates then you set yourself up to fail,” he says. “In an ideal world a school would want someone with experience and the evidence they have done it before, as well as the potential to take themselves and their new school on to new levels. In reality it may not be possible to get both, so maybe it is better to look forward to the future rather than focussing only on what candidates have done in the past. A lot of talented forty-somethings are out there, who with the right initial support structures in place can make a significant impact.”

Corinna thinks it’s not experience or potential but a candidate’s readiness to step into the role that counts. “A new headteacher needs to hit the ground running and have an immediate impact,” she says.

Recruitment consultants can help you choose the best candidate for your vacant headteacher or senior leadership post. And as the Hattersleys of this world go off to graze in pastures new and the young Blairs clamour to take their place, let’s just hope that an army of PR-savvy, Mandelson-wanabees aren’t waiting to jump on their coat tails to replace substance with spin.

**Crispin Andrews is a freelance education writer.**