

Good Will Hunting

Top headhunter: Finnish executives make for good export products



As Pasi Koivusaari made Business Week's World's Most Influential Headhunters TOP 50 list in January, the prestigious selection had ramifications that reached beyond some friendly pats on the back by his colleagues.

"The volume of CVs in my e-mail box multiplied," Koivusaari laughs. The headhunting Finn is a co-founder and a Senior Partner at Boyden Finland, having served also as the Chairman of the Board for Boyden World.

One of the things that readers of Business Week picked up on Koivusaari's interview was his favourite historical figure: Moses.

Koivusaari puts this unusual choice to a proper perspective through a story where God is faced with a tough recruiting decision. Somebody must lead his chosen people out of Egypt and into the Promised Land – and needless to say, not anyone will do.

"In Moses, we have a very interesting case," Koivusaari says. Moses, after all, was an immigrant who elevated himself into a position of no small power in Egypt.

"He was a sophisticated leader who had the proper education."

Playing hard to get

Yet, when God approached him with a career proposition Moses refused: he did not want the responsibility.

"He especially stressed that his communication skills are poor," comments Koivusaari.

However, the divine headhunter proved to be very persistent: having made his choice, God stuck by it. Finally, of course, Moses said yes.

"And here we see that the recruiter was right: Moses was efficient and committed, and held the line to the end," Koivusaari grins.

Koivusaari likes this story because it demonstrates well the very essence of headhunting: for the best executives, the quali-

ties and attributes simply shine through no matter what. He believes that visibility issues will take care of themselves as long as the results are outstanding.

In addition to a stellar track record, having the right attitude is another crucial piece of the puzzle. Top executives are exposed to a tremendous amount of pressure and must be able “to go the last mile” in often times demanding circumstances. In the final analysis, Koivusaari says, it is not the parts, but the person as a whole, that determines the quality of leadership.

Shopping for a CEO

Koivusaari was the only Nordic headhunter to make the Business Week list. His client companies operate all over the world and there is constant need for executives of various nationalities and origins.

“Presently, we’re looking for a Managing Director in England and France. In the Netherlands, the search is on for a CFO. In Russia, it’s two COOs,” Koivusaari lists quickly.

But what about Finnish executives? In a country known for its mobile phones and cruise ships, what kind of an export product is the Finnish exec?

– Not too bad, Koivusaari replies. According to him, the Finns often beat themselves up for not having high-profile CEOs in the world’s biggest companies – at least, if you exclude those companies with clear ties to Finland, such as Nokia or Kone.

“We have hundreds of quality executives abroad,” he says. But rather than occupying the number one spot in the company, the Finnish talent is often in charge of a division or a specific business area. Therefore the visibility is not as great – but this does not mean that the talent is not there. The industrious Finns have been noticed across the board:

“Boyden’s international network approaches our office in Helsinki perhaps couple of times a week to enquire about Finnish candidates,” he reveals.

Executive autopsy

And what is it that makes the Finnish executive tick? Koivusaari starts off with the language skills:

“As part of a survival strategy of a small nation, we have always been keen to learn languages here.” A Finnish CEO might easily speak four languages while his American colleague may know only his mother tongue – along with some choice vocabulary from tex-mex restaurant menus.

Beyond language skills, Koivusaari believes his countrymen to be go-getters: implementation-oriented and focused on reaching the stated objectives. Koivusaari also says that the Finns have a very well-



defined work ethic, compounded by a ‘word-is-bond’ attitude.

According to the top headhunter, it is also a bonus that the Finns are sufficiently “neutral” to operate just about anywhere – there is no friction or feuds to speak of.

Pressed for the negative aspects, Koivusaari says that small talk is something that is not traditionally a part of the leadership culture here.

“However, many people have learned to master it while working abroad.”

Another sticking point is the ability of the Finns to market their expertise to, say, a potential employer. When Koivusaari has an American prospect sitting in his office, the approach is very different: the American exec wastes no time in putting a good spin on his/her talent and achievements.

The magnetic north

Koivusaari says that it is not that big a challenge to send Finnish executives to the world – the difficulty often begins when one tries to recruit top talent to Finland. Language barrier isn’t that much of a problem, but Finland still isn’t the first country that pops into a CEO’s head when considering one’s options. Despite rave reviews from the likes of Richard Florida, Koivusaari is still sceptical about the attractiveness of Finland as a whole. He admits being a little torn about the subject, because he wants Finland to do well and is reluctant to disparage her:

“In Finland, we have worked hard to promote the ‘information society’ angle and I do feel that it is the only way for us – as a nation – to survive in the global game,” he says. Granted, Finland has done well in the

“Innovation Olympics”, but is not the only country out there with good engineers. And when one considers for a moment the sheer numbers of Chinese and Indian engineering talent, the odds suddenly turn against a small, Nordic hi-tech champion.

On the other hand, in the new age of scalability even a small country can come on top:

“Innovation can emerge anywhere.”

Eroding Europe

Koivusaari’s concern over future is not limited to Finland, however. An avid reader of books and a keen student of history, Koivusaari is worried that the European Union is about to face a slow-churning Waterloo. He fears that in a couple of centuries, when scholars sit down to write the history of the early years of the new millennium, they will look at it as the era when the European hegemony came crashing down to the ground.

“And don’t get me wrong: I’m a big supporter of the European Union. I just think that it has failed badly in its mission,” Koivusaari says, citing utter failure to collaborate as the main pitfall. During the next 50 years, the European population will dwindle, creating a power vacuum that the Asians are only too happy fill, he comments.

“The Europeans need to shape up and create some order in the ranks again,” he says, pointing out that the folks on the Old Continent have shown proper resilience and resolve in the past.

“There’s still hope that when we absolutely have to, we can make things work.” ●