

Chris Clarke, CEO and President, Boyden World Corporation, discusses the emergence of executive search among the other professions

A brief look at the history of some of the established professions shows a rather long and colourful road to the respectability and acceptance that they enjoy today. The transformation from humble beginnings to worldwide respect for these trades has taken a long time, as incremental steps forward were accompanied by a few detours along the way. However, while each profession we recognise today followed its own course in its own time, all professions pass through the same four general stages of evolution.

As we look ahead to the future of executive search, we can mark our progress by measuring it against the evolution of other professions.

Stage One: Chaos and Charlatans

Everyone has to start somewhere. And the dawn of any new practical profession is generally marked by at least a few charlatans and a fair bit of chaos.

The medical profession now grounded in science and ethics began from a nasty bit of business based in neither. In the Dark Ages, the local barber not only shaved chins, he pulled teeth, amputated limbs and administered a variety of treatments that often left his customers worse for wear. Barbers began their bloodier work as assistants to monks and priests. When the church banned clergy from medical practices in 1163, the barbers continued the bloodletting tradition (often at village fairs).

Today's Chartered Accountants and CPAs can trace their own roots back 10,000 years to when people counted their wealth by pressing sticks into wet clay. Formal accounting arrived

in 1494, with the publication of a practical mathematics book by a Franciscan friar named Luca Pacioli. The book introduced double entry bookkeeping and said that all businesses needed three things for success: access to cash, an updated accounting system and a good bookkeeper. Little changed until the Industrial Revolution when accounting advanced from recordkeeping to become a strategic tool to document data.

Executive search is much more recent, dating back to just after World War II. At that time, Sid Boyden left his job as a management consultant to set up shop in New York, effectively creating the world's first executive recruiting firm. Originally operating from a balcony of the Roosevelt Hotel (where he met with clients and interviewed candidates via the discreet phone booths), Mr Boyden laid the groundwork for a new industry, giving rise to more than 5,000 search firms today. While Mr Boyden brought the standards, techniques and ethics from his management consulting career, not everyone who followed him into search was as scrupulous. Even today, practices such as bribery and lying to candidates and clients occasionally occur, while 'pretexting' for information, lobbying-in unqualified candidates and non-delivery are all too commonplace.

Stage Two: founding a trade organisation

The next phase of evolution is the attempt to establish some form of order within the chaos.

This usually takes the form of a trade organisation created to define the process, standards and training for the nascent profession.

The first trade organisation for barbers was founded in London in 1308, called 'The Worshipful Order of Barbers,' and Richard the Barber was elected to keep order among his peers. The position came with authority from the mayor to "make diligent search through the whole of his craft every month, and if he shall find any brothel keeper or other disreputable folk to the scandal of the craft, he shall detain them and cause them to be brought before the chamber." Sixty years later, London surgeons formed the Guild of Surgeons; although the Barbers Guild was still given some supervision over the surgeons.

In the financial profession, by the mid-1800s, accountants were thriving in Britain. When investments began to flow into the New World, accountants soon followed. In 1887, 31 accountants formed what would later become the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA). Ten years later they created the standard test for 'Certified Public Accountants.' Meanwhile, across the pond, select British accountants were designated 'Chartered Accountants.'

While these other professions have typically taken centuries to establish trade organisations to aid their development, the search industry – founded in the modern era of national and global communication – is thankfully moving much more quickly. The Association of Executive Search Consultants (AESC) was originally founded in 1959



Headhunters, barbers and bean counters:

and has since evolved into a global organisation with membership of more than 270 firms. However, membership is not mandatory to practice search as a profession so there is little authority to enforce the standards, since only 5 percent of search firms are AESC members.

Stage Three: required standards

Once the standards of a profession have been determined and established among its members, the next step is the enforcement of those standards through required qualifications and consequences for defying the rules.

By the end of the 15th century, the Barbers Guild and the Surgeons Guild had settled some differences and agreed to work together. They established rules for surgery in the city, and granted the first English diploma in surgery. Working together, they also identified miscreants and fined them for their bad behaviour. In addition to fines, they had authority to send serious or persistent offenders to the city authorities for judgement and punishment. In 1540 the guilds merged into one – The Worshipful Company of Barber-Surgeons. Once again, the functions of barbers and surgeons were separated and neither was permitted to perform the work of the other.

Ultimately, with the advancement of medicine and growth in their numbers, the surgeons petitioned the House of Commons to be separated from the barbers. Their request was granted. The barbers got to keep the hall and most of its treasures, but the surgeons got a recognised profession, ultimately forming the Royal College of Surgeons of England.

The next milestone for the accounting profession came during the Great Depression.

Investors wanted to know how corporate giants that had just posted large profits could suddenly go belly-up. The answer shocked everyone, and shattered public faith in the stock market, and in accountants. Court cases revealed that there were no rules, just generally accepted practices – practices that were accepted because most accountants routinely did certain things to make corporate management happy.

Somehow, the profession escaped government takeover – no mean feat in the sweeping intervention of the New Deal era. But it was clear that change was needed, so the AICPA created its own rule-making body, the Committee on Accounting Procedure. They accepted government licensure. And they limited auditing financial statements to CPAs only – and made the CPAs personally liable for audit reports. At the same time, the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) began requiring audit reports for all publicly traded companies. Since then, the AICPA has continually updated its rules and organisation. Additionally, in this global economy, The International Accounting Standards Commission in Britain now serves as the rule-making authority for international accounting.

At the present time, there are no industry-wide rules and practices for executive search. And the only recourse against members of the industry for bad acts is found in the civil courts system.

In the absence of a governing body with the force of authority, it is incumbent upon search firms to do what is necessary within our own offices to define search as a noble profession. We're answering that challenge by establishing a certification programme for Boyden associates around the world. Every new associate must complete the certification programme in his or her first year to continue as a Boyden

professional. The AESC offers a certification programme for members, but does not require it.


Stage Four: public acceptance

After sorting out the chaos and establishing standards and qualifications, the next stage of an emerging profession is widespread acceptance by the public. Today, none of us would engage a doctor who lacked the credentials from his/her profession. In the UK, we look not only for licensure, but membership in the Royal College and board certification in the doctor's practice speciality.

Likewise, we not only look for the CPA or Chartered Accountant for our own needs, we rely on the designation as a measure of auditor competency when reviewing financials.

Executive search does not enjoy this degree of acceptance. The public does not easily grasp the value of a professional recruiter for their own prospects or as a contributor to the health of a company.

As a profession, even an aspiring one, we must do better at both defining quality and achieving it. We have a lot of work to do to create the respect our profession deserves. That kind of respect and acceptance isn't given, it's earned through clear definitions of consistently high standards and demonstrated value.

Even the fiercest rivals within our industry share a common interest in driving the search business forward into a true profession. The truth is, before we ever sell against each other, we must first sell our profession as a trusted, respected profession our clients can rely on to find the men and women who will lead and collectively drive world economies. 

**For further information, please call
+1 914 747 0093
or visit www.boyden.com**



the evolution of a profession