

Should you let AI find your next CEO?

By [Dudu Mbatha](#)

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AI is playing an important role in modernising recruitment. It is efficient at analysing data to match candidates' skills and experience to the role's requirements. It can perform initial screening and assessment of candidates and identify trends from a large cohort of applications. AI can also automate logistics such as interview scheduling, inadvertently streamlining the process even further.



Image source: dolgachov – [123RF.com](#)

But can it take over the executive search function?

No, and there is a logical reason for this: recruitment is fundamentally a very human process.

Executive search consultants bring multiple skills and years of experience to the business of sourcing and placing the right candidate that is currently irreplaceable by AI. Successful placement at C-suite and management level, especially in high risk turn-around positions, requires a human touch that builds confidence and trust among the economy's leading private and public organisations.

AI can perform many useful tasks. It can sum up the results of automated screening and assessments and is useful in mapping human capability, analysing digital footprints and handling tools to eliminate bias. However, it doesn't have the ability to accurately interpret results because it lacks human judgment.

Insight, intuition and EQ

Executive search requires the ability to see and understand nuance and this comes from insight into human dynamics. AI has many useful qualities but the subtlety, intuition and emotional intelligence required in executive search aren't among them.

Beyond these obvious aspects of executive search, consultants are excellent networkers who build relationships with both candidates and clients over time. They understand the culture of the client company and can cultivate a deep understanding of the client's business imperatives and values.

Equally, knowing the leadership style of their candidates and understanding their character enables the consultant to ensure that values will be aligned. They can also match the long-term goals of both parties, resulting in the enduring success that comes from skilful placement.



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Necessary negotiation skills

Recruitment is a process that requires a high degree of discretion and tact. Search consultants routinely act with sensitivity and AI just can't offer the level of diplomacy that is usually involved in the process. It takes a sensitive approach to communicate areas of development to candidates, just as it does to suggest improvements clients could make to attract the calibre of people they ask for.

Executive search often requires persuasion. Consultants are able to approach passive candidates who may not have been planning to move until the consultant recognises the perfect position for them. Presenting a career opportunity to a passive candidate takes influence and emotional intelligence, both of which are human qualities.

Persuasion is also crucial in the negotiation and closing process. Making a closing offer to a candidate can be time-consuming and emotionally charged. It takes a skilled negotiator to manage the complexity of this process to the satisfaction of both client and candidate.

Diversity, equity and inclusion

Other important considerations in the hiring process are diversity and inclusion, particularly in a country like South Africa where requirements are mandated by law. The complexity involved in B-BBEE is best managed with human input and oversight.

AI has a role to play in executive search and, used correctly, liberates people from routine tasks, enabling them to increase their productivity and output. However, it lacks the interpersonal prowess to foster and sustain long-term relationships. It cannot establish trust, draw on personal experience, offer tailored advice, or negotiate effectively for its clients.

Executive search is an all-encompassing end-to-end process. While there is compatibility between executive search and AI, it requires multifaceted decision-making and there is no proxy for the wisdom and humanity required of a seasoned

consultant.

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