



NAZLIA PEER
ASKED ANNE
PRATT WHAT
SHE LOOKS
FOR WHEN
INTERVIEWING
WOMEN FOR
TOP EXECUTIVE
POSITIONS

Heart-to-heart with a

headhunter

Top executives often view a recessionary economic environment as rich in opportunity. Anne Pratt, Director of Memela Pratt & Associates, is no exception. 'Senior management appointments are critical in recessionary times. Mediocrity gets retrenched and there is greater demand for top performers. It's easier to attract talent than in good times when people are highly incentivised,' she says.

As a leading executive placement professional, Pratt has the inside track on moving up during a downturn: she knows where to find the best candidates and, beyond the 'informal referencing' undertaken to determine candidates' reputations for performance, also knows how to assess them for the position.

'Up front I look for energy or "pep", aura, drive and a professional demeanour. How does someone conduct herself with our research team? How does she speak on the phone? Is she true to her word? Does she send in information on time or contact us to renegotiate if she can't?' Her CV must be performance-based and achievements quantified with timelines, sizes of budgets and detail regarding the teams the individual managed.

'It's also really important that candidates research the organisation ahead of time. They should have looked at the company's profile and financial results, and spoken to its employees and business partners.' This should enable a candidate to ask strategic questions about

the company. 'The initiative applicants take is a good indicator. In the interview I look at what the candidate focuses on. Does she focus on her strategic contribution to her organisation as opposed to being generic?'

Pratt's high expectations of candidates are not all that surprising when one considers the story of her own first interview. Aged 22, she set her sights on being one of three graduates out of 600 applicants to join Lever Brothers, the leading subsidiary within the marketing giant Unilever. 'The HR director who had flown in from London was interviewing three students at a time. I realised he was under pressure and said, "Don't stress, I'm not in a hurry." I moved to the back of the queue and ended up being interviewed alone, getting three times the attention.'

To prepare, she had researched Unilever's brands, and spoken to the marketing director and advertising agencies. In the interview she related her findings back to the core principles of marketing. The HR director had little alternative but to welcome the candidate who had distinguished herself albeit, according to him, a little 'bombastically'.

Memela Pratt & Associates is active across SA industries, notably information and communication technology, financial services, retail and manufacturing, state-owned enterprises and government. The firm is currently working on recruiting a replacement for former Transnet CEO Maria Ramos; last year they placed the CFO and CEO

of the National Housing Development Agency, and prior to that placed CEOs of MTN South Africa and MTN Africa at critical stages in the company's development. Pratt gives MTN and Coca-Cola high marks for their commitment to quality hiring practices. They are known to treat job applicants with etiquette and courtesy. (Companies at times offer company information and product samples as thank-yous.) In Pratt's book that's marketing you can't buy.

And just as the best brands never stop marketing themselves, so must the best talent. Those vying for senior positions should be proactive in enhancing their personal brand, says Pratt. 'Talented people should look beyond their industry or improve their qualifications. Invest in yourself to position yourself better for the good times. Ask what gaps in your experience and competence you can fill.'

One of the South Africa's top headhunters, Anne Pratt has come a long way since that Lever Brothers interview. 'What I enjoy most is being able to facilitate a potential marriage between an individual and an organisation,' she says. 'I get a real kick out of placing people who are competent, a good fit with the organisation, have integrity and will add value. These are the people who are fuelling South Africa's economy.' ■

Since we interviewed Anne Pratt for this article she was announced as one of the finalists in the Business Woman of the Year Awards. Read more on page 19.

THE HEADHUNTER'S GUIDE TO LANDING A TOP JOB

Your CV should read like an executive summary. It must be succinct, focused and include the critical information.

Be naturally impressive – one can feel the presence of people with healthy self-esteem and inner confidence. It's in how they smile and shake hands, and in their politeness.

How to approach an interview – walk in with an intention to learn from the experience and enjoy it.

Look Sharp – contemplate your own brand image and 'packaging'. Be modern and progressive for your sector. If necessary consult an image consultant.

Body Language – be open, sit upright, smile and relax.

Prepare – preparation builds confidence and relaxes you. Senior-executive interviewers are busy people so be persuasive and to the point.

Be honest – never falsify information. If a degree is incomplete say so. If you left a job shortly after joining or have gaps in employment admit it.

Absolute no-nos – poor communication skills, being poorly prepared, arriving late, lacking confidence and composure, being defensive.