



Kevin R. O'Neill

EDITORS' NOTE Kevin O'Neill is the founder and managing partner of Acertitude, a top-tier executive search firm and talent consultancy. His quest is to revolutionize the global executive search industry, and unleash the human potential of today's leading organizations. O'Neill has an extensive 25-year career as a trusted leadership consultant to C-level executives and boards, having led executive search engagements for notable companies globally. The launch of Acertitude builds on his leadership of O'Neill Consulting Group, which he founded in 1996, and which continues to thrive under his strategy. O'Neill spent his early career in client management roles with investment banks Merrill Lynch and Kidder, Peabody & Co, and a major search firm in Philadelphia. He earned a B.A. in Political Science from Marietta College.

COMPANY BRIEF Acertitude (acertitude.com) traces its origins to a fortuitous meeting between its founders Kevin O'Neill and Rick DeRose. They felt the executive search industry had lost its way, with larger firms increasingly inclined to favor shareholder interests over those of their clients. Believing that clients deserved better, and that the market would reward better, they set out to create a new firm that would always keep client needs front and center. Acertitude represents a new chapter in the evolution of executive search. The firm is transforming standard recruitment models by focusing on original, tailored research, data-driven selection processes, an expanded view to integration, and a consultant compensation system that ties rewards to client satisfaction. The result is a differentiated approach that is dramatically improving hiring outcomes, client experience, execution speed, and candidate care.

What was the vision behind the formation of Acertitude?

Acertitude started with listening. While I was running O'Neill Consulting Group, I was introduced to Rick DeRose, the founder of Technology Executive Group. Rick and I were

Reimagining Executive Search

An Interview with Kevin R. O'Neill,
Founder and Managing Partner, Acertitude

likeminded in the way we managed our businesses and client relationships, and shared similar views on how to address the weak points that we saw and heard about in our industry. For years, we had heard clients and candidates share negative experiences about working with some larger firms, saying they're slow, expensive, and don't produce satisfying results. We felt clients were being underserved. We saw a significant market opportunity for a new brand to come in and challenge the status quo. Our aim is to be that challenger brand by focusing on the client above all else. We both wanted to stretch the boundaries of what's possible for our clients, and the search industry, so we joined together to form Acertitude.

I think our clients would agree that we do things differently. Just as Acertitude started with listening to the market, our engagements start with listening to the client. We connect more intimately, get to know their story and their corporate culture, ask the hard questions, and meet in person to build relationships. We have always gotten to know clients well, so we could better serve them.

What else, besides listening, differentiates Acertitude from some of the larger firms? How do you compete?

It can be tough to compete – unless you have a compelling message, and Acertitude has one.

Clients want competence, certainly. But they also look to us for real understanding and personal focus. They know that combination is critical to getting quicker and better search results.

The business landscape is constantly evolving, and some firms aren't able to pivot particularly well. There has been a shift in mindset from some of the larger firms because of their perceived lack of nimbleness, bureaucratic approach, and pre-packaged offerings that don't cater specifically to a company's need. Today's executives are looking at things differently.

There is rigor around selecting an executive search firm. Our pitch process is not just providing a list of the hundreds of searches we've done; it's demonstrating metrics that matter and how we will approach a client's individual need. The experience is much more collaborative than ever before. I view my role as the client's partner working to precisely define the position and candidate profile, and then remove obstacles from my team so they can

be effective in bringing us the executive we're looking to attract.

As a result, clients are more willing to consider a challenger brand like us for critical assignments. The world is speeding up, not slowing down – and so are we. The average time to completion in the industry is around 150 days; our average is less than 90 days.

That said, our work isn't really over once we find the right candidate. We continue to check in with the client and candidate at set intervals in the first 90 days, which is a critical time for success or failure. Only by communicating, by listening, can we ensure it's a lasting and mutually advantageous fit. We also survey both parties to see how we can continuously improve the entire process. The business landscape will continue to evolve at this breakneck speed. If we're not constantly communicating with different clients and candidates and adapting our work, we'll lose our relevancy.

With what types of clients do you work?

We don't try to be all things to all people. But we know the importance and value of being the right thing to the right people.

We work with organizations in a range of industries, spanning industrial, consumer, technology, professional services, telecommunications, life sciences, and supply chain/logistics. We also have a very strong team focused on private equity, which touches a lot of the work that we do. We frequently partner with portfolio companies in high-growth, M&A, and turnaround situations.

Our team also offers a deep understanding of the dynamics shaping executive leadership selection in horizontals such as CEO, CFO, CIO, board, and top HR executives, for example. Our goal is building leading verticals in the digital and cyberspace worlds, where clients increasingly face big talent gaps.

How important will it be to not lose your edge as you grow?

We're looking to grow, but in the right ways.

We don't want to be a billion-dollar revenue firm. Our goal is to become the \$100-million revenue firm of choice with meaningful depth and capability in markets, verticals, and functions that are relevant to the executive search market.

Frankly, if we get a lot bigger than that, we run into issues. To show the best talent, we can't be confined by off-limits, and that is often

the elephant in the room when hiring a Big 5 firm. We will never be a public company. The shareholders will never be at the top of the pyramid of those we have to satisfy. Clients have and always will come first.

Is your focus primarily the U.S. market?

Our focus is on markets where we can apply our search approach. International is very important for us. We currently have small offices in London and Shanghai and work globally. We're doing a fair amount of work in the U.K., Germany, and across Europe. We have historically done interesting work in Asia.

Our aim is to have scale in the places where hiring and search decisions are made. Somewhere between 40 and 50 percent of the global search business originates in the U.S., so it's important to capitalize upon the market we're in at present.

What are the keys to a successful search?

Companies don't hire resumes. They hire people. We always remember that.

At Acertitude, we don't view success as filling seats. We deliver the highest quality candidates because we focus on recruiting talent who meet expectations well beyond the initial placement – people who are engaged, stay with a client, and move the needle.

Success begins with the up-front time spent with the client. We listen closely and spend time with clients face-to-face to align around the type of person they're looking to hire. While people are a sum total of the good and bad decisions they have made in their lives, resumes only tend to present the good ones. Our fiduciary responsibility to clients is to peel back each candidate's personal pitch and really understand who they are as a person.

We use and are certified in a unique hiring methodology called Topgrading, which came out of GE. The behavioral-based interview process and its series of "truth serums" allow us to get a more holistic, authentic view of candidates. For example, every interview starts by asking candidates to agree to arrange reference calls with the people we select from their background – not the people they select. For an

added level of insight, we also use a certified psychometric test to measure each individual's intellectual capability and behavioral style.

It seems like culture is a chiefly important element of your search.

Culture is one of the most talked about things in every meeting I attend. Every organization is like a family. There is something about certain organizations that attracts a particular type of person, or makes some candidates more likely to thrive in their environment.

When a candidate aligns with a client's culture, they are more likely to be brilliant at work. They'll likely invest more in the position – making a positive impact, taking on leadership roles, and staying longer, and they're more likely get something out of the opportunity, to be recognized for achievements, feel secure and, ultimately, attract even more A Players.

In order for us to do great work for our clients, we have to understand their culture in depth. The typical assessment of a candidate falls into three buckets: there is can-do, which is the resume; there is will-do, which is if they've been in the right sort of environment, and if this is the right sort of role at this point in their lives; and there's fit, which says in essence, if one gets on a flight at JFK to LAX and one's colleague is traveling with them, do they look forward to that ride or would they move back 10 seats?

How important is it to have that C-suite access?

One of our most important roles in any search is to assure alignment of all stakeholder interests.

We work exceptionally hard to make sure we understand everything we need to know about the client to deliver the best possible search results, quickly and efficiently. That means working across different organizational levels and learning all the different perspectives on what success will look like. In the process, we shorten the search time when we know all the people involved in candidate selection.

Is it harder to fill the roles that are out there today?

Finding resumes is easy. Finding the right person isn't.

It's not hard to find anyone in this connected world, especially with the advent of LinkedIn and social media. However, great search is not just finding – it's about connecting with people in a meaningful way to develop a peer-to-peer relationship where we can be a coach and adviser. We can then help an individual think through the next logical step in their career to help them fulfill their goals.

We develop a relationship first and foremost with a potential candidate before we begin talking about any job prospects. At any time, we're working on a number of opportunities, several of which could be of interest to the candidates we talk to. The challenge is less about identifying potential candidates, but about dislodging the best ones to join our clients.

How important is it to have diverse choices when clients are looking to build these diverse cultures?

Enormously important. Our clients want the best possible talent, and they know diversity expands that talent pool tremendously.

The magic happens when you combine competence and capability with cultural fit.

We're looking for diversity – of thinking, gender, race, and other considerations – to really show our clients the true market that exists for them so they can make the best decisions. Our clients really have a significant commitment to hiring the best possible talent and encouraging diverse candidates to participate in these processes.

What about your own talent? What do you look for in the talent you need to build this firm?

Competence, capabilities, and cultural fit. We're only looking for A Players, who possess a mix of relevant expertise and professionalism. We attract very talented, proven search professionals. But we also have had a lot of success in attracting people who have held executive roles outside of the search industry. They bring a valuable insider/outsider perspective, add credibility, and can have conversations with clients that are much more consultative in nature versus transactional.

The magic happens when you combine competence and capability with cultural fit. Acertitude is, above all, a can-do culture. We are about driving results. We're high energy, focused people who thrive in a collaborative environment. We're engaged, curious, and smart, with a service ethic second to none. We are on the front of our feet. We're not slow and bureaucratic.

Everything we're doing is getting away from transaction. Our philosophy here is "clients for life." We are, as a firm, all about how we can be of service.

Did you always have an entrepreneurial spirit?

In some ways, this is all beyond my wildest dreams and in some ways, it's just beginning.

I've had a life with ups and downs. Did I ever believe I would be doing what I'm doing now and being honored by incredibly smart and committed clients who are making a meaningful impact on the world? No. I'm a kid from a small town in Rhode Island, and I wasn't raised in a business culture. But I did have some uncles that were entrepreneurs and there was something about them that interested me. They had a great sense of confidence and it was born out of starting with little and building from there. ●

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