

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE TABLE

What the Candidate Thinks

A field guide to what's really going through the candidate's mind, before, during, and after the search.

How to read the process from the other side of the table, and know what a good one actually feels like.

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What the Candidate Thinks

A field guide for candidates who want to see their own thinking clearly, and hiring managers who want to understand what is actually happening on the other side of the table.

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AUDIENCE

Candidates at the executive level, and the hiring managers and boards evaluating them.

Both sides are performing certainty neither one fully has.

In twenty-seven years of executive search, I have sat in thousands of interviews, on both sides of the table. What I have learned is unglamorous and it does not change. The hiring manager is not as confident as they look, and the candidate is not as calm as they look. Both are performing a version of certainty they do not fully feel, and both spend the conversation quietly reading the other person for what is real underneath it.

I wrote this guide, and its companion for hiring managers, because most of what goes wrong in a search happens in that gap. Not in the resume. Not in the compensation math. In the space between what each side is actually thinking and what each side is willing to say out loud.

A search only works when three things are true at once. It has to feel good. You have to feel accomplished, not simply processed. And somewhere in it, both sides have to feel the love, meaning you believe the company genuinely wants you, not just needs a seat filled. Remove any one of those three and the deal tends to fall apart, even when the numbers are right. I have watched it happen too many times to call it a coincidence.

I will also say this plainly, because I would rather be honest than sound like a firm's brochure. Luck and timing matter. Some of the best placements I have ever made were also fortunate ones. The right person happened to be unhappy at the right moment. That does not make the discipline pointless. It means the discipline is what you control, and luck is what you do not, and confusing the two is how a good process convinces itself it failed when the truth is simpler.

This guide is written for the candidate. I would ask you to read the hiring manager's version too. Understanding what is actually going through the other person's mind is the fastest way to stop performing at each other and start talking, and it is the difference between a search that happens to you and one you actually run.

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Managing Director, ZRG Partners

How to Use This Guide

Read it before your next real conversation starts. Come back to it before you sign.

This guide follows the arc of a single search, from the candidate's chair. Part One covers what you are actually thinking before you agree to a first conversation. Part Two covers the interviews themselves, including the parts you will not say out loud. Part Three covers the offer and the moment you actually decide. Part Four covers what happens after you say yes, because the process is not over the day you sign.

Read it straight through before your next search begins, whether you are actively looking or a recruiter just called out of nowhere. After that, use it like a mirror. Open Part One the moment a conversation starts. Open Part Three the week an offer is coming. Open Part Four in your first ninety days, especially if something feels off and you are not sure whether that is normal.

If you have a coach, a mentor, or a spouse who is part of this decision with you, hand them Part Two and Part Three. Most of the doubt candidates carry through a search is not really about the company. It is a private worry they have not said out loud to the people who could actually help them think it through.

★ ONE THING

If you read nothing else, read this.

The hiring manager and the candidate are having the same private experience at the same time: hope mixed with self-doubt, and neither one wants to admit it first. The candidates who do best are usually the ones willing to be a little more honest, a little sooner, than the process requires.

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THE SHAPE OF A SEARCH

The Arc of a Search, From Your Chair

Four stages. At every one of them, you are thinking something you are not saying out loud, and so is the hiring manager. This is the shape the rest of this guide follows.

01 · BEFORE

The First Call

You do not have to be actively looking to be honestly curious. The call is deciding whether to take the next call, not whether to take the job.

02 · DURING

The Interviews

You are evaluating trust and fit before you are evaluating the role on paper, and the hiring manager is auditioning back, whether they realize it or not.

03 · THE OFFER

The Decision

The moment you actually decide rarely matches the spreadsheet. It is usually one specific memory you have not examined closely.

04 · AFTER

The First 90 Days

Signing was not the finish line. It was the start of a different test, whether the company you were pitched is the company you experience.

PART ONE

Before

What you are thinking before you even take the call.

“The recruiter's first email always sounds more exciting than the role turns out to be. Your job is to find out which parts were true.”

What You're Actually Thinking Before You Take the Call

Even candidates who are not looking are looking a little.

The candidates I have recruited over twenty-seven years fall into two groups who describe themselves very differently and think almost identically: the ones who say they are not looking, and the ones who say they are actively searching. Scratch the surface of "I'm not looking" and there is almost always a version of the same quiet arithmetic running in the background: am I still growing here, does anyone above me actually see my ceiling, and what would it take for me to leave.

That arithmetic is not disloyalty. It is what any thoughtful person does with their career, whether or not they act on it. What changes when a recruiter calls is not the thinking. It is that the thinking suddenly has somewhere to go.

What candidates rarely say out loud in a first call, but are almost always feeling: a mix of flattery and suspicion. Flattery, because being sought out feels good and most people do not hear it often enough at the senior level. Suspicion, because executive candidates have usually been burned once by a role that was oversold, and they are quietly checking whether this is another one.

"You do not have to be actively job hunting to be honestly curious."

What is actually being decided in that first fifteen minutes.

Not whether to take the job. Whether to take the next call. You are deciding if the person on the other end of the phone is worth trusting with more of your time and, eventually, more of your honesty about what you actually want.

◆ REFLECTION

Before the first call.

What would have to be true about a new role for you to seriously consider leaving right now? If you cannot answer that in one sentence, you are not ready for the conversation yet, and that is fine to say to the recruiter directly.

A COMPOSITE SCENE, DRAWN FROM PATTERN

A recruiter calls someone who has been at the same company for six years, comfortable, well regarded, not looking. The first answer is automatic: "I'm honestly not in the market right now." Ten minutes later, without quite noticing the shift, the same person is asking detailed questions about scope and reporting lines.

Nothing about their situation changed in those ten minutes. What changed is that the thinking they had been doing privately for months finally had somewhere to go. That is not disloyalty. It is just what happens when curiosity is given permission to speak.

★ ONE THING

Curiosity does not require a job search.

You do not have to be actively job hunting to be honestly curious. The candidates who navigate a search well are the ones who admit that curiosity to themselves early, instead of discovering it three interviews in and feeling caught off guard by their own interest.

The Trade-Off You Haven't Said Out Loud

Every candidate has a real number and a real reason. Most keep both private for too long.

Somewhere behind every candidate's search sits a number, or a set of circumstances, that they have not said out loud to the recruiter, and sometimes not fully admitted to themselves. What compensation actually needs to look like to make a move worth the risk to their family. Whether they are searching because they want to grow or because they are quietly unhappy and would rather not say that part yet. A geography constraint they are hoping will resolve itself rather than naming upfront.

"Every candidate has a real number and a real reason. Keeping them private does not protect you."

This is not usually dishonesty either. It is the same discomfort hiring managers carry, from the other chair. Naming a real number early feels like showing your hand. Naming the real reason you are looking feels like admitting something uncomfortable about your current situation. So candidates hold the real constraint privately and hope the process finds its way around it.

The cost is predictable and I have watched it play out often. A candidate goes three rounds deep into a process that was never going to clear their real number, and the eventual no feels personal when it was actually just math that could have been resolved in week one.

What I have seen work.

The candidates who get the best outcomes say the trade-off out loud early, to their recruiter at minimum. "Here is the number that actually moves me. Here is the part of my situation you should know now, not in week six." It costs a moment of vulnerability. It saves weeks of a process that was never going to land the way it looked like it might.

► PRO TIP

Name your ceiling before the first real interview.

Write down the one thing you are least comfortable saying out loud: a number, a reason you are looking, a constraint on location or timing. If you cannot write it down, you have not finished being honest with yourself about what you actually need.

★ ONE THING

A private ceiling does not protect you.

Every candidate has a real number and a real reason. Keeping them private does not protect you. It just moves the disappointment further into the process, to a point where it costs you more time and more hope.

Before You Take the Call

Fill this out honestly and privately before your next real conversation with a recruiter or a hiring manager. Its only job is to finish the thinking the excitement of being sought out will not do for you.

Rate where you actually stand, honestly, one to five.

I could say in one sentence what would have to be true for me to seriously consider leaving.	1	2	3	4	5
I have named, at least to myself, the real number or the real reason I would move.	1	2	3	4	5
I am being honest with myself about whether I am curious or just flattered.	1	2	3	4	5

Before the first real conversation, confirm you have:

- ☐ Written down what would have to be true about a new role for you to seriously consider it
- ☐ Named the number that actually moves you, even privately
- ☐ Identified the part of your situation the recruiter should know now, not in week six
- ☐ Decided what you are and are not willing to say out loud in a first call

A couple of honest questions, for you alone.

The real reason I would consider leaving, the version I have not said out loud, is:

What is making me hesitate to be fully honest with the recruiter right now is:

PART TWO

During

What is actually going through your mind in the interview room.

“You are not only being interviewed. You are auditioning the company, whether they realize it or not.”

What You're Really Evaluating in the Room

The job description said one thing. The room tells you something else, and the room usually wins.

Most candidates believe they are being evaluated and forget that evaluation runs both directions. What they are actually doing, often without naming it consciously, is running a faster and more instinctive calculation of their own: would I trust this person as my manager, does this team seem like people I would want to solve hard problems with, and does the energy in this room match the story I was told before I walked in.

“You evaluate trust and fit before you are evaluating the role on paper, whether you admit it or not.”

This instinct is not naive. It is frequently more accurate than the formal question and answer, because it is reading things the company cannot fully script: how the interviewer treats the receptionist, whether people seem rushed or present, whether the hiring manager actually listens to the answer or is already thinking about the next question.

The question underneath your questions.

Beneath every question a strong candidate asks, they are really asking one thing: will taking this job make my life better or harder in a year. A hiring manager who senses that question, and answers it honestly instead of defensively, earns real trust fast. One who answers only the literal question, and dodges the real one, tells the candidate something true about what working there will be like.

What you ask	What you are actually trying to learn
"What does success look like in the first year?"	Has anyone actually thought this through, or am I walking into ambiguity?
"Why is this role open?"	Am I inheriting a mess, a growth opportunity, or someone's unfinished business?
"How does the team handle disagreement?"	Will I be managed with respect when I push back?

That last question matters more than most candidates realize to ask directly. The answer, and more importantly the hesitation before the answer, tells you more about the culture than any values statement on the careers page.

► PRO TIP

Notice what you are actually reacting to.

After a strong interview, write down the specific moment that changed your mind, not your overall impression. If you cannot name a specific moment, you liked them, which is not the same as having real evidence you would thrive there.

★ ONE THING

You evaluate trust before you evaluate the role on paper.

You are evaluating trust and fit before you are evaluating the role on paper, whether you admit it or not. Do not talk yourself out of that instinct. Build evidence for it or against it, on purpose, instead of ignoring it.

The Signal You're Sending Without Meaning To

The hiring manager is reading you as carefully as you are reading them.

Every candidate I have coached wants to believe the interview is where they get evaluated and the offer is where they finally get to negotiate from strength. In practice, you are being read constantly, and so is every signal you send without meaning to.

"You are not only being interviewed. You are auditioning the company as a place to spend years of your life."

A candidate who is vague about why they are leaving their current role signals something the hiring manager will quietly worry about, even if they never ask directly. A candidate who asks sharp, specific questions about the actual work signals seriousness that stands out immediately against candidates asking generic questions they could have asked about any job at any company.

What hiring managers remember.

Hiring managers rarely remember your exact answers. They remember whether you seemed genuinely interested in this role or interested in a role, whether you were prepared or coasting on your resume, and whether a hard question made you defensive or made you thoughtful. That impression travels through a panel faster than any individual answer does.

THE SCRIPT

A better way to answer "why are you leaving?"

"I've grown a lot in my current role, and I'm at the point where the next real stretch for me looks like what you're describing here, specifically the scope and the stage of the business." Specific and forward looking beats vague and diplomatic. Hiring managers relax when a candidate is direct about what they are moving toward, not just what they are moving away from.

A COMPOSITE SCENE, DRAWN FROM PATTERN

A candidate is asked why they are leaving their current role and gives the safe answer: “looking for new challenges.” The hiring manager nods, writes nothing down, and privately files it as a small yellow flag, not disqualifying, just vague.

In a later round, a different candidate answers the same question with specifics: the scope they have outgrown, the exact stretch this role represents. The hiring manager leans forward. Nothing else about the two candidates was different that day. The second one simply decided vulnerability was worth more than polish.

★ ONE THING

You are auditioning the company too.

You are not only being interviewed. You are auditioning the company as a place to spend years of your life. The best candidates treat both jobs as equally real, and it shows in the questions they ask.

Before Your Next Round of Interviews

Use this before you walk into the next round. Most doubt candidates carry through a search is a private worry they have not said out loud to anyone who could help them think it through.

Rate your last interview, honestly, one to five.

I could name the specific moment that changed my mind about this company, not just my overall impression.

1 2 3 4 5

I asked the questions that actually mattered to me, not just the safe ones.

1 2 3 4 5

The energy in the room matched the story I was told before I walked in.

1 2 3 4 5

Before your next interview, confirm you have:

- ☐ Written the three questions whose answers would actually change your decision
- ☐ Decided how you will answer "why are you leaving" specifically, not diplomatically
- ☐ Noticed whether the hiring manager listens or is already thinking about the next question
- ☐ Written down what you are watching for beyond the literal answers

A couple of honest questions, for you alone.

The specific moment that changed my mind about this company, for better or worse, was:

The question I am afraid to ask directly, and why, is:

PART THREE

The Offer and the Decision

What "well run" actually means, and the moment you decide.

"The right offer at the wrong company is still the wrong offer."

Is This Process Well Run?

You are allowed to evaluate the company by how they ran the search, not just by what they offer you.

Candidates often treat the interview process as something that happens to them, a series of hoops to clear on the way to an offer. It is more useful, and more accurate, to treat the process itself as the single best piece of evidence you will get about what it is actually like to work there.

“A company that cannot run a search with basic discipline is showing you, in advance and for free, how it is likely to run everything else.”

A well run process has a few honest markers, and you are allowed to notice all of them. You know what stage you are in. You are told roughly when you will hear something next, and you hear it on time, or someone tells you honestly why not. Feedback moves in both directions, meaning you get real signal, not silence, if you are no longer being considered.

What a slow, vague process is actually telling you.

Every unexplained delay, every rescheduled interview, every non-answer to "what is the timeline" is data, not an accident. Companies that are disciplined about how they hire tend to be disciplined about how they operate. Companies that let a search drift for months without explanation are showing you, honestly and for free, something about how decisions get made there.

Symptom	What it might actually be telling you
Interview rescheduled twice with no real explanation	Priorities shift here without much regard for other people's time
Long silence after the final round	Either nobody owns this decision internally, or you were not the priority you were told
Cannot give a straight answer on team structure	The org is less settled than the pitch made it sound

◆ REFLECTION

Before you get too invested.

If a friend described this exact process happening to them, would you tell them it sounded well run? Your honest answer to that question is worth more than how excited you currently feel about the role.

★ ONE THING

You may judge a company by how it recruits you.

You are allowed to judge a company by how it recruits you, not only by what it offers you. A company that cannot run a search with basic discipline is showing you, in advance and for free, how it is likely to run everything else.

The Moment You Actually Decide

It is rarely the compensation number. It is usually a specific moment you cannot fully explain.

Candidates like to believe their decision comes down to a rational comparison: compensation, title, scope, commute. In my experience, the real decision usually crystallizes around one specific moment. Something a future manager said with unusual honesty. A hard question they answered without flinching. A moment in the process where the candidate thought, clearly and without hedging, I could actually see myself here.

“You will remember the moment, not the spreadsheet. Trust that memory, but make sure you gathered real evidence to remember.”

That moment deserves real weight. It is often the closest thing you have to direct evidence of how it will actually feel to work there, under pressure, in a disagreement, on an ordinary Tuesday rather than in a rehearsed interview. The comparison spreadsheet exists to make sure that feeling is not the only thing you are weighing. It should not replace it either.

What to do when the offer is right and the feeling is not.

This is the hardest version of the decision, and I have talked candidates through it more times than I can count. When the numbers are strong and something still feels off, trust the feeling enough to name it specifically before you dismiss it. Sometimes it resolves with one honest conversation. Sometimes it is the most important data point you have, and the spreadsheet was never going to catch it.

◆ REFLECTION

Before you say yes.

What is the specific moment that made you want this job? If you cannot name one, and you are saying yes mainly because the alternative is staying somewhere you have already decided to leave, that is worth noticing before you sign, not after.

A COMPOSITE SCENE, DRAWN FROM PATTERN

Two offers on the table, the numbers within a few percent of each other. The candidate keeps returning, uninvited, to one memory: a hiring manager who, asked a hard question about the team's recent struggles, answered it plainly instead of pivoting to a rehearsed strength.

The comparison spreadsheet said the roles were close to equal. The memory said otherwise, and the memory was the one that mattered when the deadline arrived.

★ ONE THING

Trust the memory. Make sure it earned that trust.

You will remember the moment, not the spreadsheet. Trust that memory, but make sure you gathered real evidence to remember, not just a good pitch you talked yourself into believing.

Before You Say Yes

Use this the week an offer is coming, or has just arrived. It takes ten minutes and it will tell you honestly whether this is a decision or a relief.

Rate this process, honestly, one to five.

This company kept every timing commitment it made to me, or clearly explained when it could not. 1 2 3 4 5

I can name the specific moment that made me want this job, not just the absence of red flags. 1 2 3 4 5

If a friend described this exact process happening to them, I would call it well run. 1 2 3 4 5

Before you sign, confirm you have:

- ☐ Named the specific moment that decided it for you, not just the overall impression
- ☐ Asked the hard question you have been avoiding, of yourself or of them
- ☐ Checked the offer against the number and the reason you named for yourself earlier
- ☐ Written down what you would tell a friend about how this company recruited you

A couple of honest questions, for you alone.

If I am saying yes mainly because the alternative is staying somewhere I have decided to leave, the honest reason is:

The part of this offer I am least certain about, and have not said out loud, is:

PART FOUR

After

The decision is not over the day you sign.

“The company that courted you for three months can lose you in the first three weeks, if you let the momentum of saying yes carry you past your own judgment.”

The First Ninety Days Are Still Your Interview

You accepted the offer. You have not yet confirmed it was the right one.

The moment a candidate signs, most people exhale and stop paying close attention, relieved the decision is finally made. That instinct is understandable and it costs you information you need. You have just made a significant bet, on this company, on a story you were told across several months of interviews. The first ninety days are where you find out if that story was true.

“Signing the offer was not the finish line. It was the start of a different test.”

I have watched strong candidates struggle in a new role not because they were the wrong hire, but because they stopped evaluating the moment they accepted the offer, and by the time something felt clearly wrong, they had already told everyone they knew about their exciting new job. Pay attention in the first ninety days with the same rigor you brought to the interviews. The company earned your trust in the process. It has to keep earning it now.

What the best candidates do differently.

They keep a private version of their own scorecard from the interview process and check it honestly at thirty, sixty, and ninety days. Does this match what I was told. They stay in touch with their network rather than going quiet the moment they start, not because they expect to need it, but because isolating yourself in a new role makes it harder to see your own situation clearly. And they ask their manager directly, more than once, whether their early priorities still match what was described in the interview.

► **PRO TIP**

Ask the question most new hires avoid.

At day thirty, ask yourself honestly: "Is this matching what I was told when I said yes?" Most people avoid a direct answer because they do not want to admit they might have made the wrong call. The ones who ask it early catch a bad fit before they have sunk a year into it.

A COMPOSITE SCENE, DRAWN FROM PATTERN

Week five in a new role. The scope has quietly narrowed from what was described in the final interview, nothing dramatic, just smaller than the pitch. The instinct is to wait it out, to not seem difficult so early.

When it finally comes up directly with the manager, the response is almost relief: "I didn't realize that wasn't clear, let's fix it." The gap had been open for five weeks. Closing it took one direct conversation that could have happened in week one.

★ ONE THING

Signing was not the finish line.

Signing the offer was not the finish line. It was the start of a different test: whether the company you were pitched is the company you actually experience. Trust what you see in the first ninety days as much as you trusted what you were told in the interviews.

The First Ninety Days, on Paper

Print this and check it at day thirty, sixty, and ninety. Signing the offer was not the finish line. This is where you find out if the story you were told was true.

Rate your first weeks, honestly, one to five.

What I am doing day to day matches what I was told in the interview process.	1	2	3	4	5
I have directly asked myself whether this is matching what I expected when I said yes.	1	2	3	4	5
I have stayed connected to my own network instead of going quiet the moment I started.	1	2	3	4	5

In the first two weeks, confirm you have:

- ☐ Written down what you were told to expect at 30, 60, and 90 days
- ☐ Asked your manager directly whether early priorities still match the interview process
- ☐ Kept at least one honest conversation going with someone outside the company
- ☐ Noted any gap between how you were treated as a candidate and how you are treated now

A couple of honest questions, for you alone.

The gap, if any, between what I was pitched and what I am experiencing is:

If I were advising a friend considering this same move today, I would tell them:

CLOSING

The Three Things It Takes (and the One You Can't Control)

FEEL GOOD You accept with genuine excitement, not quiet relief that the search is finally over.	FEEL ACCOMPLISHED The process itself earned your respect. Win or lose, you were treated like your time mattered.
FEEL THE LOVE You believe the company wanted you specifically, not just a seat that needed filling by someone.	LUCK & TIMING The one variable you do not control. Judge your own conduct on the other three, and hold this one more lightly.

I said at the start of this guide that a search only works when three things are present at once: it has to feel good, you have to feel accomplished, and both sides have to feel the love. I want to close by taking those apart from your chair, because I think candidates underrate all three, usually because compensation is easier to measure and easier to talk about.

Feeling good is not soft, and it is not the same as being flattered. It is the difference between accepting an offer with genuine excitement and accepting it because the money was right and staying felt worse. You will show up differently on day one depending on which one it was, and it will show within the first month, to you and to them.

Feeling accomplished is about the process itself, not just the offer at the end. A rigorous, well run search, even one that ends in a no, is worth more to your judgment about your own career than a sloppy process that happens to end in a yes. Pay attention to which one you actually went through.

Feeling the love is the one candidates are most uncomfortable naming, because it can sound like you are supposed to be purely rational about your career. But you can tell the difference between a company that wants you specifically and a company that needs a seat filled and you happened to be available. Do not talk yourself out of noticing that difference. It is real information.

And then there is luck and timing, which I will not pretend you control and would ask you not to punish yourself over. Some searches move in three weeks because the timing lined up. Some take eight months through no fault of your own. Judge your own conduct in the search, how honestly you communicated, how carefully you evaluated, how clearly you knew what you needed, and hold the parts you did not control more lightly. Most candidates are harder on themselves about bad timing than they are honest with themselves about their own process. Get that the right way around and the rest tends to follow.

If you finish this guide and there is a question you have been avoiding asking, either of yourself or of the company across the table, that is the place to start.

Ken Lubin

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