

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE TABLE

What the Hiring Manager Thinks

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

How to run a process you would be proud to be on the other side of.

KEN LUBIN

Managing Director, ZRG Partners

What the Hiring Manager Thinks

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

AUTHOR

Ken Lubin, Managing Director, ZRG Partners

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Hiring managers, boards, HR partners, and the candidates sitting across from them.

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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 candidates, 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. The people in it have to feel accomplished, not simply processed. And somewhere in it, both sides have to feel the love, meaning they believe the other side genuinely wants them, not just needs a box filled or a paycheck. 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 my best placements 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 hiring manager. I would ask you to read the candidate'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.

Ken Lubin

Managing Director, ZRG Partners

How to Use This Guide

Read it once before your next search opens. Hand the relevant chapters to your panel.

This guide follows the arc of a single search, from the hiring manager's chair. Part One covers what you are actually thinking before the role is even posted. Part Two covers the interviews, 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 the candidate says yes, because the search is not finished when the offer letter is signed.

Read it straight through the first time. After that, use it like a mirror, not a manual. Open Part One before your next search. Open Part Three the week before an offer. Open Part Four if a new hire is wobbling in month two.

If you run a hiring panel, hand them Part Two before the first round of interviews. Most misaligned panels are not actually disagreeing about the candidate. Each person is carrying a private worry they have not said out loud, and the disagreement is really about that.

★ 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 process that wins is the one that makes it safe to.

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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 candidate. This is the shape the rest of this guide follows.

01 · BEFORE

The Brief

You are carrying a private version of this role that the job description does not say. That private version is the real brief.

02 · DURING

The Interviews

You are evaluating trust and fit before you are evaluating skill, whether you admit it or not, and the candidate is auditioning you back.

03 · THE OFFER

The Decision

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

04 · AFTER

The First 90 Days

The offer was not the finish line. It was the start of a different test, whether the company you described is the company they experience.

PART ONE

Before

What you are thinking before the role is even posted.

“The hiring manager who says ‘we just need to fill this role’ has already told you something true about the process, and it is not a good sign.”

What You're Actually Thinking Before the Role Is Even Posted

The job description is the least honest document in the search.

Before a single candidate is contacted, the hiring manager is carrying something heavier than a headcount request. Usually it is one of three things. A leader left and took credibility with them. A function has quietly underperformed longer than anyone wants to admit. Or the hiring manager is personally nervous about being blamed if this hire does not work.

“The job description tells the candidate what you want them to think. The version in your head tells them what you are actually afraid of.”

None of that appears in the job description. The job description says "strategic leader with a track record of scaling teams." What is actually in the hiring manager's head is closer to "I need someone who will not embarrass me in front of the board," or "I need someone who can fix what my predecessor broke without making it obvious how bad it was."

I have sat in enough kickoff meetings to know the tell. When a hiring manager describes the role in outcomes, specific, measurable, dated, they have done the internal work. When they describe it in adjectives, strategic, collaborative, entrepreneurial, they are still hoping the person they hire will figure out what they actually need. That hope is not dishonest. It is just unfinished thinking, and it becomes the candidate's problem the day they start.

What the hiring manager will not say in the first call.

They are worried this hire reflects on them. A senior hire that fails is rarely blamed on the market. It gets blamed on the judgment of whoever recommended them. That fear, more than the job description, shapes who gets interviewed, how long the process takes, and how much risk the hiring manager is actually willing to accept in the final decision.

◆ REFLECTION

Ask yourself before the kickoff.

What would you tell a candidate about this role that is not in the job description? If the honest answer makes you uncomfortable and you have not said it to anyone yet, that discomfort is the conversation your process is missing.

A COMPOSITE SCENE, DRAWN FROM PATTERN

Picture the kickoff call. The hiring manager says the role needs a “strategic, collaborative leader who can scale the team.” The recruiter asks what that means in year one. There is a pause. Then: “Honestly, we need someone who can walk into a room with the board and not make me look like I made a bad call last time.”

That sentence, not the one before it, is the actual brief. Everything useful that happens in the search from that point on comes from the recruiter having asked the question that made the hiring manager say the true thing instead of the safe thing.

★ ONE THING

The version in your head is the real brief.

The job description tells the candidate what you want them to think. The version in your head tells them what you are actually afraid of. The candidates who succeed are usually the ones who got the second version.

The Trade-Off You Haven't Said Out Loud

Every search has a private ceiling. Most hiring managers never say what it is.

Somewhere behind every search sits a number, or a deadline, or both, that the hiring manager has not said out loud to the recruiter, the panel, or sometimes even to themselves. A budget ceiling nobody wants to admit is lower than the market. A promise made to the board about timing that is no longer realistic. A quiet preference for an internal candidate that the process was never designed to surface honestly.

“Every search has a real ceiling. The version you keep private does not protect you. It just moves the disappointment further down the process.”

This is not usually dishonesty. It is discomfort. Saying "I can only pay eighty percent of what this role is worth in the market" feels like admitting a weakness. Saying "I am under pressure to close this in six weeks" feels like admitting the company is behind. So the hiring manager holds the real constraint privately and hopes the process finds a way around it.

The cost of that habit is predictable. Candidates get further into a process than the constraint would have allowed, and the rejection at the end feels arbitrary to them, because it is arbitrary. Nobody told them the actual rule they were being measured against.

What I have seen work.

The hiring managers who get the best outcomes say the trade-off out loud early, to their search partner at minimum, and often to the finalist directly. "Here is what I can flex on, and here is what I cannot." It costs them a moment of discomfort. It saves everyone weeks of a process that was never going to end the way it looked like it would.

► PRO TIP

Name the ceiling before you open the search.

Write down the one constraint you are least willing to say out loud: budget, timeline, or an internal candidate you are quietly favoring. If you cannot write it down, you have not finished defining the search.

★ ONE THING

A private ceiling does not protect you.

Every search has a real ceiling. The version you keep private does not protect you. It just moves the disappointment further down the process, to a point where it costs more.

Before You Open the Search

Fill this out before the kickoff meeting, honestly and privately. Nobody else has to see it. Its only job is to make you finish the thinking the job description will not do for you.

Rate your last search, honestly, one to five.

I could have written the specific business outcome this role needs to produce in year one.	1	2	3	4	5
I had said every real constraint, budget, timeline, an internal candidate, out loud to my panel.	1	2	3	4	5
Three people on my panel would have described this role the same way.	1	2	3	4	5

Before the kickoff, confirm you have:

- ☐ Written the one sentence outcome this hire needs to produce in year one
- ☐ Named the constraint you are least comfortable saying out loud
- ☐ Checked your panel's description of the role against your own, out loud
- ☐ Decided what you can flex on and what you cannot, before a candidate asks

A couple of honest questions, for you alone.

The thing I am most afraid this hire will expose about my team or my judgment is:

The real reason this role is open, the version I have not said in a job description, is:

PART TWO

During

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

“You are not only interviewing the candidate. You are auditioning for them, whether you meant to or not.”

What You're Really Evaluating in the Room

The scorecard says one thing. The gut says another, and the gut usually wins.

Most hiring managers believe they are evaluating the candidate against the role. What they are actually doing, in the first ten minutes, is running a faster and less rational calculation: would I want this person on my team, would I trust them in a hard conversation, and would I feel comfortable if my boss met them tomorrow. The formal evaluation criteria arrive after that instinct, and mostly to justify it.

“You evaluate trust and fit before you evaluate skill, whether you admit it or not.”

This is not a flaw unique to bad interviewers. It is how people evaluate people. The scorecard exists precisely because the instinct is fast and unreliable, and structure is the only thing that slows it down enough to catch what the instinct missed or invented.

The question underneath the questions.

Beneath every interview question, the hiring manager is really asking one thing: will hiring this person make my life better or harder in six months. A candidate who senses that question, and speaks to it directly, tends to move faster through a process than one who answers only what was literally asked.

Question type	What the hiring manager is actually listening for
"Tell me about a time you led through a difficult transition."	Will this person make decisions I can defend to my boss?
"How do you handle disagreement with a peer?"	Will I have to manage conflict this person creates?
"What questions do you have for me?"	Does this person actually want this, or just a job?

That last one matters more than hiring managers admit. A candidate who asks sharp, specific questions is signaling they have done the work to want this role specifically. A candidate who asks generic questions is signaling, often without meaning to, that this is one of several roles they are pursuing without much preference among them.

► 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 evidence they will succeed.

★ ONE THING

You evaluate trust before you evaluate skill.

You are evaluating trust and fit before you are evaluating skill, whether you admit it or not. The discipline is not pretending that isn't true. It is building a process honest enough to catch you when the instinct is wrong.

The Signal You're Sending Without Meaning To

The candidate is reading you as carefully as you are reading them.

Every hiring manager I have worked with wants to believe the interview is a one-way evaluation. It never is. The candidate is watching how you run the room, whether you are prepared, whether you are on time, whether you seem like someone worth working for, and building a private scorecard of their own.

"You are not only interviewing the candidate. You are auditioning to be worked for."

A hiring manager who arrives having skimmed the resume in the elevator has told the candidate something true about how they will be treated as an employee. A hiring manager who talks for forty of the sixty minutes has told the candidate this is a place where senior people are heard and everyone else listens. Neither message was intended. Both were received.

What candidates remember.

Years later, candidates rarely remember the questions they were asked. They remember how they were made to feel: respected or rushed, curious or performative, honest or evasive when they asked a hard question about the role. That memory travels. The market for senior talent is small, and reputation is the cheapest thing your company can protect and the most expensive thing to repair.

THE SCRIPT

A better way to open the interview.

"Before we start, I want to be direct with you about where this role sits and what is genuinely uncertain about it. I would rather you have real information than a polished pitch." Candidates relax when a hiring manager leads with candor instead of salesmanship. It also gives you permission to expect the same candor back.

A COMPOSITE SCENE, DRAWN FROM PATTERN

Three interviewers debrief a strong candidate. Two are enthusiastic. One is quiet. Pressed, the quiet one says, "I don't have a specific concern, I just didn't feel it." The group moves on, unsatisfied but unwilling to slow down.

Two weeks later, in a different debrief, the same person is asked to write down their evaluation before the discussion starts. This time the vague feeling becomes specific: "They answered every question about strategy well and every question about people generically." That sentence was always there. The process just had not asked for it yet.

★ ONE THING

You are auditioning too.

You are not only interviewing the candidate. You are auditioning to be worked for. The best hiring managers treat both jobs as equally real, because the candidate certainly does.

Before Your Next Panel Sits Down

Hand this to your panel before the first round. Most panel disagreement is not really about the candidate. It is about a private worry nobody named out loud.

Rate your last interview process, honestly, one to five.

My panel wrote down independent evaluations before we discussed a candidate as a group.	1	2	3	4	5
Every interviewer was genuinely prepared, having read the resume, not skimmed it.	1	2	3	4	5
If three interviewers each pitched this role to a candidate, they would have told the same story.	1	2	3	4	5

Before the first round, confirm you have:

- ☐ Agreed as a panel on the one story everyone will tell about this role
- ☐ Set the rule that scores get written down before the group discusses
- ☐ Assigned who owns which part of the evaluation, so nobody is guessing at what to probe
- ☐ Told the candidate directly what is genuinely uncertain about the role

A couple of honest questions, for you alone.

The specific moment that changed my mind about our last strong candidate was:

The question I am afraid a candidate will ask that I do not have a good answer to is:

PART THREE

The Offer and the Decision

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

"Nobody has ever complained that an offer moved too fast because it was well prepared."

Is This Process Well Run?

The candidate is asking this question every week. You should be asking it too.

Candidates judge a process constantly, not just at the end. Every unanswered email, every week of silence between rounds, every vague answer about timeline gets logged as data about what it would be like to work at your company. Hiring managers rarely audit their own process with the same rigor, because they are inside it and busy.

“A well run process is not about being fast. It is about being honest and consistent about what candidates can expect.”

A well run process has a few honest markers, and none of them are expensive. Candidates know what stage they are in. They know roughly when they will hear something next, and they hear it on time, or get told why not. The feedback loop moves in both directions, meaning candidates also get real signal, not silence, when they are no longer being considered.

The cost of a process that runs long.

Every additional week a search drags past what was promised does two things at once. It erodes the top candidate's confidence that this company executes well, and it gives their current employer more time to counter, more time to make a case for staying, more time for doubt to creep in. A slow process does not just risk losing the candidate. It changes who you are left choosing from.

Symptom	What it is actually telling the candidate
Interview scheduled, then rescheduled twice	This company deprioritizes commitments when something else comes up
No response for two weeks after final round	Either nobody owns this decision, or I am not the priority I was told I was
Vague answer to "what is the timeline"	Nobody has actually agreed internally on what this role needs

► PRO TIP

Audit your own process like a candidate would.

Before your next search, write down the last three commitments you made to a candidate about timing. Check whether you kept them. If the honest answer is no, that is the first thing to fix, before you touch the interview questions.

★ ONE THING

Well run means honest and consistent, not fast.

A well run process is not about being fast. It is about being honest and consistent about what candidates can expect, and then delivering it. That is the entire bar, and most companies still miss it.

The Moment You Actually Decide

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

Hiring managers like to believe their decision is the sum of the scorecard. In my experience, the real decision usually crystallizes around one specific moment: a question the candidate answered with unusual honesty, a moment they pushed back respectfully, a piece of the interview where the hiring manager thought, clearly and without hedging, I would want to work for this person.

“You will remember the moment, not the scorecard. Trust that memory, but make sure it earned that trust.”

That moment matters more than any individual competency score, and it should. It is the closest thing you have to direct evidence of how this person will actually behave under pressure, in a disagreement, in a moment that was not scripted or rehearsed. The scorecard exists to make sure that moment is not the only evidence you have. It is not meant to replace it.

What to do when the panel disagrees.

When your panel is split, resist the instinct to average the opinions into a comfortable middle. Go back to the specific evidence each person is weighing. Usually the disagreement is not really about the candidate. It is about which risk each panelist is more afraid of: moving too fast on someone unproven, or moving too slow and losing someone strong to a company that decided faster.

◆ REFLECTION

Before you make the offer.

What is the specific moment that made you want to hire this person? If you cannot name one, and your decision is based entirely on the absence of red flags, that is worth noticing before you extend the offer, not after.

A COMPOSITE SCENE, DRAWN FROM PATTERN

The scorecard says the two finalists are nearly tied. The hiring manager sits with both files a final time and one memory keeps surfacing: a moment in the second interview when the eventual hire admitted, unprompted, to a decision that had gone badly two years earlier, and explained exactly what they had changed since.

Nothing on the scorecard captured that. The offer went to the person who told the harder story honestly, not the person who told the smoother one.

★ ONE THING

Trust the memory. Make sure it earned that trust.

You will remember the moment, not the scorecard. Trust that memory, but make sure the process gave you real evidence to remember, not just a good impression you talked yourself into.

Before You Extend the Offer

Use this the week an offer is going out. It takes ten minutes and it will tell you honestly whether your process earned the yes you are hoping for.

Rate this search, honestly, one to five.

I kept every timing commitment I made to this candidate, or clearly explained when I could not. 1 2 3 4 5

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

When my panel disagreed, we resolved it with evidence, not a comfortable average. 1 2 3 4 5

Before you call with the offer, confirm you have:

- ☐ Named the specific moment that decided it for you, not just the overall impression
- ☐ Resolved any panel disagreement with evidence, not a vote
- ☐ Checked your own last three timing promises to this candidate against what actually happened
- ☐ Prepared a direct answer for what is still uncertain about the role

A couple of honest questions, for you alone.

If this candidate described our process back to a friend, the word they would use is:

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

PART FOUR

After

The search is not over when the offer letter is signed.

“The candidate you spent three months courting can be lost in the first three weeks, by a company that stopped paying attention the moment they said yes.”

The First Ninety Days Are Still Your Search

You hired the person. You have not yet earned the decision they made.

The moment a candidate signs, most hiring managers exhale and move on to the next problem. That instinct is understandable and it is a mistake. The candidate has just made a significant bet, on you, on the company, on a story they were told in the interview process. The first ninety days are where they find out if that story was true.

“The offer was not the finish line. It was the beginning of a different test.”

I have watched strong hires fail not because the person was wrong, but because the company treated the offer as the finish line instead of the starting gun. No structured onboarding. No clarity on what success looks like in the first quarter. A manager who was fully present during the courtship and largely absent afterward. The new hire notices the gap between how they were treated as a candidate and how they are treated as an employee, usually within the first two weeks.

What the best hiring managers do differently.

They treat the new hire's first ninety days as a continuation of the outcomes the role exists to produce. They check in deliberately, not just when something is wrong. And they ask directly, more than once, how the experience compares to what was promised in the interview process. That question takes courage to ask, because sometimes the honest answer is uncomfortable.

► **PRO TIP**

Ask the question most managers avoid.

At day thirty, ask your new hire directly: "Is this matching what you expected when you said yes?" Most managers avoid this question because they are afraid of the answer. The ones who ask it catch small problems before they become resignation letters.

A COMPOSITE SCENE, DRAWN FROM PATTERN

Day thirty-one. A new hire who accepted with real enthusiasm has gone quiet in the team channel. Their manager, three searches deep into a busy quarter, has not checked in beyond the standing Monday meeting.

When someone finally asks directly, “Is this matching what you expected,” the answer is not a crisis, just a small gap: the scope was described as broader than what has actually landed on their desk so far. Said out loud in week five, it is a fifteen minute conversation. Left unsaid until month four, it is a resignation letter that surprises everyone except the person who wrote it.

★ ONE THING

The offer was the beginning of a different test.

The offer was not the finish line. It was the beginning of a different test: whether the company you described in the interview is the company the new hire actually experiences. Most retention problems are really integrity problems, the gap between the pitch and the reality.

The First Ninety Days, on Paper

Print this and check it at day thirty, sixty, and ninety. The search is not finished when the offer letter is signed. This is where you find out if it worked.

Rate your onboarding, honestly, one to five.

This new hire has real clarity on what success looks like at 30, 60, and 90 days.	1	2	3	4	5
I have directly asked whether this is matching what they expected when they said yes.	1	2	3	4	5
I check in deliberately, on a schedule, not only when something already seems wrong.	1	2	3	4	5

In the first two weeks, confirm you have:

- ☐ Given the new hire a written picture of success at 30, 60, and 90 days
- ☐ Scheduled a deliberate check-in beyond the standard onboarding paperwork
- ☐ Asked directly whether the role is matching what was described in the interviews
- ☐ Told your panel what you would do differently on the next search

A couple of honest questions, for you alone.

The gap, if any, between how I treated this person as a candidate and how I am treating them as an employee is:

The one thing I would change about this search if I were opening it again tomorrow is:

CLOSING

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

FEEL GOOD They accept with genuine excitement, not quiet relief that the search is finally over.	FEEL ACCOMPLISHED The process itself earned their respect. Win or lose, they were treated like their time mattered.
FEEL THE LOVE They believe you wanted them specifically, not just a seat that needed filling by someone.	LUCK & TIMING The one variable you do not control. Judge your search 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, the people in it have to feel accomplished, and both sides have to feel the love. I want to close by taking those apart, because I think hiring managers underrate all three, in different ways.

Feeling good is the easiest to dismiss as soft. It is not soft. It is the difference between a candidate who accepts an offer with genuine excitement and one who accepts it because the money was right and the alternative was worse. Those two people show up on day one differently, and it shows within the first month.

Feeling accomplished is about the process itself, not just the outcome. A candidate who goes through a rigorous, well run search and does not get the offer often speaks well of the company anyway, because they were treated like their time and their career mattered. A candidate who goes through a sloppy process and does get the offer sometimes starts the job already a little disappointed in the company that hired them.

Feeling the love is the one hiring managers are most uncomfortable naming, because it sounds unbusinesslike. But candidates can tell the difference between a company that wants them specifically and a company that needs a seat filled and they happened to be available. You cannot fake that difference convincingly. You can only build a process honest enough that the real thing comes through.

And then there is luck and timing, which I will not pretend to control and would ask you not to either. Some searches take three weeks because the right person was quietly unhappy at the right moment. Some take eight months through no fault of the process at all. Judge your search on the parts you controlled, the brief, the process, the offer, the first ninety days, and hold the parts you did not control more lightly. Most hiring managers are harder on themselves about bad luck than they are honest with themselves about bad process. Get that the right way around and the rest tends to follow.

Ken Lubin

Managing Director, ZRG Partners