CASE STUDY · EXECUTIVE SEARCH & PROCESS

R&D Leadership Hiring, Without a Reason to Move

The strongest candidate for a VP-level R&D mandate was not looking to move. Winning the appointment meant changing what the organisation was offering.

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IN BRIEF

01 The strongest candidate for a senior R&D mandate sat outside the visible hiring market.

02 Compensation was the simplest variable. Forfeited equity, intellectual property and a built team were not.

03 The executive assessed the organisation as rigorously as the organisation assessed them.

04 The mandate expanded to the team beneath the role before the appointment was made.

Difficult executive searches rarely fail for lack of talent. They fail because the strongest candidate has too much to lose. This is a specialty chemicals mandate in R&D leadership hiring that the visible market could not fill, and what it took to make the move rational.

01 · The Mandate

A capability that existed elsewhere

A specialty chemicals manufacturer needed a VP-level Head of Research & Development. The brief was to strengthen the innovation platform and build an R&D organisation with genuine commercial relevance.

The capability existed. It was not where the organisation had expected to find it.

Senior R&D leaders accumulate more than a title. They build intellectual property, assemble technical teams they trust, and earn influence inside an organisation that does not transfer with them.

From the outside, such a leader looks highly attractive. From the inside, changing employers makes very little sense. That distinction is the whole search problem.

WHAT MADE THIS MANDATE DISTINCTIVE

Outside the visible market

The eventual appointee was in another country, performing well, and not in conversation with search firms. No advertised process would have reached them.

Accumulated value, not salary

Equity, deferred incentives, intellectual property, a built team and cross-border tax exposure all sat inside the decision. A compensation comparison addressed almost none of it.

Assessment in both directions

The executive tested governance, investment appetite and decision rights before engaging seriously. Management access, not persuasion, moved the process forward.

02 · The Problem

The hiring market is narrower than the talent market

A recurring error in difficult searches is treating the available candidate pool and the relevant talent pool as the same thing. They are not.

The strongest executives are frequently outside the visible hiring market. They may be in another geography, at a competitor, or in an adjacent sector. They may simply be unwilling to speak to search firms, because they are performing well where they are.

That changed the question the organisation was actually asking. It was no longer whether someone qualified could be found. It was whether an opportunity could be made compelling enough for the right person to reconsider a successful trajectory.

Those are different mandates, and they need different work.

03 · The Economics

Compensation is the least complicated part

Organisations sometimes approach senior attraction as an exercise in compensation optimisation. For established leaders, that is misleading.

An executive considering an international move weighs several forms of accumulated value at once. Long-term incentives would be forfeited, and intellectual property stays tied to current work. A research team took years to build, and internal influence does not travel.

Tax, residency and cross-border financial implications then change the economics again. A salary comparison captures almost none of this.

The real comparison is between two professional futures. One is known. The other has to be made credible.

TWO WAYS TO READ THE SAME OFFER

	WHAT A SALARY COMPARISON CAPTURES	WHAT THE EXECUTIVE IS ACTUALLY WEIGHING
Cash	Base and bonus	Equity and deferred incentives forfeited on exit
Standing	Title and grade	Decision rights actually attached to the role
Access	Reporting line	Real access to the CEO and the board
Geography	Location	Residency, tax and cross-border financial exposure
Timing	Start date	Family, schooling and the sequencing of a move
Mandate	Functional scope	The team that will have to execute the agenda

04 · The Search

Validation ran in both directions

Organisations spend considerable time assessing executive candidates. At this level the reverse assessment is equally rigorous.

Experienced executives do not evaluate a role through its position specification. They evaluate the credibility of the leadership team, test whether investment commitments are real, and check whether decision-making authority will match the accountability attached to the role.

In R&D leadership the questions sharpen. Will research carry genuine strategic weight? Will capital be available for scale-up?

How quickly can promising work move toward commercialisation? Will technically sound decisions survive short-term commercial pressure?

A search firm cannot answer those convincingly. At some point management has to enter the process.

Engagement here increased only when the organisation’s leadership began sharing its plans directly and allowing them to be challenged. That moved the conversation from recruitment to strategic evaluation.

The engagement then ran across quarters rather than weeks. That time was not spent persuading anyone. It was spent removing uncertainty from both sides — testing commercial expectations, exploring professional ambition, examining cross-border implications, and widening management access as confidence built.

REVERSE ASSESSMENT

The executive's own evaluation of an organisation — its governance, investment appetite, decision rights and follow-through — conducted with the same rigour the organisation applies to them.

> **A long executive search is not necessarily an inefficient one. The more useful question is whether the time is reducing appointment risk.**

05 · Cross-Border

The barriers that surface late

International executive search is often described as a relocation problem. Relocation is usually one of the simpler components.

The harder issues are structural. Accumulated financial interests do not transfer neatly across jurisdictions. Equity arrangements interact with residency decisions.

Deferred compensation is treated differently when an executive leaves a country. Even the sequencing of resignation, relocation and employment carries financial consequence.

Search teams do not replace legal or tax advisers. They do need to surface these issues early.

Otherwise an organisation reaches the final stage of a long search and discovers a structural barrier that should have been identified in the first weeks. Transition planning has to begin alongside assessment, not after selection.

WHAT INFORMED OUR VIEW

- Market mapping — Across adjacent sectors and two geographies, not the advertised market.
- Compensation benchmarking — Including long-term incentive forfeiture exposure.
- Leadership interviews — With the hiring executive team.
- Organisation context — Existing scientific and technical capability beneath the role.
- Cross-border transition — Considerations referred to the executive's own specialist advisers.

06 · The Appointment

The appointment followed the alignment

Late in the process one question became decisive: who would execute the R&D agenda alongside the incoming leader.

This is common and often underestimated. Organisations hire an executive to transform a function while assuming they will simply inherit the existing one. A Head of R&D cannot deliver an innovation strategy without the scientific and technical capability underneath it.

The mandate expanded to support the incoming executive in identifying the capabilities required around the function. That mattered: it showed the organisation was prepared to build the conditions for success rather than transfer an under-resourced brief to a senior hire.

By completion, the important decisions sat well beyond compensation. Management and the executive had aligned on the strategic weight of R&D. Expectations on authority and investment had been tested.

Cross-border considerations had been surfaced for professional advice. The organisation had begun thinking about the incoming leader’s team before the first day.

The executive joined. The appointment was the consequence of that process, not the process itself.

> **The question was not whether the executive could do the work. It was whether the organisation could stand up to being assessed in return.**

SANIA NAZEEF, FOUNDER DIRECTOR, STRANCE

THE TEAM

Sania Nazeef – Founder Director

Founder Director. Sania co-founded STRANCE in 2010 and leads its executive search practice. She has completed cross-border CXO, CFO, and R&D leadership searches across petrochemicals, aviation, defense, and specialty manufacturing.

Irfan Nazeef – Founder Director

Founder Director. Irfan leads market mapping, talent intelligence, and IT and industrial leadership search across the United States and the Middle East. He also leads ChangeLabs.ai.

WHAT EMPLOYERS SHOULD CONSIDER

Are we searching among candidates prepared to move, or among the leaders who can actually solve the problem?

These are rarely the same group. The available pool is defined by who is willing to respond; the relevant pool is defined by the business problem. Mapping the second before searching the first is what changes the outcome.

Do we understand what our preferred candidate would give up to join us?

Usually not in full. Forfeited long-term incentives, intellectual property, a built team and cross-border tax exposure are all part of the decision, and none of them appear in a compensation comparison.

Are senior leaders prepared to give a candidate meaningful access before the appointment?

At this level it is decisive. A search firm cannot make an organisation's ambition credible on its behalf. Direct exposure to management, and a willingness to be challenged, is what moves a strong passive candidate.

Is a long executive search a failed search?

Not if the time is reducing appointment risk. For mandates involving relocation, major economic trade-offs or organisational transformation, compressed decision-making tends to increase risk rather than reduce it.

Does the organisation beneath the role support the executive once hired?

Rarely by default, and that gap is what undermines otherwise strong appointments. The leadership hire and the organisational architecture beneath it are often inseparable.

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