

The Great Stay: why your ideal candidate may not be looking, and won't be persuaded by a job spec

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A few months ago I called a marketing director I have known for years about a role that could have been written for her. Bigger remit, a seat at the top table, a business with money to spend and a chief executive who genuinely understands the value of commercial marketing. In previous years, she would have cleared her diary. This time she listened politely, said it sounded great, and told me she wasn't going anywhere.

She isn't especially happy where she is, she has been telling me so for at least a year. What she has is a boss who trusts her, a working pattern that fits around her life and a redundancy entitlement that grows every year she stays. Against that I was offering a pay rise and a job description. When considering stability and any sense of 'security', it wasn't close.

I am increasingly having some version of that conversation, despite the market also being saturated with exceptional, 'immediately available' candidates.

More people are looking. The ones you want aren't.

The numbers look contradictory until you sit where I sit. The latest KPMG and REC Report on Jobs shows demand for staff falling for the thirty-fourth month in a row, while the number of people seeking work rose at its sharpest rate in three months, driven by redundancies. The ONS counts 702,000 vacancies and unemployment at 4.9%. On paper, employers have their pick.

They don't. The same report shows starting salaries rising at their quickest pace since January, because employers are competing for skilled candidates they can't find. The CIPD calls this a "low hire, low fire" market: only 26% of employers expect to grow headcount this quarter, yet 31% have vacancies they describe as hard to fill.

The gap between those two figures is where the settled, successful, currently employed executive lives. LinkedIn's research gives the behaviour a name, "job hugging", and found that 71% of UK recruiters have seen more of it, with 57% spending more of their time persuading candidates to consider a move at all. **The market is full of available people and short of willing ones. It creates a furiously frustrating dynamic - highly experienced and capable**

candidates actively looking and very open and flexible to opportunities, but clients being unable to find the 'ideal fit'.

Staying is the rational choice

Employers tend to read this reticence to move, as timidity. It is arithmetic. A senior person who moves gives up accrued service, a reputation built over years and a boss whose behaviour they can predict. In return they become the newest and most expensive person in a business that, by its own admission in every survey going, is nervous about the next twelve months. Last in, first out is not a comforting phrase at director level.

Salary no longer covers the difference. The CIPD puts the median expected pay award at 3%, so nobody is being left behind by staying put, and the premium an employer needs to offer to make someone feel safe is usually more than the budget allows. Title matters even less. Most of the people I approach already have the title.

One thing is about to shift. From 1 January 2027, protection against unfair dismissal will apply after six months in a job instead of two years. That shortens the period of exposure for anyone who moves, which removes one of the quieter reasons for staying. It won't open the floodgates. It does mean employers who have been blaming the market will soon have one fewer excuse.

What moves someone who isn't looking

A job spec is a list of what you want from them. A settled executive needs to hear what they get from you, and it has to be something their current employer can't match with a counter-offer.

1. **The chief executive, early.** The person they will work for should be in the first conversation, not the third. Senior people move for a boss they believe in, and they decide quickly whether they do.
2. **The real problem.** Tell them what is broken, what has been tried and why the last person left. Candour is persuasive. A polished pitch makes experienced people suspicious.
3. **A remit with their name on it.** Be prepared to reshape the role around the person. If the brief can't flex, you are hiring a specification and will get whoever happens to be available. And this creates attrition and instability.
4. **Risk taken off their side of the table.** Longer notice periods, clear terms if things change, flexibility matched from day one. If you are asking someone to give up security, replace it.
5. **Pace.** A slow, seven-stage process tells a cautious person everything they feared about how you make decisions.

None of this fits in an advert, which is the point. The candidate you are trying to reach in this market will never see your advert.

A word to the people staying put

Staying is a decision, and it deserves the same scrutiny as leaving. Security that depends on one boss, one budget cycle or one restructure is thinner than it feels. The executives I see caught out are rarely the ones who moved. They are the ones who stopped taking calls, let their network go quiet and found out the market had changed on the day they needed it.

You don't have to move. You should know what you would move for, and take the conversation when it comes.

For employers, the question is simpler. If the person you most want to hire is comfortable where they are, what are you offering that is worth their discomfort?

Leitmotif Partners advises employers and senior candidates on exactly these decisions, and a conversation is the best place to begin. Email steph@leitmotifpartners.co.uk

