

A Nose for Talent

Veteran retail recruiter still prefers the personal approach

Joel Wilensky

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Joel Wilensky sort of stumbled into the field of retail recruiting, but he's made it his life's work. The long-time executive recruiter recently placed his 900th candidate.

After college, Wilensky joined Filene's training program, but left after six months to become a manufacturer's rep (men's sweaters and hosiery) in Boston. Three years later, he found work in an employment agency, where his association with the retail industry began in earnest.

He struck out on his own in 1975, gaining assignments primarily from regional discount department stores and the New England-based specialty store divisions of larger retail conglomerates. He has worked from the same office, located three miles from his home in Sudbury, Mass., since 1982.

At a time when retail continues to look for the next big technology break, Wilensky continues to take a more hands-on approach to matching candidates and clients – namely, the telephone. Using a network of associates, Wilensky's candidates will be personally interviewed and vetted before being presented to a client.

Why recruiting in general and retail specifically?

I went to an employment agency in October 1969 wanting to get out of sales and they – after four interviews – recruited me. Since my experience was selling to retailers, I started a retail desk placing low- to middle-level executives. I stayed there for five-and-a-half years before opening my own company.

Now I specialize equally in three areas: placing IT executives at the director level and above, as well as distribution, supply chain, logistics and anything to do with warehousing. My third area of specialty is finance, but anything a retail chain needs, I can do. After nearly 40 years of doing this, I can't wait to get to work in the morning.

Who or what's competing with retail for executive leadership?

Well, let's look at an IT assignment I have. I'm working with a retail chain that said they would look at non-retail candidates because the position is so technical – supervising all the computer types in the company at the vice president level. Another competitor to retail would likely be the sister to retail – apparel or other consumer product goods manufacturers. You see ex-retail-



ers going to a manufacturer and vice versa.

What does retail need to do to be more competitive with other fields?

I'm not sure, except perhaps pay more.

What can schools do to help steer young talent to the retail field?

You either hate it or love it; there is no industry with a faster pace. Having done this since 1969, one generalization is that you almost have to be a Type A [personality] or not a 9-to-5er to like retail. I know that isn't an answer to your question, but it's something I would tell a college grad who is considering entering retail.

What's on the CD player?

Oldies. I don't listen to any modern music. In my car right now, which is the only place I listen to music: the 1972 Dion & the Belmonts Reunion Concert, and "Jersey Boys" (which he saw for the third time last month).

What book is on the bedside stand?

"The Coldest Winter: America and the Korean War," by David Halberstam. I am a voracious reader of non-fiction, but primarily on vacations. One of my recent favorites – "The Miracle of St. Anthony: A Season with Coach Bob Hurley and Basketball's Most Improbable Dynasty" by Adrian Wojnarowski – is so good it goes to my top 10.

If you weren't doing this, what career or passion would you have pursued?

Sportswriter or sports broadcaster.

Little-known fact about you?

What you see is what you get. There isn't much not known about me.

Wilensky specializes in placing retail IT, logistics and warehousing personnel. Granddaughter Lily is not yet a client.

STORES

—Janet Groeber