BUSINESS MANAGER PROFESSION

When the client asks for the impossible

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An impossible need often hides a poorly qualified need. This article shows how a Business Manager clarifies the client's priorities before starting the search.

An impossible need almost always hides a poorly qualified need. Before looking for the sheep, the Business Manager would be wise to help their client count how many legs they actually need.

On a Tuesday morning, a Business Manager receives a request from a client they don't know very well yet. Java, Angular, Kubernetes developer, SAP experience "appreciated", fluent English, five years of experience minimum, start within fifteen days. And a daily rate matching a profile of two or three years.

They thank the client, hang up, and get to work. Resume databases, network, freelancers... Three days later, they present a candidate who checks three out of five boxes. The client responds they are looking for "exactly what is on the job description". The following week, the BM learns that the position has been filled elsewhere, with a profile that did not tick all the boxes either.

I've seen this scenario dozens of times with the BMs I support. The BM wasn't lacking energy, quite the contrary. They simply searched before understanding.

Where five-legged needs come from

Rarely from a fine analysis of the position. Rather from stacking.

The project manager wants Java, the architect insists on Kubernetes, the business manager would like someone who "knows SAP". Procurement adds English, just in case. No one has made a decision, so

the description adds everything together.

Another classic: the description outlines the former incumbent. They were excellent, stayed on the project for three years, and learned SAP in the process. The need describes what they had become by the time they left, unrelated to the profile they had when they arrived.

The daily rate has often been decided by procurement, with little connection to the level required by operations. The inconsistency is only obvious from the outside.

Then there is the defensive filter. A client receiving thirty applications per need eventually hardens their criteria to sort them out. Let's be honest: ESNs contribute to this by pushing portfolios without targeting them.

There remains the case where all legs are justified. It happens. The need then becomes commercial information in itself: a rare profile comes at a cost, and it's rarely found in fifteen days.

The costly reflex: searching before understanding

Why does the BM rush headlong? They fear losing the opportunity if they don't respond quickly. They are afraid of seeming amateurish by asking questions, especially if they are junior and not very comfortable with the technology. And sometimes, they are simply judged by the number of CVs sent.

The cost isn't immediately apparent. The recruiter spends two days on an elusive profile while more accessible needs await. Candidates are contacted for a position that will never suit them - not great for the ESN's image. And the client receives an "almost good" dossier that confirms their suspicion: they weren't truly listened to.

Ironically, no time is actually saved. Fifteen minutes of qualification often prevent several days of pointless searching. Respond quickly, yes. But first, respond accurately.

Eliminate unnecessary legs

The real work begins before sourcing. It involves transforming a list of criteria into a prioritized need, and a few questions often suffice to eliminate two or three legs. Here are the ones I work on with BMs I support:

1. "If I propose someone very strong in Java and Kubernetes, but who has never touched SAP, would you meet them?" Far more revealing than asking, in the abstract, what the priorities are.
2. "In three months, what should the person have achieved?" The answer often reveals more than the job description.
3. "Who held this position before? What worked well, what was lacking?"
4. "Who, in the team, already knows SAP?" If someone already masters it, the newcomer doesn't need to carry this skill alone.
5. "What happens if the start is in five weeks?" And immediately afterward: "Is it you or procurement who sets the budget?"
6. When the need arrives through procurement or a platform, obtaining an exchange with the operational manager often changes everything.

Asking these questions rarely causes issues. Most managers appreciate being helped to clarify their expectations, especially when the description was written between two meetings. A phrase like "I'd rather ask you five questions now than send you five irrelevant CVs" generally goes over well.

Come back with a proposal, not a CV

Once the need is prioritized, the BM can finally propose a solution.

Let’s go back to the initial need. Fifteen minutes with the operational manager is enough to get a clear picture: Java and Kubernetes are indispensable from day one. SAP only involves an interface module, and someone on the team knows it well. As for English, it's mainly for reading documentation.

The BM returns with a consultant strong in the two key skills, offers two weeks of pairing with the team's SAP expert, and proposes a start in three weeks instead of two. One dossier, with a clear explanation of how it meets the real need.

Other avenues exist depending on the case. Adjusting the daily rate or start date, showing what each choice enables. Splitting the need between a main profile and an expert for occasional support. Or frankly saying that under these conditions, the need is not realistic.

This last case scares many BMs. Wrongly, I believe. An argued refusal builds far more credibility than an approximate dossier, and the client remembers it when choosing whom to call back.

A management issue too

A BM who rushes to resume databases is often doing exactly what their environment expects of them.

If the manager primarily monitors the number of dossiers sent, they create sheep hunters. The one who takes a day to qualify a need seems less active than the one who sends four CVs in the morning... until it's time to count the missions won.

Other metrics provide a more accurate picture, such as the proportion of dossiers leading to an interview or the number of profiles proposed per mission won. In weekly meetings, "What did you understand about this need?" opens a far more useful discussion than "How many CVs did you send?".

This also requires juniors to dare to ask these questions. It demands legitimacy that doesn't come on its own. It’s cultivated through role-playing, listening to a more experienced colleague conduct qualification, and debriefing together.

A simple rule I often recommend: no search starts until the need is prioritized. Recruiters can breathe, and candidates stop being solicited for phantom positions.

And if the sheep were a symptom?

A five-legged job description says a lot about the relationship between the client and the ESN or engineering and consulting firm. When the client expects CVs, they write a list of criteria. When they expect a partner, they agree to discuss their problem.

Every impossible need is a small opportunity to shift this relationship. Next time such a description arrives, before opening any resume database, pick up the phone. And ask your client which legs they would keep if they had to cut two.