

By Lucille Craft

TOKYO — Jeff Struebing is used to conducting his business in an anonymous greasy spoon, on the crowded pavement outside a bustling train station, or even at home. He'll work over mealtime or well after midnight, if that's when one of his candidates feels comfortable calling him.

Such are the travails of the headhunter in Japan, perhaps one of the most exasperating countries known to the profession. The practitioners — an estimated dozen or so catering to foreign-owned or foreign-affiliated companies here — must penetrate the Japanese workers' legendary fealty to his employer.

Still, for those who can sunder that umbilical cord, the spoils are lucrative. Korn/Ferry International, a branch of the U.S.-based multinational firm and one of the first to set up shop here, charges 35% of the executive's annual compensation, which in 1983, according to Korn/Ferry recruiter Akira Arai, averaged between 15 million yen and 23 million yen. In that year, Korn/Ferry completed 60 assignments.

"The challenge is finding (job candidates), not getting clients," says Thomas Nevins, managing director of Technics in Management Transfer.

Stalking one's quarry can indeed take on the proportions of a Graham Greene novel. Conventional methods such as advertising in the newspaper — a respectable and time-honored method in Europe and North America — aren't enough to attract the samurais of industry.

"Everytime we advertise, there are three guys who always respond, no matter whether it's a job in aerospace or for the local janitor," Mr. Struebing, who works for Kyle International, says, only partly in jest. Many of the responses are from other headhunters, he says, trying to unload some unsold candidates.

So headhunters in Japan have to go on the offensive. Mr. Nevins makes a habit of haunting trade exhibitions, company cafeterias, office lobbies, coffee shops, factory gates and virtually any venue that will place him in the path of a potential quarry — or at least a tipster who can guide him to one. To preserve the confidentiality of his contacts or candidates, Mr. Struebing says he has to be willing to meet them almost anywhere, anytime.

The Precarious Art Of Headhunting in Japan

plete without volumes of alumni lists, graduate rosters from major universities, membership lists from professional associations, societies, clubs and other directories. And no headhunter worth his salt comes equipped without his own arsenal of tipsters and contacts in industry.

Though the recession and consequent slowdown in the Japanese economy has forced many companies to tighten their belts and encouraged many Japanese to look more favorably on the prospect of a mid-career job switch, they must still be wooed. "In the States, if we contact 10 people, all of them may apply, and the same day we can interview and do their resumes," Mr. Arai says.

Here, he says, a phone call may elicit only three prospects interested in showing up for

on trial: "Never ask why a candidate is applying for the position; he is not applying," he explained in a speech recently. "Sell your company," he exhorts. Dispatching a senior executive to meet personally with the candidate, for instance, has been known to work wonders.

Many a prize fish has been known to wriggle away, headhunters lament, because a client hesitates too long before making up his mind. Japanese candidates often consider it very insulting to be kept waiting. "One of the things that hurts companies most is themselves," Mr. Nevins says.

Discretion and timing aside, the freedom offered by many foreign companies frequently is the decisive factor for many Japanese who feel constrained by strict standards of conduct and seniority at their com-

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the initial meeting. At that first meeting, the headhunter avoids mention of the new job as religiously as virginity at a marriage-arrangement session. At the first meeting, Mr. Arai says, the recruiter must focus on building his own credibility.

At the second meeting, the veils come off — sort of. "We show the position, but no company name, just brief information," Mr. Arai says. If he is still interested, the candidate will proceed to a third session for more details. Only by the fifth or sixth meeting, Mr. Arai says, will he deign to ask about the candidate's background so that a resume may be prepared for inspection by the client. Once a candidate is selected from among a list of three finalists, he still must be coaxed to quit and come abroad.

R.J. Marshall, of ECI, Inc., a division of the multinational Peat, Marwick, Mitchell & Co., frequently has to remind clients that

panies. One candidate accepted a 2.2 million yen salary cut, the loss of a company car and membership to an exclusive club, Mr. Nevins says, simply because he was offered the chance to build up his own division at the recruiting company.

The typical candidate is male, married, 35 to 50 years old, has graduated from a top university here and may have studied abroad, and speaks enough English to communicate with the overseas office, though foreign-language ability is considered less problematic than raw managerial or technical expertise. "Beware of the professional English speaker," Mr. Marshall warns clients. Just because a candidate speaks good English doesn't mean he has the professional skills the client is seeking. The hottest properties right now are in high-tech fields — electronics, aerospace, pharmaceuticals, and the like. Sales and financial managers

Stories still abound of Japanese who are dissatisfied with their current jobs but refrain from resigning in the belief that quitting would hurt their companies or appear improper to friends. Mr. Marshall once zeroed in on "a very bright, capable executive" in a major Japanese corporation, who confessed he was chafing in his job at a company resistant to innovation. Yet his friends and family, he said, would never accept the idea of his abandoning a first-class Japanese company for a foreign one. His refusal came with mixed feelings. According to Mr. Marshall, the candidate said, "I'm sorry for you, and for me."

But Mr. Marshall and his peers claims such holdouts are starting to give way to a more self-oriented generation of managers.

"Over the last couple of years, executives have started to realize they may want to devote their lives to one career, rather than one organization," Mr. Marshall says. "There is still more loyalty here than in the U.S. or Europe, but any capable businessman anywhere in the world will be open-minded." The growth of high-tech industries has also tended to produce a more gratification-oriented crop of workers interested in jobs that exploit their technical expertise.

Gurkan Gokce, an engineering manager for Nippon Motorola of Japan, believes the incentives for switching jobs are strongest for mid-level managers. "In an American company, you can become a group leader — in charge of 10 people and a project — in four to five years. In Japan, it usually takes 10 years."

Japanese corporations have stepped in to ward off headhunters, showering important employees with extra perks such as padded housing allowances, or simply shipping them off to company offices overseas. Secretaries have been ordered to screen callers, barricading access to the targeted manager.

Though the Japanese press has tended to badmouth the invasion of the headhunters, the recruiters themselves approach their occupation as something of a public service. "Up to now, Japanese companies have been monopolizing qualified people, without utilizing their abilities to the maximum," says Kinichi Shiraishi, Mr. Marshall's partner at ECI. "We are facilitating the efficient use of people."