

Executive Profile

**Diane
 Charness**

President, Higher Talent Inc.



The basics

Background: After working in marketing and strategic planning, Charness switched careers 17 years ago to start an executive staffing company that now has five employees. A Georgetown University stint helped fill an academic, nonprofit and fundraising Rolodex, enough to place an estimated 2,500 people to date. This year, Charness, 53, hopes to do some of that in Southeast Asia and Europe.

Education: Bachelor's in foreign service, Georgetown; master's in business administration, The George Washington University

First job: Gymnastics counselor at day camp. I was a competitive gymnast.

Family: Recently remarried, to Louis Rosen. We have a wonderful and large blended family in Chevy Chase. I have three children, twin boys Adam and Justin, daughter Nina, and two step-daughters, Kristin and Lizzie.

Business strategy

How's business? I've weathered three recessions. In the staffing world, we can feel a recession coming on about six months before the press starts talking about it. And we usually start feeling the recovery about six months before. We had a very good 2010, which bodes well for the economy.

Best lesson from mentor: Be the first one in in the morning and the last one out at night.

What do you always ask during interviews? If it's a management position, then what would the lowest member on your staff say about working for you? What would the highest member on your staff say?

One mistake job candidates can make: Talking about a difficult employment situation from the past in a negative way. The worst thing they can do is go into an interview and talk trash. They've got to be honest about it, but have learned from it and talk positively.

One mistake employers can make: Not keeping momentum. Having too lengthy of a candidate-vetting process. The people we're recommending are being sought after by many other organizations. If there's too much bureaucracy and they take too long in making a decision, they lose them.

Judgment calls

Hardest lesson learned: Not to count on the revenue until the contract is signed, and not to count on money in the bank until the check is cashed. My father was a CPA and taught me that.

Your worst days: We are in the people business, and we count on our candidates and clients to be honest with us. Every once in a while, a candidate will disappoint us.

What would you change about your job? A larger staff. I think we're on the cusp of doing that again, feeling confident about making some investments in additional staff.

Advice to the unemployed today: Understand how applicant-tracking systems work. If you apply online, make sure you have key words in your resume that the technology will pick up. And be creative and aggressive. Don't leave everything to e-mail. Pick up the phone. Always try to get a face-to-face.

True confessions

Your worst job: I was a waitress, and not everyone was respectful.

Guilty pleasure: Sleeping late (9 o'clock)

Personality in high school: I was social, outgoing. I hate to admit, I was a cheerleader. I was involved in everything.

Car: I'm a Lexus person. I have been driving an SUV since I became a mother 23 years ago, and I just decided I'm going to go back to a sedan. I'm not hauling so much anymore.

Favorite hobby: I exercise a lot. My husband says too much. So he and I are avid cyclists, and we've done some wonderful biking together in Europe and elsewhere. He's much better on the hills than I am.

What do most people not know about you? It takes a lot to get me angry. But once you get me there, I'm done.

What's on your iPod? James Taylor, Carol King. A lot of jazz, old-time rock-and-roll.

Interview by Vandana Sinha