



Louise Gulliver

## Senior interim roles: a candidate perspective

What does a candidate at senior level expect - and receive - from a recruitment agency? And if it's the interim market, is recruitment any

different? **Karen Haynes** explores such aspects of the candidate experience with **Louise Gulliver**, Group Director of Membership Services at the Chartered Institute of Procurement & Supply (CIPS). At the time of interview this was an interim post: subsequently, from 1 April 2022, Louise has worked at CIPS on a permanent basis. Her current role is Director of Marketing and Communications.

**Karen Haynes:** CIPS is the third organisation you've worked for in a senior interim post. It sounds as though you relish this type of role?

**Louise Gulliver:** Yes, until a few years ago I'd always worked in permanent roles, so moving to an interim one was a bit of a leap of faith. I was at that point in my career life cycle where I wanted to do something a bit different.

**Karen:** What are the responsibilities of your current role?

**Louise:** I'm doing two things at CIPS: running business-as-usual teams in marketing, customer service, and membership, while also having a project focus.

**Karen:** Do interim roles feel very different?

**Louise:** Of course, time is not on your side. I'm really aware that I'm already 20 per cent through my contract. It's not a bad discipline though; learning to sort the wheat from the chaff. You have to become more forensic in your focus: consuming information, analysing it, and drawing conclusions pretty quickly.

At the same time, you need to quickly gain the trust and support of the people in your team and leave relationships in the best possible shape for whatever happens next.



**Karen:** I'm interested in how organisations present interim roles to candidates. Do they articulate their requirements differently?

**Louise:** In my experience organisations expect the person appointed to hit the ground running, but this is rarely explicit. Job information for interim roles tends to look very much like that for permanent ones.

**Karen:** As candidate, what do you want from a recruitment agency?

**Louise:** I'm looking for the recruiter to get across insights into the hiring organisation and nuances behind the job description: the unwritten word; the culture of the organisation; the gist of the candidate they're after. In other words: bring to life what can be a fairly dry document...

So the recruiter's proximity to the organisation they're hiring for is important. You want them to pick out what you can't pick up from your own due diligence from public documents. And to distil the key points in the job description that you need to draw out in your application. Not all bullet points are equal in a job description! Recruiters have an important interpretation job to do.

**Karen:** How have you found the performance of recruitment agencies generally?

**Louise:** A good agency is akin to why people might go a John Lewis store with a query about a product - you'd hope that the staff can tell you a lot more than is written on the card on display. As I've become more senior the quality of briefing has improved, but it's not a given.

**Karen:** FJWilson specialises in working with professional membership organisations. Is sector specialisation beneficial, in your experience?

**Louise:** The world of professional institutions has particular subtleties. For example, overt commercialisation is not well regarded by members, but making a surplus is vital to invest in member services, respond to changing member needs, and fulfil the organisation's charitable objectives.



Membership bodies often want to attract candidates with strong commercial skills, but who are able to apply these in this special context. Specialist agencies need to respond to such nuances and FJWilson is very attuned to the subtleties of the membership body sector.

**Karen:** As a candidate moving between senior roles, I'm interested in how you found the experience of working with Fiona at FJWilson. What was Fiona's approach to briefing and coaching through the application process for your current role at CIPS?

**Louise:** It was a really collaborative process. Fiona had clearly done her homework and, gently offering her perspective, gave me invaluable pointers. For example, in the covering letter I'd decided upon, Fiona advised me to dial up my experience around change management - to include demonstrable examples - as that was a priority for the organisation. She also shared candidate resources from the FJWilson website.

Fiona stressed something invaluable when I was preparing for interview: don't forget the basics. For this senior role I was focused on rather complex due diligence. Fiona reminded me; How will you answer standard questions like 'What do you think we're looking for?' 'What do you understand about what we do?' and so on.

Fiona dedicated a substantial amount of time to me (and presumably the same to other candidates). That was well appreciated. You can feel like just a number when dealing with some big recruiters, but Fiona is excellent at relationship management. I'm very impressed by her professionalism, commitment and attention to detail, with personal touches such as sending a 'good luck' card before my interview.

**Karen:** You've also lots of experience as a recruiter. What does your candidate experience say about Fiona's value to organisations?

**Louise:** Fiona is probably the most impressive recruiter I've worked with. She really understands her clients and candidates and matches the two very well. Speaking as a hirer, Fiona has definitely set the bar higher for me - I'll be more discerning when I next select a recruitment firm!