

National Executive Search Firm Placing Talent for Nonprofit Organizations and Educational Institutions



Molly Brennan
Founding Partner

Koya Leadership Partners
www.koyapartners.com

Contact:
Molly Brennan
978 465-7500 x112
mbrennan@koyapartners.com

Interview conducted by:
Lynn Fosse, Senior Editor
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“Clients choose Koya because we do an exceptional job of understanding who our clients are, what their essential work is, and what they need to get where they are going. We then layer all this understanding into the candidate identification and assessment process to deliver a deeply vetted pool of candidates, all of whom have the power to transform our client organizations.”
- Molly Brennan

CEOCFO: *Ms. Brennan, according to the Koya website, the right person in the right place can change the world. How do you accomplish that?*

Ms. Brennan: We ensure that our entire search process emphasizes and incorporates personality, culture, and mission fit as much as skill set. Doing so means that when we make a placement, we are confident it is absolutely the “right” person who will be a sustainable and transformational hire.

CEOCFO: *How do you understand the cultural fit?*

Ms. Brennan: Cultural fit is both an art and a science. The “science” includes our interviewing techniques and our interview process, which is designed to incorporate internal stakeholders beyond the Board or hiring manager so the candidate can interact with a wide range of people with whom they would be collaborating or working with as peers. The “art” includes our candidate evaluation—understanding motivators, paying attention to where candidates worked in the past and what they’ve accomplished in their volunteer time, examining how they present themselves as human beings in the world. We also look at candidate communication skills and whether the way they work best fits with the way the organization works best.

CEOCFO: *Is it easy to tell when a candidate is faking it?*

Ms. Brennan: It is not always easy. As recruiters, we are constantly questioning our gut instinct because that is when bias comes to the forefront. As humans, we are all affected by unconscious bias, especially when we are “going with our gut.” To avoid this, we try to remain aware of bias and ensure that we have multiple interactions with candidates using multiple techniques and talking about a range of issues. That way, we’re relying on more than a quick, one-hit gut experience after an introductory call.

CEOCFO: *What types of organizations are turning to you for placements?*

Ms. Brennan: We work exclusively with nonprofit organizations. A nonprofit has to have a budget that allows them to invest in an executive search firm; sometimes that dictates the size of an organization. Most organizations that come to a search firm are eager for partnership, advice, and guidance from an experienced consultant. Partnering with a search firm can help convey an organization’s progressive outlook on hiring and their focus on the importance of talent.

CEOCFO: *How do you know a nonprofit is on the up-and-up when they come to you for service?*

Ms. Brennan: We do basic due-diligence to the best of our ability. We are not forensic accountants, we are consultants. If something emerged during the search that gave us pause, we would bring that to our client contact (who is usually a board member).

CEOCFO: *What are some of the challenges unique or different for nonprofits and what are some of the easier parts as well?*

Ms. Brennan: Parsing exactly what clients mean when they say they are “seeking candidates with passion for the mission” can be challenging. We help clients think out of the box, which would apply to any search partnership, for profit or nonprofit. Another challenge is helping a client see the potential in candidates who do not come from a typical path. More and more nonprofits are interested in candidates who come from the for-profit sector.

CEOCFO: *What about candidates looking for more technology than some of the nonprofits may have?*

Ms. Brennan: It may be a misperception that all nonprofits are behind the times in terms of technology. The clients we work with are fairly progressive in terms of innovation and technology. Most of our clients are pushing their organizations to be on the cutting-edge because they know it’s necessary to make the impact they want to make.

CEOCFO: *How do you reach out to potential clients and potential candidates?*

Ms. Brennan: On the candidate side, we have the great fortune of having a deep and wide network of candidates and clients we’ve worked with over the last fourteen years in business. We leverage our network extensively on both the client and the candidate side. We’ve also built an effective research team whose job it is to approach every single search with a fresh set of eyes. They look to the broader industry to identify potential candidates and connectors who we then contact with opportunities or to gather referrals.

CEOCFO: *You mentioned nonprofits are looking for people coming from the business side. Why is that?*

Ms. Brennan: I think that over the last decade the nonprofit sector has increasingly become aware of the importance of what used to be considered “classic” business skills, especially people and financial management, strategic visioning and execution, and risk management. The belief that nonprofits do not need those skills has dissipated. Nonprofits are realizing that to be effective they need to operate in many of the same ways that businesses do.

CEOCFO: *How is business?*

Ms. Brennan: We are fortunate that we’ve grown significantly over the last few years, which has allowed us to work with more and more clients. We are feeling hopeful. In general, 2016 was a great year.

CEOCFO: *What has changed in your approach?*

Ms. Brennan: One thing that has become increasingly important both internally and in our external search work is the importance of diversity and inclusion. Specifically, building diverse teams can help nonprofits increase the impact and effectiveness of their efforts, and forming an inclusive culture enhances and grows diversity. Awareness and prioritization of diversity and inclusion has increased dramatically in our industry over the last five or six years.

CEOCFO: *Would you tell us about the Corporate Giving Program?*

Ms. Brennan: Everyone who works at Koya is motivated by the opportunity to impact a sector and a set of causes that we care about. To nurture that core value, our CEO Katie Bouton and I instituted the Corporate Giving Program, which we refer to as the Passion Project. Every employee every year gets a dollar amount to give in any capacity to an organization of their choosing. One employee used her Passion Project stipend to help mend hiking trails. Others have donated to local education foundations. Another employee used her stipend to fund a local screening of “He Named Me Malala,” the documentary about Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Malala Yousafzai, and raised \$2,500 for the Malala Fund. Sharing these stories builds a culture of philanthropy from within. The Passion Project allows our employees to be philanthropists and to learn firsthand the impact that philanthropy can have. And it is another way for Koya to give back to the nonprofit sector that we are so deeply committed to.

CEOCFO: *Would you tell us about your various locations and if you see the need to add additional locations?*

Ms. Brennan: We are a national company. We have employees working all over the country, some concentrated in offices and others working remotely. Our largest physical offices are in the Boston, Chicago, and Los Angeles areas. We also have staff in New York, San Francisco, Washington, D.C. and other locations.

CEOCFO: *How do you encourage team spirit when people are working virtually?*

Ms. Brennan: Building a successful virtual organization takes a lot of intention and planning. More important than any single retreat is the series of everyday actions we do to create a relationship-driven environment. We use video technology for internal meetings rather than phone calls, for example, which adds a human connection. We budget for small group gatherings, so a team might have the chance a few times a year to come together in person. We also encourage and coordinate professional development opportunities so people from around the country can participate

together. Someone who lives in Washington, D.C., for example, might attend a conference with colleagues who live in San Francisco and Chicago.

CEOCFO: *Why choose Koya Leadership Partners for your search?*

Ms. Brennan: Clients choose Koya because we do an exceptional job of understanding who our clients are, what their essential work is, and what they need to get where they are going. We then layer all this understanding into the candidate identification and assessment process to deliver a deeply vetted pool of candidates, all of whom have the power to transform our client organizations.

