

# First Headhuntress Stalks Tokyo

By Leslie Brody

"Even my husband teases me about having a row of salary-men's shrunken heads above the mantel," says Anne Poole, the first and only female headhunter in Japan.

More politely known as "executive search," her job demands dozens of phone calls a day to lure top Japanese professionals to leave their companies and join her clients, by tempting them with juicy raises in pay, perks, and new responsibilities.

"It's surprising that about 50 percent of the candidates who hear what you've got to offer are interested in hearing more," says Poole. "There are a lot of people out there who feel frustrated in their jobs."

Headhunting has been big business in the West almost since business began, and now it's on the rise even here in the land famed for loyalty to the company and lifetime employment. Since the first few headhunting firms opened in Tokyo in the late 60s, their number has grown to over 25. Almost all recruit Japanese specialists in the high tech and financial fields for the

foreign firms here that simply can't find qualified help themselves.

Poole, a scout for Technics in Management Transfer (TMT), is a softspoken yet plucky woman who confesses to being "just on the brink of 30." Ironically, in the country still considered the most challenging for headhunters on the chase, having a woman's voice might help.

According to one executive Poole recruited for a position in sales management, "If a man had called up with a job offer, I would have been on the defensive, and nervous that my boss was trying to get rid of me. Her voice sounded softsell and sincere so I considered the proposal." He was in his new office in three months.

Some men may warm to "soft" words, but Poole insists with a grin that she "would never resort to feminine wiles" to coax the candidates, "and would certainly never giggle."

## Being Unique

She suspects her true advantage lies in being unique in the field. "Getting a job offer not just from a woman, but from a foreign woman speaking Japanese, has got to be a first for these guys. It piques their curiosity, so they hear me out."

Tracking down the qualified candidates is the part that requires wiles, feminine or otherwise. Headhunters decline to tell their tricks, but often depend on a vast range of company directories, and lists of university graduates, MBAs, and professional clubs. Anything can help, from the most intricate computers filled with thousands of names and resumes to the most casual tips overheard in company cafes.

The spoils of the hunt, however, may make it worthwhile. Search firms claim a hefty commission—commonly 35 percent—of the candidate's first year's salary, which averages ¥10 million in the white-collar league, but can double that figure. The

target at TMT is for each scout to place two people per month, and Poole confides gingerly that "my track record at the firm is as good as the men's."

Japan's economic success has been a boon to headhunters; as business has brightened, the traditional stigma against changing jobs has faded.

"The concept of lifetime employment is rapidly disappearing," notes Paul

once and it's much easier to do it again."

Many Japanese still have qualms, however, about the honor of headhunters, who seem bent on robbing companies of their best personnel.

"Sure, most headhunters have mixed feelings about what we do," says Nevins. "We affect the fates and fortunes of many people and companies. But it's a valuable service that can really help careers, and not often hurt them."

## Attract the Dissatisfied

Scouts prefer to see themselves as givers of opportunity than as thieves. They point out that candidates don't usually make dramatic career moves just for the money, although getting a 20 percent raise is standard.

More often, the scouted say they are attracted by the chance to get ahead in a foreign firm faster than they could in the strict hierarchy of a Japanese firm. Younger employees who served in foreign branches are often dissatisfied when they come home because they enjoyed more authority overseas. Older employees who just missed promotion to the company's few top posts are another source of frustrated talent.

"The best part of my job is offering opportunities to people who crave them," says Poole. Her very first commission is a case in point; she brought a woman who was stifling in a low-level desk job to a management position in an American firm. "She would never have gotten such a good job in a Japanese company. The working situation is still so grim for Japanese women. I have high hopes for placing more of them in the future. Unfortunately there's still a shortage of women with the right qualifications."

As the Japanese become more game for job shifts, more headhunters are likely to stalk the proverbial jungle out there. And in time perhaps, more of the hunters, and the hunted, will be women.



Anne Poole

Draughn, general manager of Korn/Ferry Int'l, one of Tokyo's largest executive search firms.

"The big change now is that even Japanese companies are starting to use search firms to find employees for their offices inside Japan. It's definitely becoming easier to work with Japanese prospects."

Indeed, a 1984 survey by Recruit, a job placement agency, found that 16 percent of the college graduates in Tokyo would change jobs if contacted by a headhunter, and 61 percent would consider it.

Another recent study by the search firm IMCA discovered that one out of every three Japanese employees in their mid-20s and mid-30s wants to change jobs, and 2.4 million people do so every year.

"With computerization, people's skills are changing faster than ever, so higher job turnover is natural," points out TMT's managing director, Thomas Nevins. He adds, only partly in jest, that "changing jobs is like divorce; do it