

Everything You Know About Executive Search is Wrong

[Episode Replay link\(https://youtu.be/1IM8HFyy6Q0\)](https://youtu.be/1IM8HFyy6Q0)

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Growth Arc Advisors Webinar

Hosted by: Growth Arc Advisors LLC

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Summary

Kendall Justiniano spent more than 30 years as a commercial executive in the materials industry at Dow Chemical, PolyOne, and W.R. Grace, running P&Ls from \$100M to \$700M through the kind of transitions that serious executive searches follow. He developed the methodology behind this session through his own searches and has applied it since in coaching executives through theirs at Growth Arc Advisors.

The session's central argument: the conventional executive search approach is well-suited to an earlier stage of a career and tends to work against candidates at the executive level. The channels that feel familiar, the resume format that has always held up, the interview posture that has historically worked — each was built for a different stage and a different reader. Understanding where each breaks down at the executive level, and what replaces it, is the practical work the session's eight insights address.

The Channel Problem

Most senior executives concentrate their search energy in two channels: job boards and retained recruiters. Both are useful as sources of information about what roles exist. As primary vehicles for access to the person who controls the hiring decision, both introduce a filtering layer at exactly the point that matters most.

The executive who controls the hire is the senior leader with the problem the role is meant to solve. Recruiters, HR, and applicant tracking systems each serve as gates along the path to that person. A candidate who enters through any of those gates is competing to make a list — a list managed by people who are not accountable for the ultimate hire and are not optimizing for any individual candidate. The highest-probability path at the executive level bypasses those gates, reaching the senior executive with the problem before a formal process has started.

A client of Kendall's who structured his campaign this way sent 600 cover letters and resumes directly to targeted senior executives by mail. The package was written specifically for a Sr. Executive reader. In three months: a 10 percent response rate from senior executives. One CEO called the candidate directly, nine months before the role he had in mind would be posted. That director joined the company at VP level.

The Package Problem

Executive resumes are most commonly built to clear filters. The problem is that the document optimized to pass an ATS, satisfy a recruiter, or move through HR review is a different document from the one that compels a senior executive to pick up the phone. Most executives have only ever written the first one, because nobody has told them there are two.

A resume built for filters is a credential inventory: a structured list of activities and responsibilities, organized to demonstrate coverage of a job description. A senior executive reading a resume is asking a different question. What happened when this person was in the room? A story answers that question. An inventory lists activities without one.

Each role entry in an executive resume should carry the beats that make a leadership story legible: what the situation was when this person arrived, what was at stake for the business, what made this hard to navigate, what they did to change the trajectory, and what the measurable result was. When those elements are present and in sequence, the strategic arc of a career becomes visible. When they are absent, what remains is a flat list of activities that reads identically to every other candidate's.

The element candidates most consistently edit out is the challenge. They leave it out because it feels like a complaint or reveals organizational dysfunction. It is, in fact, the primary signal the executive reader is looking for. Competent execution in a clean mandate signals project management. Navigating inherited dysfunction, organizational resistance, and unclear scope signals leadership. Kendall walked through a senior executive with 25 years of experience whose most significant achievement read as an execution story until the challenge, the political complexity, and a \$100 million capital decision were restored to the narrative. Same facts. Fundamentally different document.

The cover letter carries the same structural problem. Most cover letters are written in the posture of an applicant: "I am writing to express my interest," "I believe I would be a strong fit." The framing Kendall recommends treats the letter as an offer — surfacing a specific capability for a reader who may or may not have the problem it addresses. The letter opens with the offer. The search is incidental to it.

The Interview Problem

By the time a candidate is in the room for an executive interview, the capability question is settled. The recruiter has already vetted them. The hiring executive is asking a harder question: is this person going to help me think differently about this problem?

Standard interview preparation focuses on the past. Rehearsed stories, anticipated objections, a polished experience narrative — all of it prepares a candidate to demonstrate what they have already demonstrated on paper. The senior executive in that room is not re-checking credentials. They are determining whether this person will challenge their thinking on the specific problem the role exists to address.

The preparation that matters most lives in the questions a candidate plans to ask, not the answers they rehearse. The right questions surface genuine tensions in how the interviewer has been thinking about the problem. They require the interviewer to actually think. When a candidate asks the question that makes a senior executive pause and say "that is a good question — I have not thought about it that way," the dynamic of the conversation has shifted. The candidate is no longer being evaluated. They are in a peer conversation.

The corollary: making your case in an interview is less effective than most candidates expect. An argument pitched against a mis-framed problem does not correct the frame. It tends to calcify it. The executives who get hired are not the ones who made the strongest case. They are the ones who made the interviewer feel understood, and then offered a perspective that expanded their thinking.

About Kendall Justiniano

Kendall Justiniano spent more than 20 years as a commercial executive in the materials industry at Dow Chemical, PolyOne (now Avient), and W.R. Grace. He is the Founder and CEO of Growth Arc Advisors LLC. He holds an MBA with highest distinction from the University of Michigan and a BS in Chemical Engineering from Purdue University.

About Growth Arc Advisors LLC

After a 30 year career as an executive in the chemical industry, founder Kendall Justiniano started Growth Arc Advisors to help chemical business leaders implement the new thinking required for changing fundamentals. We're experienced industry operators who know the old playbooks, their gaps, and the new pages required.

The firm delivers customized engagements for Materials Executives in 3 key areas:

Commercial Effectiveness: increasing growth revenue through proven next-level commercial practices, including digital sales & marketing.

Strategy: helping clients navigate threats generated by sustainability, digital, and global demand shifts.

Innovation: accelerating return on innovation through focused investment.