Client:

NORTHUMBRIAN WATER living water

Role: Procurement Category Manager

Sector: Utilities / Infrastructure / Procurement

Finding the Right Procurement Specialist for a Critical Infrastructure Programme

The Challenge

Northumbrian Water was about to start one of the most significant infrastructure investment programmes in its history.

As part of the UK's AMP8 investment cycle, the business was preparing to deliver a multi-billion-pound programme of capital works designed to improve and modernise water infrastructure across the region. To support these projects, the procurement team needed to appoint a Category Manager with responsibility for managing complex engineering and construction contracts.

The technical requirements were highly specialised.

The successful candidate needed experience in managing NEC4 contract frameworks together with procurement expertise gained within a major capital project environment. Beyond technical ability, Northumbrian Water was looking for someone who would thrive within its collaborative, high-performing culture.

The assignment was even more challenging for us as it was not an exclusive search.

Northumbrian Water was managing applications through its own internal recruitment team while simultaneously working with several external recruitment partners, all competing to identify the strongest candidate within a short recruitment window.

Our Approach

Rather than beginning with a list of potential candidates, we began with a detailed understanding of what success would look like.

The technical requirements were exceptionally niche, making it essential to understand not only the role itself but the practical experience that underpinned the specification.

Although the search focused on procurement professionals with experience of major infrastructure projects, we knew that the most suitable candidate might not be immediately apparent, based on job title alone.

The breakthrough came during an entirely separate conversation with a procurement professional who was considering her next career move.

Initially, there was little connection between her current employer and Northumbrian Water.

However, by taking the time to explore her experience in greater depth and careful questioning, we uncovered her significant experience in NEC4 contracts, gained while managing procurement activity for major capital expenditure projects.

Those specialist skills aligned precisely with Northumbrian Water's requirements.

Rather than relying solely on keywords or job titles, we recognised the relevance of her experience and quickly introduced her to the client.

The Outcome

The candidate progressed successfully through Northumbrian Water's two-stage interview process and was offered the position.

Stephenson Stappard introduced the successful candidate and completed the assignment within the client's demanding recruitment timetable.

Two years later, the successful candidate remains with the business, where she has become a valued member of the procurement team and continues to support the delivery of Northumbrian Water's ambitious infrastructure programme.

Why This Matters

Successful recruitment isn't always about searching harder. Sometimes it's about asking better questions.

Technical recruitment often relies heavily on matching job titles, qualifications or keywords. However, specialist appointments frequently depend on uncovering experience that isn't immediately obvious.

This assignment demonstrates the value of curiosity, commercial judgement and taking the time to understand a candidate's broader career experience.

By looking beyond the obvious and recognising the significance of highly specialised procurement expertise, Stephenson Stappard was able to identify the strongest candidate in a competitive market.

The result wasn't simply a successful placement; it was the right appointment for the client, delivered through experience, insight and a genuine understanding of both the market and the individual.

Key Results

Challenge: Recruit a Category Manager with specialist NEC4 procurement experience to support a major AMP8 infrastructure investment programme.

Approach: Relationship-led recruitment, detailed technical questioning and identification of transferable specialist experience through an in-depth candidate conversation.

Outcome: Successful appointment delivered within a competitive contingent recruitment process involving multiple recruitment partners and an internal talent team.

Added Value: Demonstrated how curiosity, technical understanding and informed judgement can uncover exceptional candidates whose most valuable experience may not be immediately visible on a CV.

The AMP8 programme is really important to Northumbrian Water, and we needed to appoint a Category Manager responsible for managing complex engineering and construction contracts. We'd been looking for a while and had reviewed many candidates, but we needed someone with specific skills. Peter took a consultative approach, asked the right questions and identified what we really needed in terms of cultural fit and technical capability.

The successful candidate was someone Peter had interviewed in detail, looking beyond the CV and sector, to find solid experience of managing NEC4 contracts. It's as if he knew where to look and what to ask.

Steve Betts, Senior Procurement Manager, Northumbrian Water Group

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