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PROFESSIONAL SERVICES

How Arizona recruiter Kathleen Duffy hunts top talent at agency she founded



Kathleen Duffy, taking a break during a hike in Tempe, runs an executive search firm in the Valley.

HAILEY MENSIK
Reporter, Phoenix Business Journal



Kathleen Duffy has a knack for finding people who are the right fit. She realized it back at Arizona State University decades ago while handling recruitment for her sorority and another campus club.

“Everything that I did had this common theme of recruiting talent to an organization,” Duffy said. “However, nobody talked about that as being a career.”

She pivoted from studying education to communications, and after graduating landed a job with a local boutique executive search firm.

Today, she runs her own Phoenix-based executive search firm, the Duffy Group. Her company, which she founded in 1991, connects midsized companies to qualified candidates for open executive positions. Her firm has 42 employees spread across 14 states, ranked among the Business Journal’s largest woman-owned businesses.

Duffy’s time spent hunting top talent has stretched through several economic downturns that upended the job market, along with the rise of the internet and other technology that has changed the way people work entirely.

When she first started, Duffy remembers having to mail a packet of physical copies of candidates’ resumes to clients. And when job hunting sites like Monster.com and Career Builder first came out, she feared they might eliminate the need for third party recruiters. Now AI is threatening to eliminate many professional jobs in the recruiting space.

“AI might be able to help with the sourcing and identification of who some of these executive-level individuals are that are in niche industries,” Duffy said.

“But it’s not having a recruiter go out and talk to those executives and build that relationship and garner that trust and be transparent about what that opportunity is. AI is just not going to get there. I think because we’re in an industry that is so reliant on being human that technology is only going to help us to be better at what we do,” Duffy said.

Other recent shake-ups within the job market that are still unfolding include impacts from the Covid-19 pandemic, and what exactly the future of work looks like.

Duffy’s firm is entirely remote as has been since she started it, allowing employees to have better work life balance like she sought early in her career. Her approach also includes a fee structure not tied to a candidate’s potential compensation, which is unique in the industry.

“I started Duffy Group with the ultimate purpose of being able to do what I love to do, and to be available for my kids when they are getting off the bus from school,” Duffy said.

“We continue to be a virtual company, and we were even before being a virtual company was a cool thing to be. So the foundation of our value system is all around work life balance and work life harmony and being able to back each other up,” she said.

What’s your favorite question to ask when interviewing candidates? I’ll ask a candidate, ‘So this has nothing to do with this job, but tell me something that you’re really curious about and you love to learn about.’ I get all sorts of different answers to that, and it just helps me to understand the type of person that they are, and again, their curiosity factor. It helps me to get to know them a little better.

Over the course of your career, how has the idea of what makes a “good leader” changed? I would say that 35 years ago, we didn’t dig into the culture as much. And even mission alignment. You weren’t digging into the culture because there weren’t as many companies as there are today. I remember it was probably in the mid-1990s, where things like unlimited soda in the break room were a big deal, and then you started adding the ping-pong tables. I don’t want to call it a fad, but that was going on for a certain period of time. Now, that’s still in many organizations, but it’s not as big a deal anymore, because people are more interested in having probably a hybrid type of work relationship, so that’s a piece of the culture.”

Do you have any hobbies? My husband and I enjoy traveling, we like to mix it up between out of the country and in the country. We found that we really have not even experienced so many things the United States has to offer, so we like to do that. I’m also a new grandmother, and I’m very excited to have a grandchild and to be able to spend time with her.

Do you have any career regrets? No, not really. When I started Duffy Group it was really about being able to earn a living so that I could pay my bills. I did not have a strategic business plan. But what happened is as I started meeting other people, they wanted what I had. They loved recruiting. They wanted to be a professional recruiter but they wanted to pick their kids up at the bus stop. And so that’s really how the business grew. The other piece of it was that a lot of people liked the model, they were tired of these really high fees, and they were looking for something different. So then it just took off.

THE DUFFY FILE

Title: President and CEO

Company: Duffy Group

Education: Bachelor’s degree, communication, Arizona State University

How did you make your first dollar? Probably baby-sitting for four hours at 25 cents an hour



A DAY IN THE LIFE

We asked Kathleen to break down a typical day.



5:30 a.m.
Wake up



6 a.m.
Go to Orange Theory for a workout class or do Yoga at home.



7 a.m.
Breakfast with her husband and her 92-year-old mother, who lives with them.



9 a.m.
Start the workday.



10 a.m. - noon
Client calls



1-5 p.m.
Strategy work, meetings.



6-7 p.m.
Make dinner and eat with the family.



9:30 p.m.
Bedtime