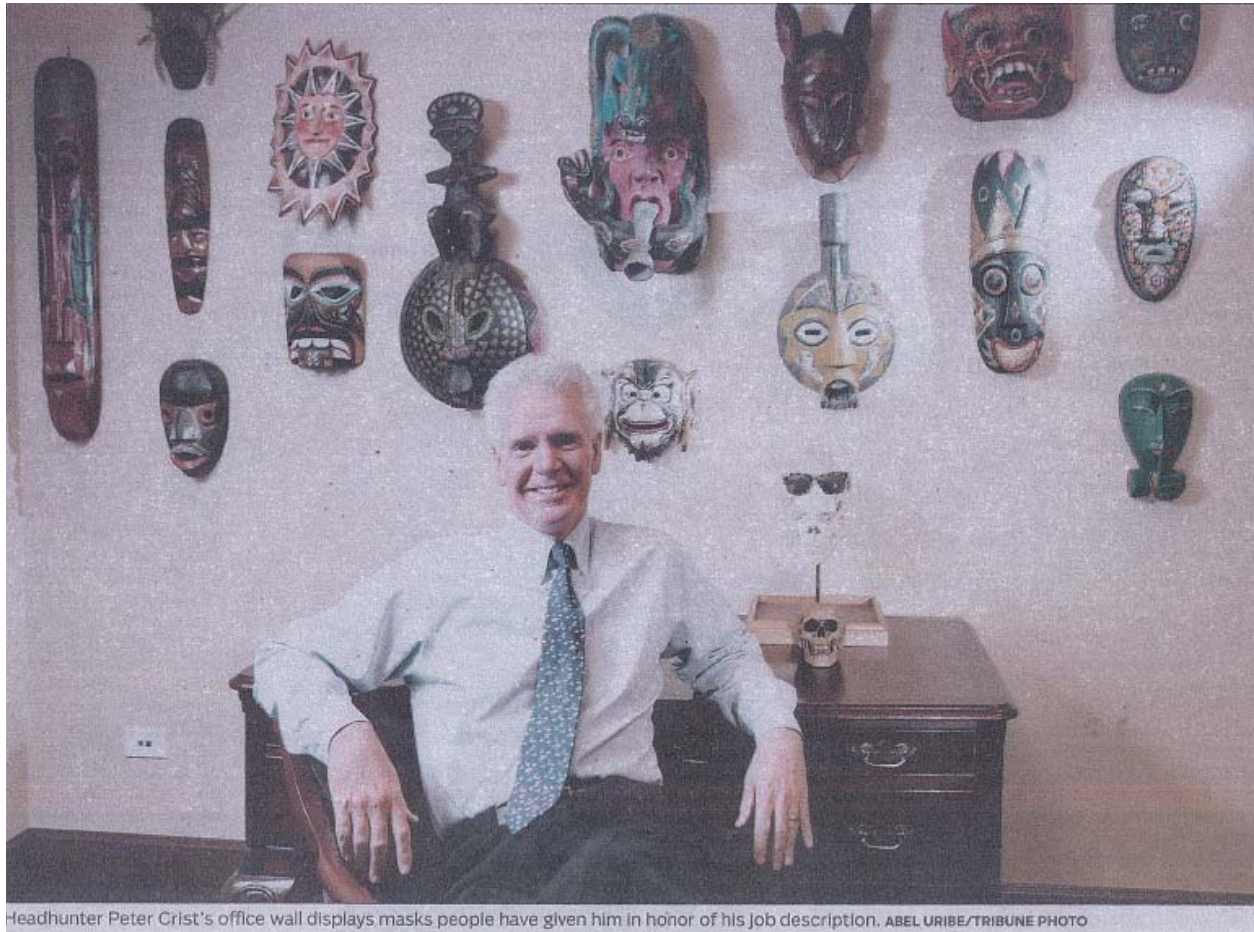


# Chicago Tribune

## Recruiting not for faint of heart

**Peter Crist, chairman of Crist|Kolder Associates, says job requires physical stamina, willingness to do what's right even if client is hesitant**

By Ann Therese Palmer, Special to the Tribune  
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Headhunter Peter Crist's office wall displays masks people have given him in honor of his job description. ABEL URIBE/TRIBUNE PHOTO

For two nights in December, while waiting to hear whether Microsoft Corp. Chief Financial Officer Chris Liddell would move to General Motors, executive recruiter Peter Crist couldn't sleep.

"If Liddell said no, I'd convinced myself we couldn't get a better player into the chair," said Crist, 57, chairman of Hinsdale-based Crist|Kolder Associates, a firm specializing in chief executive, chief financial officer and corporate board searches.

"So many things complicated the search — GM, the TARP money, Detroit, GM's CEO Fritz Henderson just having been fired," Crist said. "The thought of starting over just horrified me."

A typical workday for Crist starts at 4 a.m. He jumps on the exercise bike in his basement while reading military history books, a routine that takes his mind off of work and helps him endure the frequent day trips — he's accumulated 5 million frequent-flier miles — to New York, Dallas or Detroit.

"If you don't have a regimen to stay in shape and burn off the stress, you get overwhelmed," he said. "This is a body-contact sport. Most of what I do requires me to be somewhere physically to meet people. It requires physical stamina, rigor."

Several years ago, Crist learned his job required another discipline: listening to his gut and speaking up.

A client insisted on seeing candidates from only General Electric. Crist's instincts warned him that such a decision would be too limiting. The client then selected a person with "good, but not great" references. Crist resisted the urge to object. "The client was headstrong, a very smart person I respected," he said.

Six months later, he found out that the candidate wasn't working out. He reopened the search, considering all qualified candidates, and successfully found the right person for the job.

"I learned a big lesson," Crist said. "I allowed myself to be talked into something my instincts told me wouldn't work. I learned to trust my instincts, even if it's something the client doesn't want to hear."

As for Crist's instincts on Liddell? On Dec. 18, Liddell took the GM job.

Q. When you're evaluating C-level candidates, what are you looking for?

A. Malleability. Can you go from one industry to another at the high end?

Are you an inspirational leader? I'm not looking for a noisy, preacher-type. An inspirational leader can be very quiet, but they get people to think about things they haven't before, excited about concepts and markets.

I'm looking for subtle leadership qualities. Do you hear and see things others can't? Do you have empathy? How do you treat the waiter or waitress when we're eating, or my assistants when you're on the phone?

Q. In your career, what are some important lessons you've learned?

A. Sensitivity towards people, particularly displaced people. Being let go from a job is one of the most vulnerable times in a person's life. If you don't respond with empathy, they'll never forget it.

When I was a young partner at Russell Reynolds, a displaced exec called a partner there who never responded. Five years later, when the person was a CEO, we were competing for an assignment from his firm. The CEO told me he wouldn't give it to us because we'd ignored him.

Q. Anything else?

A. When I was in my early 40s, I was struggling as co-head of Russell Reynolds' North American business, opening offices in Menlo Park (Calif.) and Toronto. When my clients would call me with assignments, they'd ask me what I was doing there.

I resisted giving up my clients, because I realized that's what I was really good at. Finally, my boss said there are two types of people: practitioners or people who lead. I had to choose whether I wanted to compete to eventually run the entire firm or be the best recruiter in the country. It was my defining moment. I realized I wanted to be a practitioner.

Q. During interviews, what do you ask candidates they're not expecting?

A. If you're announced as CEO of X Corp. tomorrow, how will the broad constituencies respond — the analysts, public markets? That requires a sophisticated response.

Then I ask: My client's college roommate knows you. What does he say when he calls my client after reading he's hired you?

Q. What would readers be most surprised to learn about your management style?

A. If you send me an e-mail or call me, I reply as soon as possible. I work very hard at being accessible.

### **Step by step**

2004-present: Chairman, Crist|Kolder Associates, Hinsdale

2003-2004: Chairman, Crist Associates, Hinsdale

1999-2003: Vice chairman/head of global board practice, Korn/Ferry International, Chicago

1995-99: President, Crist Partners, Chicago

1991-95: Co-head for North America, Russell Reynolds, Chicago

1989-91: Head of Chicago office, Russell Reynolds

1983-89: Managing director, Russell Reynolds

1981-82: Executive director, Russell Reynolds

1979-80: Vice president, Russell Reynolds

1977-78: Associate, Russell Reynolds

1974-76: Tour director, E.F. McDonald, San Francisco

1974: Bachelor of arts, Brown University, Providence, R.I.

Summers 1972-73: Roll-steel lineman, Miami Industries, Piqua, Ohio

Summers 1970-71: Laborer, Heimel Construction, Piqua

1968-70: Busboy, Terry's Cafeteria, Piqua

1967-68: Caddy, Piqua Country Club

1962-66: Paperboy, Dayton Daily News and Piqua Daily Call