



Spotlight



Holly Peña, Founder and CEO & Carlos Peña, Founder and President: Peña Search



Peña Search, founded in 2009, focuses on the placement of leaders inside mission-driven organizations.

Brief summary of what got you into executive search and built your firm:

In 1999, after practicing law for 7 years, Holly joined the Dallas office of a husband and wife-led Texas-based legal search firm. Carlos, after 11 years as VP of University Advancement at The University of Texas at Dallas and ready for a change, reached out

to a recruiter who had contacted him over the years. The recruiter invited Carlos to join his Dallas-based boutique executive search firm. Having seen how well Holly had done in legal search and how much she enjoyed it, Carlos decided to give it a try and also loved it. A few years later, Holly and Carlos decided to join forces and launch their own search firm, bringing together the best elements of their experience thus far and incorporating new ones for a shared vision.

What are the shared attributes of the clients you have most successfully partnered with? What made those relationships so enjoyable?

Passion for the mission of the organization and a genuine commitment to that mission. Also, sharing a commitment to the communities the organization serves. It's truly gratifying work and such an honor and privilege to partner with our clients inside the valuable and often critical missions they undertake in service to others.

What's one thing people would be surprised to learn about you?

That fundamentally, we are both introverts who simply bring the necessary extrovert qualities to our work.

What are the types of opportunities you are most known for specializing in?

We are recognized for working almost exclusively in the nonprofit sector, conducting C-level searches (CEO, CFO, CDO, CMO, etc.) for foundations, social and human services agencies, museums, and other cultural organizations, professional and trade associations, and educational institutions. Due to the high demand and particular difficulty of searches in the fundraising space, we also conduct C2 and C3 level searches and have gained a reputation for consistently delivering high-quality results in that arena.

How does the culture of your organization lead to your success?

We embrace a culture of continuous learning and improvement. Aiming to stay informed about industry trends, best practices, and emerging technologies, we work to adapt and evolve to better serve our clients and candidates. We believe in empowering our team members to reach their full potential because collaboration and teamwork are essential to our success. We also value the well-being of our team members and promote and support a healthy work-life balance. In a constantly evolving landscape, we make a concerted effort to embrace change and challenges as opportunities for growth and innovation, likely resulting in new ways to add value and meet the evolving needs of our team, our clients, and our candidates.

What do you have little patience for?

Carlos: For meetings that are longer than necessary. and for people that "love to listen to themselves talk."





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What are the biggest trends you are seeing with your clients in attracting, onboarding and retaining the best of the best in your niche?

Flexibility in the working hours and location (remotely/hybrid), and a work schedule that offers the opportunity to have a balanced life.

What do you still hope to accomplish in your life and within your firm?

To see the firm grow at least twofold and build a significant presence outside of Texas, with every team member also growing in their roles within the firm and their incomes.

What have you been most proud of professionally?

Holly: The team we have in place now and their tenure with us.

Carlos: To have done something I never, ever thought I would do/be—an entrepreneur/business owner.



What's your leadership philosophy?

Our leadership philosophy is rooted in the idea of service. Every decision and action we take should align with serving the missions of our clients and serving candidates and each other as we work toward those ends. Integrity is the foundation of our relationships and transparency. This helps guide our decisions, ensuring trust and credibility. As a woman and minority-owned firm, from the outset, we have been committed to promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion. From our personal experience, we recognize the value of diverse perspectives and seek to foster inclusive environments. As members of the nonprofit sector community, we recognize our responsibility to give back to the communities we serve. Through volunteerism, philanthropy, and pro bono work, when possible, we strive to make a positive impact beyond our professional endeavors.

If you hadn't taken the path of building an executive search firm, you would have...

Holly: My dream job, aside from being in executive search, would be being a dossier writer in the foreign intelligence community.

Carlos: Continue to work in higher education with the goal of becoming a college president one day.

Did you have any life-changing experiences that put you on the path that led you to be doing what you're doing today?

We both have experience living in different countries on multiple occasions, and those experiences gave us an openness to other cultures and people, broadening our viewpoints in fundamental, life-changing ways. In addition, we both grew up in families that cared about the communities where they lived, giving back to make life for others better, hence the focus on the nonprofit sector.



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What motivates you to work as hard as you do?

A commitment to excellence motivates us to work hard. We hold ourselves accountable for delivering results with the highest quality and professionalism, striving to exceed expectations and continuously raise the bar for ourselves and our industry. Additionally, we are inspired and motivated by the hard work that our clients do every day. We owe it to them and the people they serve in the missions they pursue to work hard and do our best.

What are some of the biggest lessons you've learned throughout this journey in executive search?

Holly: Always anticipate detours and roadblocks and know that somehow, particularly with the input of the smarter people you have around you, you will find the way around to the best possible outcome despite the setbacks.

Carlos: That you can never take anything or anyone for granted. You must work hard every day as if it is your first day on the job.

What was your first job as a kid?

Holly: Excluding a corner lemonade stand with my brother, my first job was being a babysitter for a family with eight children, elementary school age to infant. I drove an unairconditioned 1960 VW Bug and piled many kids in that car, which was grandfathered from the new seatbelt mandate.

Carlos: I never had a job until after I graduated from college.

Is there anything you wish would come back into fashion?

Holly: Unless I grow 5 more inches, I definitely don't wish for the return of bell bottoms. Some things in the fashion graveyard, many I have worn over the years, should stay there!

Carlos: Velvet purple bell bottoms (joking, but I loved them when I wore them in middle school!)

What's your go-to Karaoke song?

Together, we can belt out Despacito pretty well. For Holly, separately and preferably out of earshot, Ain't No Mountain High Enough.

What's still on your bucket list?

Holly: More time in big cities around the world and to learn to play the guitar so that people can sing along with me anywhere and anytime.

Carlos: More time in big cities around the world, AND to see a live recording of SNL.

FAVORITE QUOTE

"Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better."

– Maya Angelou



FAVORITE QUOTE

"My goal in life is to become as wonderful as my dog thinks I am."

– Toby Green

