Recruitment Agency vs Headhunter: What Is the Difference?

A recruitment agency fills roles with people who are already open to a move, using job ads and its own database, and usually charges only when you hire. A headhunter approaches specific people who aren't looking, works exclusively on your search and asks for part of the fee upfront. In SaaS sales, the recruitment agency vs headhunter line is blurring, as the strongest specialist agencies now do a bit of both.

Key Takeaways

- Recruitment agencies run many vacancies at once and usually charge 20% to 25% of gross annual salary, only on a hire.
- Headhunters take fewer searches, work exclusively and typically charge 30% to 33%, partly upfront.
- Confidential, senior and scarce sales roles need a direct approach, while common profiles can be filled from applicants.
- Specialist SaaS agencies such as Katapult combine a direct approach with published fees and a no-upfront-cost option.

What Is the Difference Between a Recruitment Agency and a Headhunter?

The main difference is the candidate pool. A recruitment agency mostly works with active candidates who respond to ads or are in its database, while a headhunter maps the market and approaches people who are happy where they are. The fee model differs: agencies usually work on no cure, no pay, while headhunters charge a retainer and work exclusively on your search.

	Recruitment agency	Headhunter
Candidates	Mostly active job seekers	Mostly passive, employed candidates
Sourcing	Job ads, database, network	Market mapping and direct approach
Fee model	No cure, no pay	Retained, part paid upfront
Typical fee in the Netherlands	20% to 25% of gross annual salary	30% to 33% of gross annual salary
Exclusivity	Often works alongside other agencies	Works exclusively on your search
Typical roles	Entry-level to mid-level	Senior, leadership and board roles

Fee ranges come from recruitment trainer Jacco Valkenburg's 2026 overview of the Dutch market. In practice, the labels overlap, since executive search is the formal name for retained headhunting at senior level and many agencies headhunt for harder roles. **What matters is how a partner finds candidates and how it gets paid.**

How Does a Recruitment Agency Work?

An agency advertises your vacancy, searches its database and sends you the best-matching CVs. On a no-cure-no-pay contract, you pay nothing unless someone starts, so the risk is low and it's easy to brief several agencies at once.

That convenience has a cost. Valkenburg notes that agencies on this model often work in parallel and select candidates based on their chance

of being hired rather than fit. Brief four agencies and the same CV can land in your inbox three times, with a fee discussion attached.

You get speed and volume, but your own team does the filtering. That trade-off is manageable for an SDR vacancy with plenty of applicants and painful for a senior Account Executive.

How Does a Headhunter Work?

A headhunter starts with the market, not with applicants. They map the companies where your ideal candidate works today and approach the best people there directly, reaching candidates who would never answer a job ad.

You pay for that focus in advance. Dutch retainers typically require 30% to 50% of the total fee upfront, with the rest due at milestones and on placement; 30% to 33% of annual salary is standard for executive search. **The upfront payment buys exclusivity and depth, not a guaranteed hire.**

A direct approach does pay off. Gem's 2025 Recruiting Benchmarks Report, based on 1.3 million hires, found that sourced applicants are five times more likely to be hired than inbound ones.

Headhunter vs Recruiter: Which Should You Use for a Sales Hire?

In the recruitment agency vs headhunter decision, the role decides. If strong candidates apply on their own, an agency's database and job ads will do. These signals mean you need a direct approach, the core of headhunting:

- You are replacing a sales leader and the current team cannot know yet
- The role needs a rare mix, such as a German-speaking enterprise AE with logistics experience

- Your best candidates work at competitors and will never see your job ad
- A wrong hire would cost you a quarter or more of pipeline

A direct approach doesn't have to mean a retainer. Colt Technologies needed a successor to a long-serving sales director and ran a confidential search with Katapult.

The candidate it hired was introduced nine days after the role opened, well under the [average time to fill a sales role].

Where Do Specialist SaaS Recruitment Agencies Fit?

For most SaaS sales hires, the recruitment agency vs headhunter question has a third answer. A specialist agency approaches passive candidates like a headhunter but keeps an agency fee structure.

Katapult works this way. The consultants are former SaaS professionals who contact candidates directly, and in 2025, recruitment messages got a 62% reply rate, as explained in why recruitment campaigns get no responses. Candidates also come from a network of over 10,000 commercial SaaS professionals, and you meet at most four per role, from BDR to Sales Director.

You also choose how to pay. Katapult search costs 26% of annual salary with no upfront cost. Katapult plus costs 28%, split 50% upfront and 50% at hire, and adds a prioritised search, multiple consultants and a recruitment marketing budget.

Customs4trade, a Belgian customs software company, used Katapult to hire two enterprise Account Executives within about two months. Before comparing quotes, read recruitment agency fees explained.

Weighing up recruitment agency vs headhunter for your next sales hire? Book a call with Katapult to scope the role and pick the package that fits it

Sources

1. RecruitmentTraining.pro (Jacco Valkenburg), "Wat kost een recruitmentbureau echt? Tarieven & valkuilen", 15 May 2026

Gem, "2025 Recruiting Benchmarks Report", hiring data from January 2021 to December 2024.

FAQ

Can I work with several recruitment agencies at once?

Yes, most agencies accept it on no-cure-no-pay terms. Agree on a rule for duplicate CVs first, because in Dutch practice the agency that submitted the candidate first often has the claim. An exclusive brief usually gets you more effort in return.

What types of recruitment agencies are there?

The main types are generalist agencies covering many fields and specialist agencies focused on one area, such as Katapult for SaaS sales and customer-facing roles. Executive search firms handle C-suite and board positions, while staffing agencies supply temporary workers.

Will a headhunter approach my own employees?

It can happen, since approaching people at other companies is their job, and your team may be on someone else's target list. Agree in writing that the firm will not approach your staff while it works for you and for a fixed period afterwards.

Average Time to Fill a Sales Role: Benchmarks for SaaS Companies

The average time to fill a sales role includes around five weeks of hiring. Gem's 2025 benchmark report puts the average time to hire for sales at 35 days, faster than the 41-day average across all departments. In the Netherlands, new hires then usually work a month's notice, so plan for roughly two months between briefing a search and the first working day. Senior, enterprise and language-specific roles usually take longer than the benchmark.

Key Takeaways

- Sales roles take an average of 35 days to hire, against 41 days across all departments.
- Companies now hold 21 interviews per sales hire, seven more than in 2021.
- Dutch employees usually work a month's notice before they can start.
- Plan headcount around the day a hire becomes productive, since notice and ramp add months.

What Is the Average Time to Fill a Sales Role?

Sales is one of the quicker functions to hire for. Gem's 2025 Recruiting Benchmarks Report, built on 1.3 million hires between 2021 and 2024, puts the average time to hire for sales at 35 days in 2024, one day more than in 2021. Across all departments, the average rose from 33 to 41 days over the same period. Gem reports this as days to hire. Time to fill, counted from the day the vacancy opens, is usually longer.

Department	Average days to hire, 2024	Interviews per hire, 2024
Sales	35	21
Customer Success	37	17
Marketing	39	26
Engineering	53	39
All departments	41	20

The bigger change is the number of interviews per sales hire, up from 14 to 21 since 2021. Every extra round adds days and gives a strong candidate another chance to accept a competing offer.

Time to Fill vs Time to Hire: Which Should You Track?

Track both, because they measure different stretches of the process. Time to fill starts when the vacancy is approved or published and ends when a candidate accepts your offer. Time to hire starts later, when your eventual hire enters the pipeline by applying or being sourced.

The gap between them shows where the time goes. A long time to fill with a short time to hire means you found the right person late, so sourcing is the bottleneck. When both are long, your interview process is the problem. Exclude always-open roles, such as junior sales positions, from the average, since they inflate it without saying anything about your process.

How Long Does It Take to Hire an AE in the Netherlands?

From first briefing to first working day, plan for around two months. The search itself can move fast: Katapult's average time to placement is under 30 days.

The time to fill a sales role is only part of the calendar, though. Under Dutch law, an employee's statutory notice period is one month, but an employment contract can set a longer one, up to six months. Ask about notice in the first call rather than at the offer stage.

Then add ramp time. The Bridge Group's 2025 research across 351 B2B companies puts the average SDR ramp at 3.0 months. **Your real deadline is the day a new hire builds pipeline, not the day they sign.**

Why Do Some Sales Roles Take Longer to Fill?

The Dutch labour market has cooled, yet strong sellers are still scarce. Statistics Netherlands (CBS) counted 95 vacancies for every 100 unemployed people in the second quarter of 2026, down from 142 in mid-2022. Katapult's SaaS salary benchmarks 2026 see the same split in sales: plenty of applicants, but a clear shortage of people who can run full-cycle deals on their own, especially at mid-market and enterprise level.

Several factors stretch the time to fill a sales role well past the average:

- Seniority, since enterprise and leadership candidates are few and rarely answer job ads
- Language, as Dutch employers now favour native target-market speakers over English-only profiles
- Founding roles, where the hire has to build pipeline without a playbook
- A slow process, with too many rounds or long gaps between interview and feedback
- A vacancy that hides the salary or lists requirements that do not matter

TheFork felt the language problem first-hand. Recruiting from its London headquarters, it spent months looking for Dutch field sales reps, then met its new hires two weeks after starting with Katapult.

How Can You Shorten the Time to Fill a Sales Role?

Start with sourcing. Gem found that sourced applicants are five times more likely to be hired than inbound ones, while job boards and social sites deliver 49% of applications but less than a quarter of hires. Waiting for applications is a slow way to reach a senior seller.

Then tighten the process:

1. Agree on the profile, pay range and interview stages before the vacancy goes live, as covered in how to hire salespeople
2. Publish the salary range and avoid the three mistakes we see in sales vacancies every week
3. Keep the process to three or four stages, one of them a role play
4. Give candidates feedback within two working days of each interview
5. Make the offer within days of the final round

A specialist partner shortens the search because it starts with a network rather than an empty job board. Acto, an AI revenue intelligence platform scaling across DACH, received a shortlist within 10 days of kick-off and closed its German-speaking AE roles within a month.

[Recruitment agency vs headhunter] explains which kind of partner fits your role.

Need a new seller on the team before next quarter? Book a call with Katapult and meet a maximum of four vetted candidates for the role.

FAQ

Should the notice period count towards time to fill?

No. Time to fill usually ends when the candidate accepts your offer. Track the notice period separately as time to start, since it depends on the candidate's contract rather than on your process, and base headcount plans on the start date.

Can a candidate leave their current job before the notice period ends?

Yes, if their employer agrees. Dutch rules allow the employer and employee to agree that a resignation takes effect immediately, as long as they confirm it in writing. It is worth raising when the contract sets a notice period longer than one month.

When should I start hiring to have a productive rep by next quarter?

Count backwards. Allow five weeks or more for the search, at least a month for notice and about three months of ramp for an SDR. That puts the start of the search roughly five to six months before you need the rep at full productivity.

Sources

1. Gem, "2025 Recruiting Benchmarks Report", hiring data from January 2021 to December 2024
2. Business.gov.nl (Netherlands Enterprise Agency), "Notice period in case of dismissal"
3. The Bridge Group, "SDR Models, Motions & Metrics: 2025 Research Report", 6 February 2025
4. CBS (Statistics Netherlands), "Werkloosheid gedaald in tweede kwartaal 2026", 30 July 2026