



FROM MILTON TO MILTON
Patrick and Robbie Ropella moved from Milton, Wisconsin, to Milton, Florida, where their highly specialized executive search firm is thriving and the weather is warm.

The Company You Call to Find the Needle in a Haystack

The Ropella Group finds candidates for highly specialized jobs **BY LAURA BRADLEY**

If you've ever used a Tide detergent pod, or a host of other consumer products, there's a good chance The Ropella Group, a company based in Milton, has touched your life. They're the guys who find the perfect candidates for jobs that are so specialized, only a handful of people in the world could do them well. And because they do what they do, innovative products such as Transitions lenses exist. Patrick Ropella was the one who found the perfect researcher for PPG Industries as it tried to develop airplane windows that tint as pilots fly facing the sun.

"We really specialize in needle-in-a-haystack searches," Ropella said. "The types of searches we do, often you're lucky if there are 10 people or 20 people in the world who are really A quality, versus B or C candidates who can do this job."

The Ropella Group has industry searches down to a science: It developed a 12-step process for identifying employer priorities, finding candidates who fit the bill and then selecting the perfect fit from the bunch. The process works for all of the industries it serves, which cover everything from consumer products to pharma to chemicals. The company is especially well recognized for its work in the chemicals industry, for which it has grown the world's largest database of executives and contacts.

Patrick Ropella first started out in sales almost 30 years ago in Milwaukee. After a while, he was looking for his next step — something in sales, perhaps something more

entrepreneurial. He approached recruiting firms for interviews, and they gave him the nudge that sent him to where he's landed today.

"They started to say, 'You know, you like sales, and this is sales. Recruiting is selling a service and selling yourself to the people you're recruiting,'" Ropella said. "Sure enough, 30 years later, here I am."

Ropella moved from downtown Milwaukee to downtown Chicago, where he worked at a high-end corporate search firm before going into business for himself. The Ropella Group moved to Wisconsin so that Ropella and his wife and business partner, Robbie Ropella, could raise their family outside the city. In Milton, Wisconsin, they raised their two boys, along with some horses. But the cold weather, mixed with caring for the horses, got to be a constant pest. Patrick Ropella's nephew was getting his wings in Milton, Florida, and had grown to love the area. After some nudging from the kids, and a six-month search for land to build a ranch, about 18 years ago the Ropella family relocated from Milton, Wisconsin, to Milton, Florida. Although they had to give up the horses after their sons went off to college, the Ropellas still love the area.

"On one hand, it's still oak trees and pine trees, just like Wisconsin, but on the other hand, it's just 30 minutes to the Gulf, and your palm trees and hibiscus trees are right around the corner," Ropella said.

Founded in Chicago in 1987, The Ropella Group specializes in finding top candidates for highly specialized jobs around the world. Since moving operations to Milton in Santa Rosa County, the company has been able to aggressively expand, and is now considered one of the top search firms for chemical industry recruits.

The key to The Ropella Group's success in finding the right fit for any job is its 12-step process, which is divided into three stages. In Stage One, the client and The Ropella Group set their expectations and then proceed in rounding up suitable candidates, vetting them based on how well they align with the clients' most important must-haves. In Stage Two, they interview the best candidates, and Stage Three is the hiring and onboarding process. The Ropella Group relies on behavioral interviewing — asking candidates about the nature of their participation in various jobs and projects, rather than simply the outcomes — to see which candidates tend to create success.

FINDING THE PERFECT FIT
Specializing in the chemical industry, The Ropella Group has grown the world's largest database of executives and contacts.

Robbie Ropella explained that often in the industries they work in, projects are operated by teams, rather than an individual. But within those groups, only one or two people tend to take the reins and push the project to success. Behavioral interviewing “helps us differentiate who's the leader within that team, as opposed to who was a participant,” she said.

It might seem unlikely that an executive search firm that works with clients around the world, including Nike and Dow Chemical, would be based in a small Florida town. But the Ropellas have found that on top of having better weather, the move to Florida made perfect business sense. Technology and smartphones allow business owners to get their work done anywhere, even on the go. The Ropellas have been able to travel the world, actively attending conferences and client meetings, while still keeping operations running via smartphone. This flexibility in workplace location also means that when deciding where to expand their business, the Ropellas could ignore the old rules of sticking to major metropolitan areas and move to Florida, where they enjoy a lower cost of living, have no state income tax to pay and have a state government that works to help businesses grow.

“There's a reason why Florida and Texas are the strongest, fastest-growing job creators in the country,” Patrick Ropella said. It also doesn't hurt that they live 15 minutes from an airport that never shuts down because of



“WE REALLY SPECIALIZE IN NEEDLE-IN-A-HAYSTACK SEARCHES. THE TYPES OF SEARCHES WE DO, OFTEN YOU'RE LUCKY IF THERE ARE 10 PEOPLE OR 20 PEOPLE IN THE WORLD WHO ARE REALLY A QUALITY, VERSUS B OR C CANDIDATES WHO CAN DO THIS JOB.”
PATRICK ROPELLA, CHAIRMAN, CEO & CMO OF THE ROPELLA GROUP

freezing or ice, where they can arrive and hop on a plane within a half hour. Since moving to Florida, their business has expanded to almost 35 employees and counting.

But, like every business decision, there are also drawbacks: Many people who grow up in the area tend to leave to pursue higher education elsewhere and don't come back. This makes it hard for firms like The Ropella Group that also compete with big credit unions for similarly specialized personnel. Luckily, as a recruiting firm, The Ropella Group knows a thing or two about how to find clients outside their local network: To find their own recruits, they use the same steps and techniques they employ to find other companies' hires.

It can be a challenge at times to match the right candidates with the right company; working with Nike was especially challenging because the company wanted many top materials scientists who initially had no interest in working for a tennis shoe company. But overcoming those challenges and making the perfect match is the most valuable part of the job, Robbie Ropella said.

“Once you get somebody into a company like Nike and they can put that on their résumé, and it's changed their life, and you've helped a company the size of Nike really implement talent, it's just a win-win situation all around,” she said, adding later, “It's just the best dream job that anyone could possibly have.” ■