

Bright spots shine through the doom and gloom

The picture is mixed for job hunters, but recruitment consultants say there are opportunities out there. Jamie Oliver reports.



Chris Seabourne
Partner, CTPartners

THE trouble with attempting to work out the state of the jobs market next year is that you have to speak to recruitment consultants. Being consummate sales people, they will tell you it's not all bad, there are plenty of opportunities out there. In reality, it depends on the sector and ultimately how well individual firms are being and have been run. The picture, predictably, is mixed.

"I know someone trying to fill a fairly senior manager job at the moment, in the HR (human resources) field, in Cambridge," says Steve Huxham, chairman of the Recruitment Society and also managing director of HUX Search and Selection. "In the week the job has been advertised, it has received 13 replies. So where are the 1.8m people out of work? I would have expected the post to have attracted between 50 and 60 candidates by now, but it goes to show how people are sticking where they are at the moment and not looking to move jobs."

Chris Seabourne, a partner at global search firm CTPartners, says it's a matter of time. "I think people are predisposed towards apocalyptic predictions about the year ahead," he says, "but there is pent-up demand from the last quarter of this year that will be released in the first half of 2009."

Seabourne sees two areas of growth for the year ahead - in pharmaceutical and in "clean" technology. "The big story is cleantech," he says. "There is momentum for alternative, renewable energy sources such as solar and wind and the US government is investing in this area. That means other governments will follow, as will private equity funds." He says there will be demand for large general managers as a result, plus there will be a need for cleantech sales and marketing people. "We're now in the green collar era," he says.

"The difference between this economic cycle and previous ones

is in terms of the public perception," says Raj Tulsiani, chief executive of Green Park Interim and Executive Resourcing. "This time the Government is involved and helping to shape the message that 2009 will be tough. In some ways this is positive but it also gives credence to the view that things might indeed become dreadful. A few months ago the fear was that we'd talk ourselves into recession and it appears we have done that. Of course some industries have been hard hit, but not all of them and there are signs of optimism for 2009 out there."

Firms with the right niche focus will handle the downturn better than others. David Leyshon, managing director of technical and engineering recruitment specialist CBSbutler, says there is likely to be continuing demand for people in food production, oil and gas engineering, pharmaceuticals, defence and renewable energy. "Petrochemical engineers are in huge demand. The average age in the UK of these engineers is 54 years old, and because organisations haven't invested in graduate schemes over the last 15 years, there is a huge supply and demand gap internationally."

Aerospace tends to follow automotive and manufacturing with a nine-month delay so the downturn is likely to hit the industry mid 2009," says Jon Rance, a consultant at Jonathan Lee Recruitment. He says order books at Boeing and Airbus look good at the moment and there are a number of large programmes going ahead, namely for the Boeing 747, Airbus A380, A350 and A400M. "Demand is for stress engineers, design engineers, technical supply chain specialists and fatigue engineers and these are areas where we are still experiencing skills shortages with many companies looking to Europe, including Italy, Spain and France, to fill the gaps." He adds that many firms, while cutting back on management or project management roles, will look to retain their core engineering capability.

Jo Sellwood, managing director of Strategi Search and Selection, says 2009 will force many firms to look at their operations and become more effective. "HR people are central to that," she says, "and retention becomes more important." Sellwood believes companies are becoming more cautious

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DAILY TELEGRAPH: Bright spots shine through the doom... (Continued)

when it comes to hiring, perhaps adding in an extra couple of steps in the process to ensure they have the right person.

Looking to Europe, Mike Garlick, managing director at IT recruiter MBA, says there remain "hotspots of opportunity". He adds: "Even though Germany is now officially in recession, a lot of its more conservative banks have actually benefited from the crisis and 30pc of our contractors working in Germany are British. Additionally, if candidates have a specialism, SAP or Oracle for example, they are likely to see themselves very much in demand."

The global picture is no clearer. Tony Goodwin runs recruitment firm Antal International. He founded the business in 1993 and has offices across the world. He's reasonably optimistic about the prospects ahead, not least because he feels the economic cycle has just about hit rock bottom. "There remains a dearth of talent in places such as India, China, Brazil, Russia and Eastern Europe," he says. "There are still good opportunities in a number of sectors, including healthcare, transport, waste management, renewable energy and biosciences."

Goodwin's firm employs 120 people at its two China offices, and while global demand may be slowing, the internal market in China remains huge. "We're planning to open 11 further offices in India and have plans for at least six more in China. So our plans are still on course, although instead of opening with 15 staff, we'll probably start with more like two or three people. Business is still taking place and life goes on. We're not panicking."

Perhaps not, but a final note of caution/reality comes from Claire Birkinshaw, a solicitor and legal information manager at Abbey Legal Services. The company offers advice to members of the Federation of Small Businesses. "In October 2008, more than 25pc of the advice we gave was on the subject of redundancy or lay-offs," she says. "When you think we have more than 50 categories that we offer legal advice on, for two topics to currently cover more than 25pc of the calls gives you some idea of the scale of the issue."