

# Rebalancing recruitment

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**The jobs market was heavily tested in 2008, with a seismic shift occurring in the employer-jobseeker dynamic. But as we settle into 2009, how should businesses approach recruitment going forward?**

As 2009 gets under way, business owners, managers and employees will wait on tenterhooks to see how this year pans out. The term ‘current economic climate’ is now etched permanently into the national psyche, and the ‘r’ word (it ends with ‘ession’) must surely have been the most overused noun in the Oxford English Dictionary last year. Hence, predictions for 2009 have been given with heavy doses of caution and trepidation.

Such negativity notwithstanding, many firms and their leaders remain positive. Robert Mac Giolla Phadraig, associate director, Sigmar Recruitment, is one such individual. He reminds us that 2008 wasn’t entirely bad.

“All in all, we had a good year. It was a story of two halves: sales during our first six months were very strong; we were growing at a very steady rate. However, in the third quarter, things became a little bit tougher.”

As businesses continue to tighten operations in order to remain competitive, the recruitment sector has certainly been hit. Since the turn of the century, it has been a candidate’s market, with firms increasing salaries and benefits packages to attract the best people. Movement of staff was also easy and frequent.

In 2008 that changed, as the huge increase in redundancies across the country saw a flood of candidates onto the market. That’s not necessarily a positive thing, says Mac Giolla Phadraig.

“The supply of candidates has increased, unquestionably. But if you look at any redundancy process, employers are going to let go of those people who aren’t performing, so you have a dilution of candidates in the marketplace. Employers feel they’re in the position to be a lot more selective and that they have the luxury of time, but many jobseekers are not compromising on their requirements.”

To the casual observer, the recent onslaught of job losses in the Irish economy might suggest the days of skills shortages are well and truly over, but those companies still recruiting are struggling to find the best staff.

The Small Firms Association has said there is now a clear mismatch between the skill levels of those workers being made redundant and the vacant positions on offer.

Mac Giolla Phadraig believes there is no room for complacency. “Firms still need to move very aggressively and take on people who can add value to their business. Companies need to readjust and market themselves to potential employees.”

Colm Buckley, joint managing director, The People Group, a recruitment agency that deals principally in sales, marketing, finance, administration and management positions, says the culture of expectation that existed among candidates hitherto is shifting.

“Very quickly, this country has gone from one where there were lots of jobs and not enough candidates to lots of candidates and not enough jobs. There’s no natural churn, as there’s so much caution out there at the moment. While there is apprehension in the candidates’ market, a lot of good people know their value and are confident in their sector. Indeed, their confidence in their ability to get the right job is quite discernible.”

Good companies should still expect to provide employees with a suite of benefits, says Buckley. He adds that, despite the lack of natural churn at present, having a specialist recruiter should be on a company’s priority list.

“Employers who are advertising directly are getting many more responses than normal, but I would question how relevant these candidates are. That’s where a good recruitment agency comes in.”

Mac Giolla Phadraig advises companies to focus a lot of their attention on the recruitment process.

“This is a huge test of the mettle of business leadership in Ireland and across the world, so having the right management in place is fundamental.”

Looking forward, Buckley is optimistic. “I really do think once the banks get going again, things will pick up. But I also think that employers will be more stringent in what they’re looking for and will want bang for their buck from the word go,” he says.

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