

The Straits Times, Pg B21 13 October 2008, Monday

Finance jobs: It's not all bleak

Consumer banks are still hiring, although they may offer more contract jobs, analysts say

GABRIEL CHEN

[SINGAPORE] Management University student Huang Jian An has a year to go before he graduates.

The third-year accountancy student is already nervous - not surprising, given the crisis in the financial markets.

He is sweating it out late at night filling in application forms, chatting with senior students and preparing himself for a bank internship to get a headstart in the highly competitive job market.

This year, Mr Huang, 25, hopes to snag a private wealth management-related internship with HSBC or Standard Chartered Bank (Stanchart).

He is also trying to burnish his credentials and hunt down more business-related competitions to take part in.

"It's for the future and that is why I'm beefing up my resume. Hopefully, the job market improves next year," he said.

Mr Huang is not the only one with the jitters - although experts say jobs are on offer in certain banking segments.

"Fresh graduates are getting nervous," said Mr Gary Lai, front office banking manager of search firm Robert Walters. "Many of them are trying to secure jobs even before they graduate."

Mr Lai said he has been receiving many requests from newly-minted degree holders asking him for help - but he has advised them to contact banks directly.

Financial sector jobs usually available to fresh graduates include management associate roles, branch-level financial consultants as well as risk and compliance positions, he said.

But recruiters say in these tough times, even more experienced industry personnel face difficulties in clinching new jobs.

As the credit crunch deepens and banking stocks dive, some banks are said to have frozen their headcount.

Others have imposed more stringent hiring guidelines. Before they can add headcount, for example, they must get approval from senior management.

Not surprisingly, investment banking and credit-related jobs are not exactly flavour-of-the-month at the moment.

Banks, hit by a weakened dealflow, want to avoid anything remotely linked to excessive risk-taking.

But despite the economic slowdown, some financial institutions are shopping around for talent to fill certain positions and functions, according to headhunters.

“We see a clear distinction between the commercial banks versus the first-tier investment banks, some of which are now commercial banks. Consumer and commercial banks are still hiring,” said Ms Pernille Storm, director of banking and finance at Hudson Singapore.

Mr Tan Soo Jin, vice-chairman of executive search firm Amrop Hever Group, said among those hiring are Stanchart, Citi, DBS Bank, United Overseas Bank and OCBC, as well as institutions with private banking units such as Credit Suisse.

For instance, demand is strong for staff with accounting backgrounds at banks, mostly in departments such as product control, tax, compliance and financial planning.

Tightening credit markets have brought risk issues to the fore, with many banks increasing their hiring of credit risk experts.

The need to counter fraud, especially within international investments, is also fuelling demand for forensic accountants.

Consumer banking divisions, too, have been hiring.

For instance, demand for compliance officers is still high, especially in know-your-customer roles. At the same time, staff numbers in areas such as priority banking, sales and business development are expected to grow.

Arguably, private banking remains one of the “lifelines” of the recruitment market here, but the days when banks poached entire teams and doubled salaries are certainly over, for now.

Private banks want experienced relationship managers with local networks who can hit the ground running, bringing with them clients along with their assets under management.

Ms Annie Yap, chief executive of the GMP Group, said that relationship manager or private banker positions are usually reserved for experienced and highly trained professionals in the industry.

"Fresh graduates are not immediately able to enter the specialty trade, even for private banking support positions such as marketing assistants or client servicing officers, which require at least two to three years in the banking industry," Ms Yap said.

Last month, online job portal eFinancialCareers held a roundtable discussion attended by senior internal recruiters from several leading financial institutions here.

What surfaced during the talks, said eFinancialCareers' Asia-Pacific editor Simon Mortlock, was that back and middle office roles have not been hit as hard as front office investment banking jobs.

Recruitment has become more selective, with tougher selection criteria, more interviews and greater use of competency-based and psychometric testing, he said.

Mr Mortlock said the global downturn has made switching jobs a slower process, with candidates forced to wait about eight weeks for sign-off, about double the time it took last year. Recruiters suggest that during a crisis, firms are more likely to offer contractual instead of permanent jobs.

This is because, given the unpredictability of developments, companies will have less liability in letting contractual staff go should the situation worsen, or to convert contract staff to permanent positions if it improves.

For now, headhunters predict the financial job market is expected to remain subdued, with bonuses trending lower and salaries rising minimally.

"Some organisations are prepared to start real quality fresh graduates at \$3,500 to \$4,000, but much is expected of this group and if they don't perform, they will fall by the wayside," Mr Tan said.

Robert Half's Singapore managing director Tim Hird advised job seekers to pay more attention to the content and scalability of the job, including opportunities for skill-set enhancement, career advancement and training opportunities, and the existence of good mentors.

gabrielc@sph.com.sg

HIGH EXPECTATIONS

"Some organisations are prepared to start real quality fresh graduates at \$3,500 to \$4,000, but much is expected of this group. If they don't perform, they will fall by the way-side."

- Mr Tan Soo Jin, vice-chairman of executive search firm Amrop Hever Group