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## **Helping hand from job agencies Outplacement firms provide various services for retrenched workers**

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WITH the dreaded R-word - retrenchment - rearing its ugly head with alarming frequency these days, things may look pretty grim for those out of a job.

But all is not lost.

Agencies offering outplacement services are able to help affected workers to find their next employer.

Companies that are downsizing can turn to these agencies to make it easier for their staff to move on.

Job cuts are likely to gather pace both here and globally in the coming months, as the world economy grapples with the fallout of the credit crunch.

The economic bust means a boom for these agencies.

Some have seen a doubling in the number of inquiries from companies in the last eight weeks, and others have had business increasing about four to five times.

DBM Singapore director Sattar Bawany said: "Redundancy causes most people stress and anxiety. So it is important that organisations are able to offer a career and outplacement service to help their exiting staff, and to instil a positive and caring corporate image."

Outplacement specialist Paul Heng, founder of NeXT Career Consulting Group, said: "It's about giving them skills to fish, and also going fishing with them."

Outplacement involves the counselling, support, guidance and training provided to workers faced with retrenchment or career change.

"Various aspects such as career management and career options, job-search process, business opportunities, and skills upgrading can be used to help them move on," said Ms Laletha Nithiyandanan, vice-president (Asia Pacific) at Kelly Outsourcing & Consulting Group.

Mr Bawany, who is also DBM's regional head of transition coaching, added that the costs of such services are borne by the corporation.

The help could last until the worker lands a new job or for a limited time, such as three months.

Typically, the services come in three phases.

The first involves support on the day job cuts are announced.

“We will coach managers on how to break the news, how to counsel the remaining staff, and provide counselling to those affected,” said Mr Heng of NeXT.

These agencies will also be around to address initial questions and concerns.

The second step is to sharpen the workers’ skills before they seek their next employment position.

This can be done via rewriting resumes, honing interview skills, running through practice interviews, and learning how to negotiate job offers.

The final phase is the actual job search, an area in which some placement bodies provide office support.

For example, NeXT offers services such as the use of personal computers, laptops, Internet and research facilities to help workers in their hunt for a new job.

The firm even provides secretarial support for those who were previously in positions of senior management.

“All personnel will be included in our candidate database and receive first priority should there be any available opportunities,” said GMP Group chief executive Annie Yap.

Usually, differing approaches are used for junior and senior staff.

At GMP, entry- to mid-level job seekers are put into groups of six to eight for workshops to sharpen their resumes, interview skills and job-search strategies, while managerial and senior management staff will get one-to-one consultation.

Said Mr Bawany: “The more senior a person, the greater the likelihood that they will find their next opportunity through networking.

“A retrenched finance director who spends all her time looking for opportunities online is likely to become increasingly despondent about the lack of opportunities, while an assistant accountant with two years of experience is likely to have greater success using this medium.”

What about workers whose companies are affected by retrenchments, but which do not hire outplacement agencies?

Ms Nithyanandan said: "The affected workers can still go to recruitment companies and search firms. Do other work in between jobs rather than stay at home."

Human resource experts told The Straits Times that few Singaporeans are well-

informed of how job agencies can help those retrenched get a new start.

"Most people have misconceptions about an agency, such as thinking they need to pay a fee to get help," said human resource consultant Cindy Ong.

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