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### **Job situation starting to look up**

**More employers expect to hire, but some sectors still languishing**

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WHEN the recession hit Singapore earlier this year, information technology (IT) and engineering firm PBA Group, like other companies here, froze hiring.

But PBA started hiring again two months ago, and at a higher rate than before the recession.

"We actually went into more aggressive recruitment after the recession," PBA's regional general manager, Mr Derrick Yap, told The Straits Times.

He cited employees' lowered salary expectations and the need for PBA to allow enough time to train employees for a potential market upturn ahead as the main factors for this move.

"Previously, many individuals' asking salaries were unrealistic because they were benchmarked against companies such as banks. We couldn't afford to give them that much," he said.

"I feel that the market could be picking up by the end of the year, so I wanted to hire people and train them in time to prepare for that. We intend to work with them for the long term," Mr Yap said.

PBA is not the only company whose hiring seems to be picking up, although the big picture remains uncertain.

A wider tentative trend appears to be emerging. Many employers remain cautious but the employment situation in general is starting to look up.

The most recent Manpower Employment Outlook Survey, released quarterly, reflected an about-face in the net employment outlook for the coming three months.

The reading shot up from minus 43 per cent for second-quarter hiring to a positive 5 per cent - indicating that there are more employers who expect to increase hiring than those who expect to cut headcount further in the third quarter.

"There has definitely been an improvement over the past few months," said Mr Josh Goh, assistant director of corporate services at recruitment firm GMP. "Instead of contract positions which were very common over the past few months, we are seeing more permanent positions...It shows that clients are more confident of hiring."

His optimism was echoed by Ms Andrea Ross, managing director of recruiting firm Robert Walters: "Companies' second quarter results have been positive, creating a positive sentiment in the market place."

### **Sectors in demand**

SECTORS of the economy that are recovering include finance and accounting, information and technology, engineering, health care and retail, experts said.

Mr Andrew Chan, chief executive of TMS Asia Pacific, a hospitality and tourism recruiter, added: "There are definitely still opportunities in the marketplace for job seekers...especially in the service industry, in anticipation of the two new integrated resorts."

### **Languishing sectors**

BUT some industries are still in the doldrums, such as shipping and semiconductors. Also, workers with highly specialised skill sets are still finding it difficult to secure positions.

In the semiconductor industry, "especially if you are from the production side, you will have difficulty", Mr Goh said.

"And in the engineering sector, certain niche workers may face more challenges landing a job...For these workers, their skill set is very 'niche' so it's hard."

And even though the number of available jobs has inched up of late, competition has also climbed.

Machine manufacturer Makino Asia did not freeze research and development (R&D) hiring during the downturn, and has seen applicants for these positions rise by up to 40 per cent in the past few months.

"We are more selective now because everyone counts. Applicants have to be outstanding and a lot more prepared," said Mr Lim Poh Leng, Makino's human resource section manager. Makino has employed more than 10 new R&D engineers since January.

Mr Goh said that GMP was "seeing an increase in job applications over the last six months compared to before the recession, for every advertised job".

"In the past, there were so many opportunities out there, and those holding jobs were also unlikely to apply. The pool has got wider now," he said, adding that it was still unclear whether the worst was now over.

### **Cautious outlook**

MS ROSS agreed that the employment situation is not out of the woods yet. Of the apparent employment upturn, she said: "This may be a short-term effect and it may dip again."

The founder and managing director of NeXT Career Consulting Group, Mr Paul Heng, cited Seagate's recent announcement that it will lay off 2,000 workers.

"Companies still remain cautious about hiring extra staff, because from a business perspective they don't know what will happen in the future. They also are continuing to fire people. Is the worst over? Far from it, and that's the understatement of the year.

"Job seekers need to take unconventional approaches and not rely on jobs that are in the open market, that are publicised, but also try to find jobs in the hidden market."

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