

## **The Straits Times, Pg B18 9 February 2009, Monday**

### **Realistic outlook key to landing job**

**Job seekers can enhance chances by lowering expectations and being more proactive, say experts**

ALVIN FOO

THE recession winds of change have swept through the Singapore employment market, with pay cuts, hiring freezes and retrenchments gathering pace.

Although the market has headed south, all is not lost for people seeking jobs in a far harsher climate, say human resource experts.

They could adopt practical measures such as being more proactive in networking, seeking contract work and possessing a different mindset.

It was all so different 12 months ago, with professionals switching jobs and getting higher pay within short periods, and companies competing with each other to retain talent.

Now, businesses have become much more cautious, putting hiring plans on hold, not replacing staff who leave, and even cutting pay.

The headline numbers have also turned downbeat. Last year, about 16,000 workers here lost their jobs and the unemployment rate rose from 2.2per cent in September to 2.6per cent in December, with huge job losses in the final quarter of last year.

Layoffs could hit levels seen in past recessions, such as during the 1998 Asian financial crisis when retrenchments peaked at 30,000.

"For the rest of the year, at least, job demand will outnumber supply," said MrPaul Heng, managing director of NeXT Career Consulting.

Although it is clearly now an employer's market, there are practical steps people can take to increase their chances of landing a job.

One timely way is to seek contract positions with special projects, which could lead to full-time offers.

Global specialist recruitment agency Robert Half said companies that are unable to add permanent staff during economic uncertainty often bring in professionals on a contract basis.

This can translate into opportunities for those looking to earn income, make new contacts and enhance their marketability during an extended job search.

"What starts as a project role may in fact turn into a permanent position," said Mr Tim Hird, managing director of Robert Half Singapore.

He explained that companies frequently draw from the ranks of their contract staff when making new hires, as both parties have had a chance to evaluate whether the position is a fit.

Tougher times also call for more robust mindsets, say consultants. Job seekers must expect to search for a far longer time than usual, and make twice as many applications.

DBM Singapore director Sattar Bawany said: "They need to steel themselves for negative responses...rejections are part of the process and never a comment on performance, ability or potential."

An even more proactive approach is required now, and extensive networking is a necessity.

"Reach out to potential hiring companies, not just the ones who have made public their job openings," said Mr Heng.

"Rather than say, 'I look forward to hearing from you' in your application cover letter, say, 'I will follow up on this application with a phone call to your office soon'."

Mr Bawany added: "Get the word out to friends, trusted colleagues and even relatives that you are actively looking for a job. Ask them to keep their eyes and ears open for any opportunity."

Final-year undergraduates about to enter the job market are urged to tone down their expectations accordingly.

GMP Group senior manager Josh Goh said: "It will take them longer to secure jobs compared to their seniors. They will need to lower their expectations, especially where starting salaries are concerned."

Internships could be a first option, as this will help them "get job experience, which will give a boost to their resumes and skills", he added.

Workers who have been laid off are advised to find avenues of upgrading or training.

Said Mr Goh: "They should be open to taking diverse portfolios or more responsibilities, as some firms may expand the job scope of some positions to cut costs."

Should job seekers grab the first opening that arises?

Managing consultant Ivy Ang with BTI Consultants said: "See that it suits your skill set and interest, and don't just take a job out of desperation as you will eventually disappoint yourself and your employer."

First, research prospective companies and talk to the human resources contact person to find out in full what the position entails. Job seekers should avoid "blindly sending resumes to a mass of employers", said Mr Bawany.

Another useful tip is to sit with a financial planner to work out a timeline to see how long you can afford to be out of work.

Experience and exposure should take priority over salary and benefits. Consultants say such a tack will bear fruit when the economic recovery comes, as experienced and skilled workers will be in high demand.

Job seekers must also weigh offers in the light of career goals and family commitments. Said Mr Heng: "If push comes to shove, and you have to put food on the table, then the answer is obvious."

[alfoo@sph.com.sg](mailto:alfoo@sph.com.sg)