

HR TALENT – STILL IN SHORT SUPPLY

In the current climate of job redundancies, rising unemployment and declining company profits, it would be easy to conclude that it is now an employers' market. While this may be true for many professions, finding top HR talent will still be as hard as ever.

From a rationale perspective this seems perplexing. Print employment ads are at the lowest they have been for 35 years (ANZ index) and retrenchments are announced almost daily. One would assume that talent in all disciplines would be flooding the market. The reality is that large numbers of HR practitioners have not been released into the supply side of the employment market. Why?

The supply of HR talent – behind the curve

As an evolving discipline with increasingly higher corporate expectations and a changing economy, HR has more pressing demands than in the past.

HR professionals are expected to combine technical depth with business acumen, project management, coaching, mediation, change management, systems and advisory. Well-developed interpersonal skills, creativity, resourcefulness and innovation are also essential.

This is a tall order and is sought at all levels of the profession from HR Consultants through to HR Business Partners, HR Directors, as well as specialists in the discipline. The benchmark is high. The supply of HR practitioners with this combination of advanced skills is still behind the demand of business.

Uncertain times lead to risk adversity

Naturally, HR practitioners currently employed are also being extremely cautious about putting themselves "out there". With an increase in uncertainty, potential candidates in HR are concerned about taking unnecessary risks. As one senior candidate remarked recently, "it's a case of better the devil you know".

In the strong growth markets of the past, candidates could throw caution to the wind and explore the market, safe in the knowledge that they could choose from multiple job opportunities. In the current market, even those with demanded skills in areas such as remuneration need to be prised from their current employer.

In this time of change, potential candidates know that no company is immune from downsizing. There is a general consensus amongst many potential HR candidates that they believe they are best placed to stick with their current employer where they have tenure and a more attractive redundancy package on offer rather than risking a new employer that might not be able to deliver on their employment promise.

No mass redundancies of HR professionals

There isn't a lot of 'fat' in HR functions, and those practitioners that are in thinned-down functions are busy helping their business to survive the current economic climate. Unlike 2001 when Ansett collapsed releasing large numbers of HR people, the market has not been inundated with large groups of retrenched HR practitioners.

Companies are actively retaining their talent

One of the positive outcomes of the economic crisis is that organisations appear to have learnt some lessons from past downturns. While redundancies are occurring, many Australian companies of all shapes and size are offering numerous alternatives to manage labour costs and retain valued employees.

Rather than cutting headcount, responsible organisations are attempting to retain key talent through creative strategies such as four-day working weeks, extended leave, career breaks, secondments to client organisations and rotation of employees to varied projects.

The positive way that many companies have dealt with the current downturn has created a sense of loyalty among HR practitioners towards their employers. In this situation they don't want to be seen as jumping from what could be a sinking or severely damaged ship.

HR talent attraction strategies in this market

So what does this mean for those companies actively seeking to recruit HR talent now? It means that some of the rules haven't changed:

Employers still need to engage potential candidates – it is still a two-way process and it has never been more important to protect the companies employment brand

Companies representatives need to be firm in what is being offered and they need to be sure that the company can deliver on the pre-employment promise

HR leaders need to be aware that the skills shortage hasn't suddenly disappeared hence they may need to compromise on some of the experience needed and allow for individual development or growth into a role

HR leaders need to adopt a recruitment strategy that encompasses all aspects of candidate sourcing i.e. the passive HR market as well as active job seekers.

So whilst the market will present companies the opportunity to be overly discerning in many professionals' fields, HR professionals will still be hard to find.

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