

Recession? We've been there before

Tom White of the Oakland Partnership talks candidly to us about the leasing recruitment business

LeasingWorld: How is the recession affecting you?

Tom White ("TW"): I worked through the last UK recession of the 1990s in recruiting, while our other senior partner, Denise Lawlor, worked through the same recession in a leasing company, so we have a wealth of experience that is relevant to today's market. This time round, the media have been very negative, and have talked things down to an excessive degree. Our experience is that, whilst some larger organisations have stopped recruiting, there are still many organisations, often the smaller and more entrepreneurial businesses, who are pushing on, replacing staff when they leave, and even creating new positions. The market, whilst quieter than six months ago, is by no means dead.

'Not just fair-weather friends'

LeasingWorld: Does this market still yield opportunities?

TW: The current slowdown has given us an excellent opportunity to be a true partner to those of our clients that are going through difficult and upsetting times. They have welcomed the fact that we are not just fair-weather friends, who are there during the good times when fees are easy to earn, but that we will also support and help them when they are not recruiting, e.g. by offering advice and assistance to their displaced staff.

LeasingWorld: What about the effect of redundancy on people?

TW: In recent years, the leasing industry has experienced a "candidate-short" market. The recent wave of redundancies has seen some high calibre candidates come onto the market, and whilst there are still shortages in certain areas there is now a surplus in areas such as sales.

Providing candidates with a positive experience is crucial, especially as some of them are in their forties and fifties, and have never had to look for a job

before. It is important for candidates to work with recruiters who are experienced and knowledgeable, and able to provide them with clear honest advice, because there are some agencies that have never experienced a recession before.

LeasingWorld: What would you advise candidates to do to maximise their chances?

TW: Candidates who heed our advice, and are flexible, realistic, and willing to compromise on salary and package in order to get back into work, are far more likely to secure new positions. Salary levels are dropping as candidates who are made redundant are willing to take a salary drop, and those who were on, say, £50k often take the view that they would rather earn £40k than be out of work.

LeasingWorld: How will the agencies themselves cope with the recession?

TW: The standard of recruitment consultancies operating in leasing and asset finance, is generally very good. The level of knowledge they demonstrate, and their professionalism, is commendable and compares very well with recruiters working in other specialist sectors. Nevertheless, it is a regrettable fact that every downturn brings its casualties, and sees some shoddy or underhand practises creep in from the less successful agencies. Some smaller companies, which are to all intents and purposes lifestyle businesses, may not have the financial resources or motivation to endure a long term downturn.

LeasingWorld: Are there winners and losers when it comes to candidates' job categories?

TW: The demand for sales people and credit analysts is dropping just at a time when there is a glut of candidates on the market. Yet, many good candidates in areas such as collections, asset management, and litigations are finding that their value is increasing, and it is

important that companies realise this and ensure they have adequate provision in this area for the business challenges which may lie ahead.

'Excellent opportunities to pick up top quality people'

LeasingWorld: What positives do you see emerging from the current situation?

TW: The leasing industry has always been very insular when it comes to recruitment. When the industry picks up again after this recession there will be excellent opportunities to attract top quality people, many of them younger candidates, who have been displaced from other areas of the financial services industry.

Hopefully, the industry will seize this opportunity when it presents itself, as it could be said that in the past too much store has been placed on the importance of prior leasing experience when recruiting for straightforward vacancies in sales support, credit control, and customer service. That approach effectively eliminated a huge pool of fresh talent for the industry, as it kept churning the existing pool of players.