

THE OAKLAND PARTNERSHIP

Has the ball bounced?

Tom White and **Denise Lawlor** of The Oakland Partnership survey today's complex recruitment world

Standing in a full rush-hour train going into the City of London offices of recruitment consultants The Oakland Partnership, it was difficult to square the newspaper headlines about the latest unemployment statistics with the full carriages of presumably employed people going to work (unemployment had reached 2.49 million, the highest figure since March 1995).

So, when I arrived at their comfortable offices overlooking the city skyline, I posed the question to Tom White, and Denise Lawlor, directors of the firm.

Quick off the mark, Tom White suggested the full carriages were far more likely to be the result of shorter and less frequent trains, because anecdotal evidence pointed to a marked reduction in commuters on the railways coming into London every day. He also pointed out that these latest statistics represented the smallest quarterly increase in the number of unemployed people since May 2008, so, in his words he felt, "The ball had bounced," and was now about to come up again.

So, how was the leasing recruitment market looking at the present? White explained that it was mixed, there were areas that were candidate-short, for example in Collections and Litigation, but at the same time there were areas that were candidate-rich, like sales and some support areas. Furthermore, these hot-spots and cold-spots could change surprisingly quickly. Most people had heard of the move by many laid-off sales people into setting up as brokers, and the evidence now was that many of them had found the going very tough and were coming back into the market hopeful of finding stable employment again. Looking forward, the prospects for 2010 are certainly strong with many employers committed to new ventures and whilst recovery will be gradual White is confident that the carnage of



Denise Lawlor and Tom White

2009 will be replaced with stability and cautious optimism in 2010

Does that mean that there are plenty of successful placements happening? To say plenty would be an exaggeration, Denise Lawlor felt, as market conditions were still unsettled. Many of the best people were generally still in work, and were extremely cautious about moving jobs at this stage, however attractive sounding the new role may be. This meant that for both junior and senior vacancies there was an abundance of speculative applications to be handled, but few were an ideal fit for the client's requirements. As White said there are a lot of "square pegs applying for round holes." That was not the only consideration, as something that had emerged was the varying levels of knowledge and expertise that people from different firms appear to have. When lessors insist on leasing experience to fill their new vacancies many assumed that "Competitors do things the same way as us," in terms of

the specifics of technical knowledge, techniques, business attitudes, and beliefs. This is often not the case and in doing so, they underestimate the level of training still required for an industry experienced candidate. It also means that the talents of highly able people outside the industry are often overlooked unnecessarily.

Is this disparity possibly related to the ongoing training issue in the industry? Lawlor said she felt the UK leasing industry had definitely lost something over the years. She quoted the example of credit people, a section of the market where vacancies nowadays are frequently filled by candidates from Australia, New Zealand, or South Africa. These candidates had been trained in the "old-fashioned" way to high standards, something that was rarely happening in UK firms. However, it would be wrong to put it all down to just training, she felt. The ever-increasing levels of automation by employers made their people more task

specific in their skills, expert only in the way that the inhouse software system handled the employer's data, according to a head office reporting template.

So, given the shortfalls in training, and that in the current recession, young graduates have been the hardest hit, was there a case for getting more new blood into the industry? Young blood was definitely required, felt White, though not just in the form of raw trainees. There was a large pool of very good staff in the finance industry, if not in leasing itself, and employers should be more open-minded in this respect. White took trouble to point out, though, that whilst some of the larger lessors have done little or no recruitment this year a number of their smaller and medium sized clients in the leasing market, especially those not owned by a bank, were being more entrepreneurial, believing that "you should never waste a good recession." "They see this as a good time to secure quality staff, property and technology at far lower cost than would normally be the case .

What about the workload at recruitment companies, with all the new technology, jobs boards and the like, how had "the typical recruiter's day" changed? Lawlor agreed that technology had made certain processes much faster, but also tended to generate more data which then needed to be sifted and dealt with. The minimal effort required for a candidate to apply for a job online means that many take little or no notice of the criteria set out in advertisements and apply based just on the job title. Currently The Oakland Partnership are dealing with 50 percent more candidate applications than normal. White felt that employers had always underestimated how much work a good recruitment consultancy has to do, and with a smile he extended an open invitation to senior executives at lessors and brokers to call him and arrange to spend an afternoon with the Oakland team, which he guarantees will not only be good fun but might also be an eye-opener for many them.

Someone said recently that there was a glint of light at the end of the tunnel,

but could anyone afford the train ticket, what did The Oakland Partnership think? There are some new players with ambitious plans who are gearing up for the eventual upturn, said White. The industry's workforce has had a shake-out, and many of those over the age of fifty, if they don't immediately secure another position, may take the decision not to come back in, which leaves some room for new blood going forward. The industry is still in business, and some lessors may well be reporting higher profits soon, despite the downturn in volumes. At that moment, White's telephone could become overloaded with calls as lessors stampede for growth at the same time. Communication between employer and recruiter is key and shrewd employers will discuss their plans, however tentative, in advance with their recruitment consultancy thereby ensuring that their chosen recruiter is able to highlight interesting candidates coming onto the market, as early as possible.

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