

Rising demand for good candidates

The last few years have not been an easy time for the building industry, but are there signs that the market has turned the corner? Tony Smith of recruitment specialist Courtney Smith Group argues that there are good grounds for increased optimism.

Five years ago the words 'credit crunch' and 'comprehensive spending review' meant nothing to most people and times were good for the industry. But as we all know, things changed pretty quickly. The economy took a beating and the size of the market was reduced to a level not seen for decades. First the private housing market put the brakes on hundreds of projects, then the commercial sector followed suit. The final blow came when the otherwise reliable public sector was decimated by last year's comprehensive spending review.

Inevitably, many employers were forced to cut costs to survive, which often meant reducing their staff levels. Some reluctantly let go of all but their very best staff.

Tony Smith is Managing Director of Courtney Smith Group, a recruitment consultant specialising in sales and management positions



Tony Smith, Managing Director of Courtney Smith Group

for the building industry. Over the years the company has built up a strong heating and ventilation client base and earlier this year a new dedicated electrical division was established.

Tony offers his view on the current state of the market: "Although we're clearly not out of the woods yet, the panic is definitely over. The public sector is still weak, but the

private commercial market seems to be picking up a lot of the slack. Our experience seems to reflect a recent CPA (Construction Products Association) report which forecast that public sector output would decline by £11bn by 2015, but private commercial work would increase by £15bn over the same period."

Inside track

With many clients in the sector, Courtney Smith Group knows the market well, and Tony himself has been recruiting professionals for building products manufacturers and distributors for 27 years. He argues that the market is more stable now than it has been for a while.

"Two years ago we saw candidates looking for new positions virtually every week," he says, "but very few companies were recruiting. For a short while we only

had 25 assignments on the books. So at that time the H&V market definitely favoured clients, who could have their pick from a huge range of candidates. But at the start of this year, the swing has gone in the opposite direction, with a large number of vacancies and not enough candidates of the right calibre to fill them. Now we're working on 108 positions so we've swung from one extreme to the other."

The provision of quality candidates is an important part of the service and Courtney Smith uses its experience and industry contacts to match the right candidate with the right position. Tony explains why high calibre candidates are difficult to attract at the moment: "A lot of good people lost their jobs in the downturn so, for the time being at least, the highest calibre candidates are reluctant to move from the employer that kept

them on when so many of their colleagues were not so fortunate."

Tony adds that this trend has had a knock-on effect on salaries. "Staff recruitment is no different to any other open market. Prices rise when demand outstrips supply. We have noticed salaries increasing steadily over the past few months and we expect them to continue to rise for the rest of this year."

Planning ahead

As more and more companies believe the worst is over and are planning for improved sales in the future, Tony expects 2011 to continue to be candidate-driven.

"Fortunately, things are improving and demand from both manufacturers and distributors is increasing. Even the private housing market is on the move. A lot of companies are reviewing their budgets and planning for

increased sales activity over the next two to four years. We've noticed an increase in recruitment activity from just about every sector of the construction industry we're involved in."

Of course no one can predict the future and no one expects a huge upturn in the economy in the near future, but some sectors are definitely seeing an upturn. Tony concludes: "The message we're getting is that no one wants to be caught out with increased targets but without the people to bring in the sales. Their worst nightmare is to see an increase in their market but watch the sales go to their competitors because they haven't got the staff level required to accommodate the increase in business."

Find out more

For more details about the Courtney Smith Group please visit www.csguk.co.uk