

What Employers Want Now



Corporate and public affairs recruitment specialist **Peter Salt** offers advice on the kind of qualities, skills and experience employers crave, having had to contend with the global financial crisis.

What are employers looking for in this current tough market and what skills do candidates need in order to get ahead?

Having worked through three recessions over the past 22 years I can't help but make the statement "the more things change the more they stay the same." It seems everyone is looking for a fundamental shift in human thinking to have occurred. I believe that we are creatures of habit and that recent events have only further strengthened some of the underlying core values and skills that are respected by employers in general.

With everyone thinking the worst almost 18 months ago we have seen a return to reason in the past three months and an opportunity to make some observations about this cycle that may be of interest to employers and employees alike.

Leaner at the outset

Firstly unlike the recession in 1990, companies generally were quite lean going into the GFC. There was also an acknowledgement that the critical skills shortage wasn't going to go away anytime soon.

The consequent level of retrenchment was far less than in the 90's and a shared approach to cost-cutting that saw organisations offering everyone to take a four-day week option rather than retrench 10-15% of staff. The cost on staff morale and the loss of critical expertise has consequently been significantly reduced.

Twenty years later employers generally have a far more sophisticated understanding of the value of brand reputation and just how easy it is to destroy. This augurs well for communications and corporate affairs executives in general. In fact many seasoned corporate affairs executives regard this current crisis as the validation the function needed. There's nothing like a good crisis to show just what good strategic communications can really do.

A focus on core skills

Employers appear to be focusing on core skills like never before and some of the most requested appear to be:

1. For senior executives the ability to think strategically whilst showing the willingness and ability to remain tactically involved. By all means develop an ability to manage staff but be known for more than that.
2. Commercial instincts, strong work ethic and sense of urgency remain very attractive particularly when demonstrated in conjunction with a full social or family agenda. Employers increasingly understand that 'all work and no play make Johnny a dull boy.' Don't be afraid to be proud of your son's golf handicap and of your own for that matter!
3. Defining professional success in terms of the communications role in assisting the organisation in the achievement of broader business objectives. We have seen a number of communication executives taking on post-graduate studies in accounting, finance and law which has been well received by employers.
4. Fearless independence and creativity of thought. A fearless ability to speak your mind and offer an alternative solution and a preparedness to stick your neck out. CEO's we work with really value and need their advisor to be prepared to disagree with them and argue a different approach. Post GFC there is no room for 'yes' men and sycophants!
5. Keep things simple. Our clients valued the skills and experience that cut through the noise and fads, that focused on the core issues, providing leadership, communicating effectively across the organisation.
6. Emotional intelligence. It's been said before but when the proverbial is flying, our clients want a voice of reason and a calm assessment and decisive action without the emotional outpouring if possible.
7. Evidence of a flexible, diplomatic ability to work effectively in different work environments. Employers want to hire people who have worked in several different environments. 15-20 years and a gold watch just doesn't cut it. Far more impressive is a mixture of corporate, consulting, government and/or peak body and industry association experiences.
8. Being precious doesn't work. Our clients spoke of the need to react to an ever increasing array of internal and external factors necessitating a need to be constantly evaluating plans and being prepared to change direction or focus.
9. Have some skin in the game. Employers respected executives who were willing to back themselves and be rewarded for taking on that risk.
10. Interestingly despite all the technical and functional expertise listed above, employers still wanted to like the person they employ. Interpersonal communication and social skills, a warm engaging, intelligent, intuitive ability to interact and add to a conversation on a wide range of topics really makes a difference in the hiring decision.

As I said at the outset "the more things change ... etc". The decision to hire remains a commercially sensitive one. Those employees who critically understand the commercial premise they offer an employer and the value attached to the IP they own and can communicate this succinctly, will win over every time.

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