

How to... be an HR interim in the recession

This is the toughest market most interims will have faced in their careers. The volume of assignments is down, while the number of candidates has shot through the roof as newly redundant people turn to interim positions. *Hashi Syedain* spoke to a panel of experts about how to win work.

1 KNOW YOURSELF

Being an interim is very different from being a permanent employee. You must thrive on change and challenge and be focused on delivery. You need confidence in your ability and a good understanding of your strengths (and weaknesses). You must be able to enter a new situation and instantly grasp the issues. A true interim doesn't want a permanent job and, if faced with the choice of a plum permanent role or a juicy interim assignment, would always go for the latter.

If you are new to interim management, you need to be able to convince agencies and clients that this is a positive career choice, not a desperate second best. So rehearse your story well and find evidence from your career history to back up your assertions.

2 PERFECT YOUR CV

An interim CV is all about showing what you have achieved. Clients are not interested in your potential or in developing you, but in what you can do for them. They want to see a track record that suggests they are not taking a risk in appointing you. You should always tailor

your CV to the assignment you are going for. Have a bank of case studies that you can slot in as appropriate from previous interim assignments or from specific tasks or projects you have completed during a permanent career. Be very clear about what the challenge was, what you did and what the outcome was. Then list contact details for a referee on the project.

3 NETWORK, NETWORK, NETWORK

It's impossible to overstate the importance of networking for a successful interim career, especially in a recession. If it doesn't come naturally to you, learn how to do it. It has never been easier with tools such as LinkedIn and email. Meet people regularly, accept invitations and attend events. If you don't have time to lunch,

meet before or after work. If the organisation you are working for gets a training company or consultants in, introduce yourself and let them know what you do. Find reasons to stay in touch – an email saying you've started a new assignment, a Christmas greeting, a call to say you're coming to the end of an assignment. It's not difficult, but it does require time and commitment.

4 PREPARE WELL FOR INTERVIEWS

Interim assignments often involve only one interview. So if you are asked to an interview, prepare well. Research the organisation and its context and make sure you understand the problem that needs solving. Talk to your network – people who have completed similar jobs or who have previously worked in that organisation. Make sure you know your CV really well and can talk in detail about jobs and assignments mentioned in it. Be sure you sound convincing as an interim, especially if you are new to it. That means demonstrating an interim mindset – a focus on delivery and love of change and challenge.

5 TAKE ADVANTAGE OF AGENCIES

If you are new to the business, try to talk to established interim recruiters. Pick their brains about the

market and how you can best position yourself. Even if you are well established, cultivate the recruitment agents. Stay in touch. Go for coffee. The good ones will give you advice and help you to keep up to date on market trends – and, if they're not good, you'll only have wasted half an hour.

6 USE THE INTERNET CLEVERLY

Staying in touch with your network has never been easier. If you are going to use jobsites, make sure you understand about keyword searching, so your CV pops up for the right assignments.

7 ASK PEOPLE TO REFER YOU – AND RETURN THE FAVOUR

If you can put your CV forward with a personal recommendation from someone the client knows and trusts, that's the best calling card. But, in any event, make sure you get references from each assignment.

8 EXPLAIN YOUR GAPS

Everyone knows it's a tough market and many good people are not finding assignments as quickly as in the past. Use your time out wisely – do some personal development or training; travel or learn something new. Above all, rehearse your story so that it sounds like a positive decision, not an act of desperation. "I had worked non-stop for 18 years and had a good financial buffer. So, in view of market conditions, I decided to take a year out and pursue a long-standing dream to learn to play the cello/complete a counselling course/learn Russian – and pick my kids up from school every day," sounds much better than "I've been looking for something for the past year but there's been very little available."

9 BE FLEXIBLE

Given the competition for assignments you may have to be more flexible than usual. Even highly experienced interims are finding that rates are down. If you are new to the interim market, be prepared to take an assignment at a slightly lower level than you were hoping, or be prepared to travel. It may also be a time to consider some pro bono work to generate contacts, although this is obviously best kept to a minimum.

If your specialism is one that's in little demand – for example, resourcing – look back over your experience and see if you can refocus on a generalist past. ■

'Make sure you demonstrate an interim mindset – a focus on delivery and a love of change'

be flexible

Panel of experts

Gwen Carter, director, interim management, Capita
Julie Edwards, senior consultant, Alexander Lloyd
Angela Franks, head of interim, MDH
James Hunt, managing director, Penna Interim Executive
Kate Mansfield, managing consultant, Alium
Judith Moeckell, director, Institute of Interim Management
Lorraine Thomas, business development director, Metzger

