

An increase in finance staff spurs competition for best candidates

European companies will increase their finance staff in the next six months and beyond as we see greater levels of certainty in the market. Unfortunately, it's not feasible to bracket the entire continent in one blanket statement- because individual countries will emerge in different stages and in their own time. But one thing rings true — organizations need to be one step ahead of this upturn in order to attract high quality candidates. In fact, the economic landscape is already showing signs of improvement, and as increased optimism in the market continues, there will be fierce competition for candidates. **By: Mei-Yin Teo**

Now is the time to look into the career mirror and do a check and balance of what your current situation is to see how you can attract the candidates of tomorrow, most of whom are working at the moment already," says Ian Graves, District Director Continental Europe for specialized financial recruitment agency Robert Half Finance & Accounting.

According to the latest 'Financial Hiring Index' by Robert Half Finance & Accounting, an upward spiral in the European recruitment market began in the last quarter of 2003 with a steady increase in hiring: 10.3% in September to 12.3% in January 2004 and the number rises to 15% in May. This consistent rise of 2% every quarter is complimented by a gradual decrease in staff reduction.

Market confidence from the US one year earlier suggests what is in store for Europe in the near future, which tends to lag behind the States by six to nine months. The US Financial Hiring Index reveals a constant growth in hiring from as far back as the last quarter of 2002. The US market has stabilized during 2003 with three to four quarters of sustained growth — a sign of things to come in Europe.

"As organizations budget for 2005 with a high level of hopefulness, headcount is on top of department agendas. We will certainly see budget allocated to all staff but particularly to finance people because when there is an increase in activity in the front office, it inevitably has an impact on the back office," says Graves. He recommends employers be prepared with the necessary financial structure in place to capitalize on



an upsurge in sales.

Accounting is even more in demand as the profession has been pushed into the spotlight with the increased in corporate governance globally. The stronger emphasis on internal controls and financial transparency as companies comply with the Sarbanes-Oxley Act requires organizations to 'ramp up' their finance departments with skilled individuals. Specialist positions such as internal audit and management accounting have become attractive and lucrative job options.

"Even the image of accounting itself has evolved from the stuffy accountant to a sophisticated, creative and dynamic profession, who adds value to a company," says Graves. "People entering the profession require specialist skills and deserve suitable recognition and

remuneration," he adds.

Steve Carter, UK & Ireland managing director for Robert Half Finance & Accounting, believes retention rates will be impacted as the recruitment market makes a positive shift. "With the economy picking up, people are more willing to take risks and pursue other employment possibilities. More employers have to be aware of this if they hope to retain their staff," he says. According to Carter, financial reward, career development and supporting work/life balance issues will keep employees loyal.

Graves agrees that successful recruitment largely begins with the ability to retain. "If you lose staff through the back door, then your net gain is zero," he says. He advises organizations to establish a specific and timely process to measure employees' state of mind. "The underlying question is 'what's in place every month to engage with key hires so you can help them develop on their career track,'" he says. ■

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