

Where to find employees

By Peter Switzer

October 01, 2007 09:46am

IN THE tightest job market in living memory, some employers are starting to think outside the square and looking at historically ignored workers.

The August Sensis Business Index, which is one of the country's most respected small and medium enterprise (SME) surveys, reported the number one concern was "finding/keeping staff" at 14 per cent.

This has been the main complaint from business in these kinds of surveys for the past four years. And as there is no relief in sight, desperate times have resulted in some lateral thinking.

A growing number of smarter bosses are looking at hiring from abroad, from the grey army or those with disabilities.

The Recruitment and Consulting Services Association's (RCSA) chief executive Julie Mills says her group has been focusing on accessing the untapped workforce for some time now.

"Our 2004 Symposium was called 'Age Management in the Workplace' and was designed to engage the industry and others in discussion about these issues," she says. "The issue of older workers is a recurring theme in many of my speeches."

The RCSA has been urging recruiters, and by extension, employers, to consider how they can change their attitudes and consider "other people", even if some flexibility is required.

Nowadays there are specialist mature-age recruitment agencies such as SageCo and **Adage** focused on helping employers to broaden their views on the value of employing older workers.

Recruiters have also actively searched overseas for skilled workers on the 457 Visa scheme to reach a wider talent pool.

"This allows skilled workers to be brought in for areas where we have skills shortages," Mills says.

"Nurses, engineers and others are sponsored by either an employer or a recruiter and they are responsible for keeping them employed for that time."

Naomi Simpson, who owns Red Balloon Days, which sells "experiences" for special occasions, loved ones and employees, sponsored an American computer whiz after advertising here and drawing a blank.

"In America, the online world is three years ahead and we don't have the quantity and depth of experience here," she says. "It really has worked out well."

Some employers have tried to rort the system with foreign workers, but others have really used the employment option skilfully to make up for the labour supply problem. "When it's done well, it is done very well," Mills says. "The nursing associations in particular have been a standout."

The desperate need for workers has meant other Australians who have suffered profound discrimination for too long are now being considered for jobs for the first time.

There is even an Australian Employers Network on Disability, which was founded to create opportunities of mutual benefit for people with a disability.

It not only facilitates an employer network on disability for mutual learning and information sharing, it helps businesses become compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act.

"We also undertake valuable projects that can inform us on what it takes to successfully include people with disability as employees, customers and suppliers in a range of businesses and locations," its website says.

Mills thinks Australian employers need to get real and recognise that a solution to worker shortages might require some "new age" thinking.

"Employers might need to consider a 90 per cent fit person when it comes to new workers, instead of a 100 per cent perfect employer," she says.

"There is a part-time pool of workers that really needs to be tapped." Mills says there are about 700,000 people on the Disability Services Pension, but many aren't really as disabled as most people would think.

All up, this lateral thinking on alternative sources for employees works for me.