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## Qualified job candidates hard to find for PR, marketing jobs

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It had been three months, and the midlevel account manager vacancy at Boardroom Communications Inc., remained unfilled. Job board listings with local P.R. associations were resulting in few -- if any -- applicants. Those who did reply were less qualified than the requested three to five years of agency experience.

Some candidates lived in south Miami-Dade County, much too far for a daily commute to the Plantation-based firm. Others were at small not-for-profit organizations or were handling internal corporate communications.

"They didn't have the metabolism for P.R. agency work," said Don Silver, the firm's partner and chief operating officer. "Finding agency P.R. people is very challenging."

In a strong economy, where job candidates are scarce, there's a common lament: Some executives say, "I can't find any good people." Others complain, "It's so bad, I can't find any bad people."

Times are tough for marketing firms looking to hire staff. It's a common lament when there's a tightening work force: Good talent becomes harder to find. Entry-level candidates are bountiful, but often lack on-the-job experience -- save college internships or summer jobs.

As jobs become more numerous than the prospects to fill them, it becomes a candidate's market. Salary and benefit expectations rise, regardless of the candidate's capabilities. Moreover, corporations will frequently hire employees to staff their internal communications departments, effectively taking those candidates off the market.

South Florida marketing executives are looking for solutions. Some continue to use job boards, like CareerBuilder, Monster or Craigslist to find candidates. Some turn to freelancers to handle that workload that can be outsourced, and which doesn't matter whether the client knows a freelancer is on the job -- or the executive is able to have assignments ghosted, or handled behind the scenes.

Valerie Zucker, founder of Zucker P.R. in Fort Lauderdale, couldn't entice suitable senior managers to come on board with the same enthusiasm she held for her shop. After interviewing numerous candidates, Zucker hired account manager Laurie Zuckerman, who arrived with a desire to one day become a partner. Zuckerman advanced through to managing director, and last year was named a partner.

Zucker knew a partnership would drive Zuckerman and help her focus on delivering improved client service.

"I knew I wanted to work smarter not harder and knew this was the best way to do it," she said.

Finding talented writers is Tom Cutler's "constant lament." His firm, TR Cutler Inc., in Fort

Lauderdale, targets the manufacturing sector. The industry's resurgence over the past several years has only increased Cutler's need to generate more than 1,000 press releases a month all written for search engine optimization and key word functionality, he said. Finding qualified writers is "nothing short of a nightmare," he said.

What's more, many of his writer prospects -- some with 4.0 GPAs from top-notch schools, or others versed in time-worn news writing style -- "have only mastered the art of dull, boring and dry writing skills." Schools don't focus on Internet writing, which is increasingly the medium of choice, he said.

"Few marcom [marketing communications] professionals have adapted to the Internet consumption of P.R. where volume and sexy headlines rule," he said. "This is the industrial revolution of P.R. Those who need to slowly hand-craft each release are going to be left behind with the buggy whip manufacturers of the nineteenth century."

With a dearth of specialists wanting to be full-time workers, Cutler turns to freelancers. Barry R. Epstein in Boca Raton runs a virtual organization with employees and contractors working from their homes. Similarly, Margie Zable Fisher created her "Agency Secret Weapon" program to provide specialists, also who often are freelancers. She has amassed a stable of 30 writers and media specialists, each versed in specific categories and based throughout the country. This allows Fisher to provide vendors that help other P.R. firms stay atop workflow without struggling to find hard-to-find, full-time staff, she said.

"P.R. firms have been saying it's impossible to get good people," said Fisher, owner of Zable Fisher Public Relations in Boca Raton. "They have accounts to take care of, and that's why they are ripe for outsourced people."

It helps that freelancing maintains strong acceptance among agencies and corporate communications departments. Talented P.R. providers are interested in "the freelance lifestyle," and clients get prescreened performers -- without the overhead and hassle of hiring full-time employees.

"Almost every agency uses freelancers anyway," she said. "There are just a lot of great P.R. people who don't want to be employees."

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