

Starry-eyed in a job desert

Fresh finance graduates struggle to adjust expectations as dream jobs go up in smoke

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EVEN as well-heeled chief executives of American banks are being called before Congress to defend their use of corporate jets, local finance graduates have also come crashing down to earth. Job offers that were once plentiful have evaporated and pay packages have shrunk. But some still refuse to accept the new realities and have turned their backs on jobs they see as less prestigious.

Khai, a finance graduate who had emerged last year among the top of his cohort, is still reeling from a fruitless job search, ongoing since last September. The 23-year-old who speaks four languages – Japanese and Malay in addition to English and Mandarin – has sent out 15 applications and sat through seven interviews to date.

"It has been whittled down to just one company with a potential interview," he said. Despite this, he has held out on applying to smaller outfits like local analyst firms and brokerages – including one he interned with last year – though he would have stood a better chance with them. "It just wasn't something that fitted my long-term career path," he said.

It is now dawning on graduates like him that it is time to adjust expectations as they face increased competition from experienced employees who are not as picky as fresh graduates.

Moses Largado, 23, recalled getting through to the final round of interviews for a trading position with a foreign investment bank last year, in which none of the nine short-listed fresh graduates were hired. "The bank ended up picking two experienced hires from Hong Kong for the position," he said.

"Some professionals with two years of experience are more than willing to take a pay cut of 10-15 per cent for an entry level position with the sales and trading desk at that bank," Mr Largado estimates. Having a specific department in mind has also not made the job search in a tightening market any easier for finance graduates like Mr Largado's coursemate, Wee Tze Yi.

The 24-year-old, who graduated last year, had approached close to 30 institutions, but only for trading or buy-side research positions because those had been his sole areas of interest – only to encounter resounding silence.

Alongside expectations that are lagging reality, some graduates have been somewhat passive about their job search. Frederic Lee, 26, had interned with a Big Four accounting firm and received a favourable appraisal but he received no response when he applied to it for a job. He did not follow up with a call. "I'd lost the human resources person's number," he said.

As recently as early last year, finance graduates were expecting an annual starting pay of \$110,000 as the industry norm. Such expectations have been dealt a swift and brutal blow with one newly hired entry-level banker whom BT spoke to bemoaning his starting salary of 'only \$55,000 a year'.

But such expectations of hefty pay cheques had primarily been fuelled by the global banks, which are themselves now cutting back on hiring and bracing themselves for austere times.

The hiring landscape this year is a bleak one compared to just two years ago. Of the 15 finance graduates BT spoke to, only four had managed to secure jobs.

In 2007, the National University of Singapore reported that close to 100 per cent of its business graduates gained employment within six months of graduation, with 80 per cent getting a job before graduation, according to its Graduate Employment Survey.

Today, in sombre contrast, the school is telling graduating

students to brace themselves and moderate salary expectations.

"Although campus recruitment activities are continuing, the pace has slowed slightly. Given the volatility of the current environment, we can expect some recruiters to relook their recruitment plans," said Joan Tay, the director of career services for the NUS Business School.

Hiring freezes have also adversely affected business students at Nanyang Technological University compared to their accounting faculty brethren.

"78 per cent of our cohort of 700 accountancy students graduating this May have already found jobs, which is quite similar to previous years.

"However, this year's cohort of 500 business students are facing challenges in finding jobs in view of the recession Singapore is experiencing," said Professor Gillian Yeo, the executive associate dean at NTU's Nanyang Business School.

Singapore Management Uni-

versity has taken to advising its students not to be choosy about jobs. "These difficult times are unprecedented, and for this batch of graduating students, it will be a baptism of fire," said Ruth Chiang, SMU's director of career services.

All three universities have reported that they are working

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closely with employers to secure jobs for their graduating students.

Some graduates such as Mr Largado and Mr Wee have decided to give the corporate sector a miss altogether.

Together, they have struck out as independent day traders, setting up office in a Tiong Bahru So-

ho unit. "What's the point even if I get a job? The bank might retract the offer or fire me one month from now or even close down," said Mr Wee, who has been trading currency, commodities and equities for the last three years. Starting out with \$70,000 in capital, Mr Wee aims to double that sum by the end of the year.

But he admits: "Even though we've been trading for three years, we are aware that the market has no favourites."

Before graduates start looking at a Master's degree as a means of deferring their entry into the workforce, they should take heart from the fact that even though firms have cut down on hiring, they have not stopped altogether.

CIMB-GK Securities, a broking house, is in fact looking to increase its headcount of brokers and relationship managers, and will be scouring career seminars for fresh graduates this weekend.

"Fresh graduates will be considered alongside other experienced candidates as long as they possess the right qualifications and attributes for the positions," said Carol Fong, the chief executive officer of CIMB-GK Securities.

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