

# Development in the downturn

By Gaynor Lowndes of The Recruitment Training Company

The downturn is well and truly with us now. The uneasy mix of doomsday prophecies and denial has gripped the international media, and as recruiters, perhaps the most adversely affected of professionals, we want answers.

But let me start by asking a simple, but fundamental question: Is the downturn an opportunity for growth or simply survival? Forgive me if this question seems offensive. I understand first-hand the realities of recruitment in recession, and I have seen enough to know that those who manage to prosper despite the floundering economy are those who invest in developing and refining their recruitment skills.

If you're a manager, I know what you're thinking: "We can't afford our own staff, let alone the 'luxury' of training." I understand your concern. But I continue to find inspiring examples of prosperity in the industry, both individuals and companies, and the reason is clear: Rather than saying "We can't afford to invest in training", these companies and individuals take the attitude of "We can't afford not to invest in training".

Let me introduce you to Matthew McBean, National Manager of Industry Recruitment Solutions, based in Maitland, near Newcastle, NSW. Matthew formed IRS little over 12 months ago, to specialise in engineering and the trades. The company already boasts an \$11 million turnover.

To understand why, it is important to look at Matthew's individual background, and how he entered the industry in the first place. A qualified boilermaker, Matthew was placed on a temp project by a large national firm. He claims the agency deliberately misled him regarding the length of the assignment. Matthew was understandably frustrated: "I certainly had something to say to my temp manager when I saw him. I talked to him about it...and he said, 'Well if you think you can do better, then come in and start with us tomorrow'. Just like that."

Many junior recruiters are thrown in the deep end when they commence, and Matthew's situation epitomised this. He found himself unsure of the required processes, and filling jobs in areas he had no knowledge of. How did he survive? "I really did my research on the roles I was placing", he says.

As time went by, Matthew realised that skills development was essential, but it would need to be an individual initiative. "I really had to invest in myself", he says. "The companies I worked for didn't offer much in the way of training." Matthew had risen to the role of Business Development Manager by the time he left the agency to start his own from scratch. He was somewhat frustrated with the lack of training opportunities at the companies he had worked for.

Matthew continued with his training initiatives, gaining certificates in office and business administration, as well as an OHS certificate for frontline managers. He was determined to offer his staff at IRS the support that he had not received, knowing full-well that this was the key to the success and survival of the company in difficult times.

As National Manager, what will he do differently in order to see IRS through the downturn? Matthew laughs: "Nothing. We have a very clear plan of action...and that includes training. We invest heavily in training, because we see a return on it."

I was inspired by Matthew's story, but also a little frustrated. It's a story that hits me very close to home. Matthew epitomises the self-made recruiter. He expanded his knowledge, developed his skills, and undertook training...but all through his own initiative.

My question to managers throughout the industry is this: How can we expect our consultants to perform through the tough times, when we don't even train them to perform through the good times?

I can remember working in the UK during the Thatcher years. I survived, and did

relatively well, but the lack of training support that I witnessed then, and have continued to witness, is a source of constant frustration. Now, agencies are closing, recruiters are being laid off or simply resigning in discouragement. Would this be happening to the same extent, if our consultants had a base of training and support? No, we would be better equipped as an industry to deal with the challenges of recession.

I didn't become a recruitment trainer on a whim. I did it because I know from experience as a team leader and manager, that good recruiters are not born, they are made and developed. And at no time is that development more important than during periods of slowed growth and recession.

I believe that this period of difficulty can teach us an important lesson. It is an opportunity for us to grow as an industry, leaving behind the days when a recruiter like Matthew McBean would have to train himself. As an industry, we can value training and skills development, making it a priority in the good times and the bad. This way, we can survive and prosper during this downturn, and be better prepared when the next one comes along. ■



**Gaynor Lowndes** set up The Recruitment Training Company in 2001 to provide specific recruitment skills training to

recruiters. It has grown to be the largest provider of skills-based training to the recruitment industry. In addition, Gaynor provides success coaching services via [GaynorLowndes.com](http://GaynorLowndes.com).