

The Turning Tide of the Security Job Market

By Jeff Combs

Hiring managers take note: The tide is starting to turn. The “employer’s market” that had allowed hiring managers to cherry-pick, take their time, and lowball candidates is headed back out to sea.

Despite the fact that hiring activity has been slowly improving since the “dark days” of 2001, the job market has been tough. For the last several years, job seekers and professional recruiters like me have had to work harder. The number of qualified candidates has outweighed the number of available opportunities, creating a highly competitive environment for all involved. On one hand, this has had a positive effect by weeding out the less qualified and less dedicated candidates from the profession. On the other hand, this has created an “employer’s market,” with the balance of power in the hands of hiring managers and human resources.

The employment market is cyclical, however, and the balance of power is shifting back into the hands of employees and job seekers. Since the last quarter of 2004, my colleagues and I have seen that opportunities for motivated and talented security professionals are obviously increasing. You can credit new regulatory requirements, recent newsworthy security events, the evolution of the security profession, and your lucky rabbit’s foot. The upside is that companies are investing in their security and audit functions, and this is good news for practitioners.

For years just about everyone in IT and especially security has been doing more with less, working longer hours, and “sucking it up” so to speak. However, it doesn’t mean that employees aren’t facing burnout or are happily satisfied with the role they’re in. Years of frozen salaries, minimal bonuses and lack of career progression are causing employees to open their eyes and look for greener pastures, and managers need to be aware of this. The cost of replacing a valued team member is significant in dollars, time and mental resources. Managers who take a pro-active approach to understanding and addressing employee dissatisfaction will be doing themselves a favor. It’s time for managers to become their employees’ advocates and work towards creating a more rewarding and satisfying environment if they don’t want to lose their best people.

Employers, recognize that you are not the only game in town anymore and that a real effort has to be made to attract the best candidates to your organization. You need to “sell” candidates on why your company is a great place to work. If you can’t immediately tell someone why they should come to work for your organization, you have some homework to do. Second, the hiring process must be brought up to snuff. This means that everyone involved in the interview process must know why and what role they are interviewing candidates for. It means that the interviewers must present a cohesive, consistent message to candidates regarding the opportunity, its challenges and its benefits. It also means that accurate feedback must be provided in a timely fashion. This last point is absolutely critical and can’t be stressed enough. Great candidates, even good to average candidates, will not stick around indefinitely. They need feedback and a comfort level that things are moving forward or they will prioritize other opportunities over yours. And finally, the days of expecting candidates to accept lowball or lateral compensation packages are ending, too. With the market improving, people aren’t willing to take the risks associated with changing jobs for less or equal compensation than they are currently earning. Don’t be surprised if you have to dig deeper to get the best. It’s just the way things are. Walk in your employee’s shoes and find ways to make them happy. Address their pain points and make sure they recognize that they are valued.

And when it comes time to start hiring new talent, whether driven by new initiatives or replacing the fallen, get your ducks in a row. Work closely with your human resources staff and your recruiting partner to create a hiring process that gives your organization every advantage over your competition. Understand that you will have to be able to sell and articulate the value of the opportunity to candidates if you want their attention. And finally, recognize that strong candidates out on the market have a short shelf life and it will be up to you as a hiring authority to make a decision and act decisively if you wish to hire them.

In summary, the playing field between job seekers and prospective employers is beginning to level out. As a result, the competition to be and attract the best is increasing. Everyone, hiring authorities included, will need to get their game on if they want to be part of a winning team.

Jeff Combs has been with Alta Associates since 1999. Jeff has a depth of experience recruiting security professionals at all levels for corporate clients, professional services firms, and security vendors.