

Employees gaining the upper hand

Companies are chasing workers again as confidence returns

CAMERON COOPER

RESOURCE hot spots such as coal seam gas and underground coal gasification are facing a massive shortage of workers with the skills and technical expertise to enter these emerging fields.

With deals such as the multi-billion-dollar agreement for BG Group to supply liquefied natural gas to the China National Offshore Oil Corporation from its Curtis Island project at Gladstone in Queensland, the demand for talent is likely to be high.

To overcome the skills shortage resources companies are targeting workers from related industries such as the coal sector, says Richard Dunks, managing director of specialist executive search and human resources consulting firm Vantage Human Capital. In turn, this is leading to employment turnover in traditional resources companies.

"Those people need to come from somewhere and they're usually [drawn] from parallel areas, so it is creating a little bit more of a churn," he says.

Dunks believes confidence is returning to the resources sector in the wake of the global financial crisis, despite uncertainty as a result of, first, the Labor Government's resources super profits tax and, second, the delayed federal election result.

"I think there was certainly a hiatus with the resources super tax whereas now there's a bit more clarity around what's going on, so people are a lot more confident making those high-end decisions."

Not surprisingly, the resources powerhouses of Western Australia and Queensland are dominating jobs growth, with burgeoning sectors such as coal seam gas and underground coal gasification creating many new roles. Dunks says it is not easy to find workers with direct experience in such specialist areas.

"I think employers are going to have to not necessarily relax their standards but be more flexible and open-minded and creative about where these individuals are going to come from."

As confidence returns to the job market, he confirms that skilled workers are again starting to assess their options after sitting tight for the past 18 months or so.

"These are people who are usually passive because they're happy and comfortable in their role, but they know that they've hit a ceiling or they're looking for that next challenge, a parallel industry or a competitor."

While job vacancies are on the rise, Dunks says the situation has not yet returned to the heights of 2007 when companies were holding Dutch auctions and making huge offers and counter-offers to woo candidates. Some employees were also chasing their arm and seeking pay hikes in the order of 20 per cent.

"I think everybody is hoping and praying that it doesn't [happen again] because, oddly enough, the individual might win in terms of playing off a bit of a Dutch auction, but really it's unsettling for



Minister for Resources Martin Ferguson, BG Group managing director Catherine Tanna and Treasurer Wayne Swan announce the launch of the LNG plant at Curtis Island in Gladstone last month

LYNDON MECHELSZEN

everyone and the reality is that if people move purely for the dollar they're moving for the wrong reasons."

In terms of what companies can do to win over workers, Dunks believes it requires a combination of factors including pay, job challenges and work-life balance.

While Vantage Human Capital is mainly engaged in recruiting talent for white-collar roles such as commercial managers, chief financial officers, financial controllers, project accountants and human resources professionals, he says there is also demand for blue-collar workers.

Specialist jobs in areas involving complex land access issues are

also growing. In August, the Queensland Parliament passed the Geothermal Energy Bill 2010, introducing a new framework for land access and compensation arrangements that will apply across all tenure types in the estate.

The legislation has the potential to affect projects such as drilling on farm land or indigenous land tracts.

Dunk says the laws will create employment opportunities involving the environment and sustainability, tenement management, community and stakeholder liaison, cultural heritage and native title management.

"It's such a sensitive issue. You need to make sure everyone is

working off the same hymn sheet, that everyone's in agreement about what you can do and what you can't do on the land in terms of general relationship management," he says.

Such issues came to light recently when Cougar Energy was forced to shut down its pilot underground coal gasification plant near Kingaroy, 220km north-west of Brisbane, after the state government learned that traces of chemicals benzene and toluene had been found in groundwater at the site and on a neighbouring property.

"When PR gets out of that's negative in those communities it spreads like wildfire and it makes

it difficult," Dunks says. "So it's a unique area, but putting that to one side it's creating new opportunities and I guess new jobs and new careers out there."

He is confident ongoing demand for resources from China and other powerhouses such as India means projects and jobs will continue to flourish.

"There are a lot of factors, but the reality is that it's a pretty unique time and a unique opportunity within resources [with] the emerging new industries that I think will prove, in time, with technology and patience and careful management that they will be a good, long-term sustainable industry for the country."