



Weekend Australian Saturday 14/11/2009

Page: 8
Section: Weekend Professional
Region: Australia, AU
Circulation: 316194
Type: National
Size: 190.67 sq.cms.



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Circumventing the milk round

IN recruitment circles it's known as the milk round. The cycle begins in February when companies spruik their wares to students entering the final year of their degrees. By June, offers of employment have generally been made and successful candidates look forward to starting work as graduates the following February.

A key player in this process is Sydney-based communications agency Unimail. Headed by Andrea Culligan, who in October was named Telstra Young Business Woman of the Year, Unimail acts as a creative interface, representing "employers to students in a fashion that students wish to be spoken to".

"We provide a number of different platforms," Culligan says. "Employers can advertise jobs on our website, they can advertise in our graduate jobs directory, and we can create an entire brand and [marketing] concept based on what their company profile is and what they are trying to represent to a student body."

"And then we take it out to the masses. So we go to careers fairs and spend quite a lot of time on campuses promoting our publications, our websites."

It's big business. Unimail client NAB would typically attend

about 28 careers events between February and March and speak to an average of 15,000 students. And it's just one of 250 Australian companies Unimail works with aside from its numerous federal government clients. The agency's jobs website receives more than 1.8 million hits a month and its database contains about 65,000 students who are regularly surveyed by email.

Culligan says the annual 13 per cent increase in the number of positions available to graduates has held up throughout the global financial crisis, largely because smaller to medium enterprises stepped into graduate

recruitment as larger companies pulled back.

When the economy was raging, skills shortages meant students were able to command big salaries and company cars. To compete for the best talent, companies sweetened their offers with training and development, mentoring, fast-tracking, flexible hours and up-to-date technology.

As the downturn kicked in, Culligan says, students became more interested in working for businesses that reflected their ethical views.

In the middle of this year, when companies would normally have booked recruitment

campaigns for 2010, the market dried up.

Things weren't helped in July, Culligan says, by Employment Participation Minister Mark Arbib saying young people should take any job they could get.

"It's an atrocious feeling to be rejected for a role," she says, and a likely outcome when students apply widely for jobs they're unsuited for.

Culligan's advice to students is to "spend more time researching the organisations that are true to what you want to achieve in the long run, both personally and professionally. Don't just jump at the first opportunity."

By September this year, the market began bouncing back with big players signalling a resumption of graduate programs in 2010.

Mining and manufacturing giant OneSteel is recruiting already and senior recruitment adviser Ainsley Gilkes says the listed company is struggling to fill positions, particularly in accounting, engineering and IT.

Anne Moore at Sydney Talent, the University of Sydney's student employment agency, expects graduate recruitment to ramp up next year.

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