

# Table talk: recruitment

*Leading health and safety recruiters give their candid insights into how anyone looking for a new job can stand out from the currently expanding pool of candidates in the market*

A BRIEF glance at the recruitment advertisements at the back of this or any health and safety magazine will show that the jobs market is less buoyant than in previous years. There is a large cohort of practitioners chasing a reduced number of vacant posts, as many people who might have moved stay put while they wait for evidence of an economic revival.

But for those who fall into that expanding group of jobhunters, advice on how to increase their chances of winning a job they want is at a premium.

For that reason, we brought together five of the UK's most senior health and safety recruitment agents to discuss the state of the market and to offer their thoughts on how candidates can win, and more often lose, jobs they want.

Even if you aren't planning to move jobs in the near future, it's worth reading their advice on CV format and content, the need for honesty, and how to get a recruitment agent to be your best advocate; it will prove invaluable whenever you next decide to move.

## The state of recruitment

**Mark Burton:** It's not impossible but it's a lot harder than it was 12 months ago. It's about as hard as I've seen it. There's a lot of industries being hit where they probably weren't in previous recessions.

**Shirley Parsons:** Health and safety has not been nearly as badly hit as in some other recessions. Companies legally have to have someone responsible for health and safety.

**Helen Murphy:** We've noticed a huge increase in the number of candidates

registering with us. There's a lot more people out there looking. That tends to dilute the really good candidates.

**MB:** I don't think the quality is as good if you look at the pool as a whole.

**Jo Banks:** You think so? I think there are some really good people in there.

**Steve Hancock:** I think when any market goes through recession there's a natural evolution where the weaker candidates get shaken out first and that's what we've experienced recently. Unfortunately now some of the good candidates are coming out through no fault of their own. We are seeing a lot of people out there: some good, some not so good, and some quite arrogant. Realism hasn't come home to a lot of the candidates at the moment, but it will do, as their awareness of what's going on increases.

**HM:** Salaries increased quite dramatically over the past couple of years, so people are still expecting to get that same level of money, but companies aren't necessarily offering that. They are thinking "there's lots of people out there, we can get someone for £10k less".

**MB:** For a lot of people the competition to get the job they would have got two years ago is much much tougher now.

**HM:** I think we've seen fewer people at the senior level looking. Perhaps those people are thinking, "Well I've got a secure job now, I'm going to stay put and see how the market pans out." Because it's often fast in, first out with companies, so they don't want to jump ship just at the moment. They'll ride the storm and maybe look to move in a couple of years' time.

**JB:** Also self-employed people that previously have been doing very nicely as independents or interim managers and maybe would have bounced round the agencies doing six months here, six months there, they are heading for the hills and looking for senior permanent jobs.

**MB:** I have had long conversations with people who have been career contractors who have suddenly decided now's the perfect time to have that dream permanent job they've always wanted, and it's not entirely realistic. And clients have so much choice they can see through that too.

**JB:** Sometimes those six months here and there have actually given them a CV that couldn't be beaten elsewhere because they've tasted and seen so many different environments and they've followed projects through to completion that we can verify. Other times it's all a bit ... bitty.

**SH:** There's a lot more competition from non-niche-market recruiters. A lot of generalists have come into the market. The end result for the candidates is they have to be cautious who they register with. Good agencies will always talk to candidates to make sure they have their permission to put their CVs forward, some others who are new into the market will just mailshot their CVs out to anybody. We are getting clients saying, "I've already had this CV from three or four agents" and we are the only one that has actually spoken to the candidate. For the



candidates it gives the impression that they are not in control of their career.

**SB:** Yes, that they are desperate.

**SH:** It's no fault of the candidate.

**JB:** I think some candidates are almost giving tacit permission; they are sending their CVs out to so many agencies. I'm receiving emails now that have got everyone's name at the top and I always think why don't they blind copy it? Why do I want to know that they have sent their CV to 20 other recruiters? I'd be happier not knowing. Some of them do naïvely believe that if their CV is sent to an employer by more than one source, it means they are even more suitable for the job.

**SP:** That's definitely wrong.

### The importance of honesty

**JB:** I definitely think that we should be in more demand now because there are so many candidates and they don't know how to vet them properly and don't have our background in selecting the wheat from the chaff. The clients almost need us more now because there are people lying on their CVs — we've caught some.

**SP:** Oh yes, we've had some of that.

**JB:** We tightened up on all of our procedures. In the past you could take a photocopy of a NEBOSH certificate as read that it was genuine. I've now been told that there are ways of getting a dodgy NEBOSH certificate that you could send in to a recruitment agent who's not checking. We are scrutinising them now because we know people in this market are tempted to make themselves appear better than they are.

**MB:** Even with something like an IOSH membership which you can check really easily with a phone call ... the amount of people who say they are members at one level and actually they are not quite there yet.

**SP:** They'll quickly get found out.

**JB:** Or they study for an MSc that they never complete. I've had that several times with candidates and it's been on their CV for the past five years that they are studying at Portsmouth, but if you then ask them to provide their first year completion certificate, they haven't got one. Second year certificate? Haven't got one. How long's the course supposed to last? Three years. So how do they explain that? There is definitely some skulduggery going on. I think the better candidates will shine through still because they are checkable and verifiable. Checking references becomes all the more important.

**SH:** I think the message is the candidates shouldn't be as naïve as to think that agencies don't check. So if there's any doubt, don't try and say you are what you're not, because you'll be found out and that has a knock-on effect because the agency will be asking what else is a lie on your CV if that is? Just present yourself as you are.

**SP:** It's much better to be honest, because if the client specifies they want CMIOASH or the NEBOSH Diploma and this candidate hasn't got that it's best to say they haven't got it but they are strong in other areas and would be willing to study for it. It's much better for them to be totally honest.

**JB:** It also means they won't be in breach of contract. It can happen if you start a job under false pretences; they can use that as a means of getting you out, dismissing you. And that's no good for anyone. The agency isn't going to forget you put them in that position, and the client definitely won't forget.

### Working with agents

**SH:** I think candidates need to take ownership of their job hunting. Getting a new job

### Know what you want

**Steve Hancock:** I'm getting more and more, particularly out-of-work, candidates who will say yes to any type of job when actually they've no intention of doing it and it wastes an awful lot of time. You go to candidates and say, "You're really going to relocate to Scotland?" and they say, "Yes, yes". And you say, "Well, you're married with two kids at university and your house isn't sellable, so you're not going to move". Candidates should take some time to reflect as to what they are looking for in their next move. Even if they are out of work it's still worth being very clear about the type of work they are looking for. That helps the agent focus on finding them the right thing.

### Steve Hancock, director, Convert Recruitment

Steve Hancock is founder of Convert Recruitment, a privately owned specialist health, safety and environmental recruitment agency. He has been in the recruitment industry since 1985 and has extensive experience across a broad spectrum of industry sectors, working through economic highs and lows. Steve has been involved in all recruitment areas, covering permanent, contract, advertised search and outplacement. He offers a great insight into the issues facing both clients and candidates during this period of uncertainty.

Convert Recruitment was established in 2004 and holds a reputation for high-quality service, competitively priced. Convert recruits health, safety, and environmental professionals on behalf of clients in the UK, Europe and Middle East on a permanent and contract basis. [www.convertrecruitment.co.uk](http://www.convertrecruitment.co.uk)

**Mark Burton, director, Attwood Burton**

Mark Burton heads up Attwood Burton with Alistair Attwood. They have 15 years' health, safety and environmental recruitment experience and more than 30 years in technical recruitment, search and selection.

Attwood Burton is not the sub-division of a faceless corporate recruitment business. They specialise only in health, safety and environment and their approach is to focus on building personal, long-term relationships with candidate and client alike. They work at all levels from assistant to director. The range of jobs they've filled already in 2009 is testament to this. They've found new graduates their first roles in the profession, placed managers at blue chip projects including the Olympics, and filled a director-level role with a world-class organisation at a basic salary of more than £100,000. Many of their roles are exclusive and they run search campaigns for clients, as well as working on contingency projects.



is a job in itself. You need to get up in the morning and approach it as a job. Yes, they can just put a CV up on a job site, but there are some negatives about doing it that way. They would benefit from a more controlled approach to five or six agencies and taking their career searching as seriously as they take their job. If you are using a housing analogy, you wouldn't put your house on the market and wait for all and sundry to call you up, you market it through an agency you trust. You just wouldn't do that with a high-value product such as a house, but they are willing to do it with themselves, probably through desperation and lack of understanding.

**SP:** Candidates should tell the agency that they want to be advised first before they are put forward for a role. That would help all of us I think.

**MB:** There are candidates who are out of work or know they are going to be out of work and are desperate. They want a job and I don't think they really care who they get it through. They aren't planning their career, as you say, they just want to pay the mortgage and aren't really thinking about the longer term. They might not know who they've sent their CV to or spoken to.

**SH:** But it can have a knock-on in the short term. If a candidate's details arrive four or five times at a client, the client will start to see a whole inter-agency issue [about which agency gets the fee], which makes it easier for the client

to de-select that candidate because they say, "I can't be bothered with that, and I've got 15 others here." So they are in danger of being knocked out of the running because there's an inter-agency fight about whose candidate they are.

That's a risk candidates take by not taking ownership of where their CVs are going.

**Doing unto others...**

**JB:** Candidate ethics is a subject in itself. Sometimes, when there's the pressure to get a job, people don't behave the way they would normally perhaps. We don't know their home circumstances and the pressures they're under. But I have had situations where someone who I've placed on a contract has left the contract without telling me whereas before they wouldn't have done that, but that's because nervousness has set in, they've been offered something where they are not sure whether they are going to get it. I've always had this system with contractors where we say: "If you are getting itchy feet, tell us first. Allow us to help you move on." That also allows us to keep our client happy by having a ready replacement for them.

When they let you down, then in a couple of years you're not going to be interested, are you? I've been in the business 10 years and I've got notes and a system where we can recall all our interactions. The number of times people re-register two years after they've pulled a stinker and think you don't remember. But we are like elephants us lot, we remember everything. Bad form follows you.

**SP:** I'd always recommend candidates who decide to use a specialist agency to come and meet us, so we can have a proper conversation about their career aspirations and where they see their future. Because even if people are out of work, there's no point in them jumping into the first job because it's not going to look

**Upskill in a downturn**

**Jo Banks:** I see this time as a great opportunity for all those candidates who need a period of upskilling. They could use this as a really good time to improve their CVs, improve their presentation skills, communication skills, qualifications. They can do short courses if they already have the NEBOSH Diploma or whatever.

I always say don't just think about the next job you want, think about the job after that and the one after. It's about long-term planning."



**Helen Murphy FREC, director, New Level Recruitment**

Helen Murphy is founder of the health, safety and environmental recruitment specialist New Level Recruitment. Prior to establishing New Level in 2005, Helen worked as an assistant health and safety adviser for a large public sector organisation and as a health and safety consultant with a corporate client group.

Helen first started working in recruitment in 1989 and has more than 16 years' experience of sourcing and recruiting specialist staff worldwide for positions in the UK, Europe, the Middle East and Africa. She is a Fellow of the REC, an active member of the IOSH South Downs Branch and holds both REC and NEBOSH qualifications. In her current role, Helen works with both contract and permanent staffing requirements and manages a number of preferred supplier contracts for clients in a variety of industries.

good on their CV if they've been job-hopping. So they'd be best advised to take the time now to find their right career move.

**MB:** I think that says something about the commitment of the candidate as well. Are they willing to take an hour to come and meet you and sit down and talk about it face to face. There are some people who don't even want to pick up the phone. They just send an email out and wait for the jobs to come in.

**SP:** We can't wave a magic wand. It's just human nature — you're probably going to have the people who put a lot of effort in at the front of your mind.

**MB:** They say people buy people, and in terms of the relationship you have with your clients [companies], that's what it's all about. From a candidate perspective it's the same. A candidate should be selling themselves to you so you can promote them to your clients. And if they aren't willing to put in the effort themselves, that probably tells you something about how what they will do will reflect back on you.

**JB:** If a candidate cuts up rough over whatever — a contractor starts letting you down or they phone up accounts and are very rude to the people processing the payments — that kind of thing will follow a person. They need to be aware it's not just the CV and how they behave at interview; we are professionals and we expect them to be too.

### CVs as ads

**SH:** I think the other thing is for candidates to read their own CVs. It's amazing, and we've all seen it, a guy who has been in the industry for 20 years gives you a CV with one line covering his entire career. Candidates need to be aware that with the advent of the internet, the CV is more of a selling document than it's ever been before. It's an opportunity to sell yourself. They have to ask is it selling their actual achievements, not just the facts of what they've done? Then to actually read it themselves. Often you talk to candidates and say "2000 to 2003 you were doing this" and they say "Was I?" And you ask "What was your biggest achievement?" and they say "Uhhh...".

**JB:** And if the agency doesn't give you proper information, demand it. It's part of the agency's job to brief you.

**HM:** I think in this kind of market candidates need to make HR's life easy for them. They need to give the information a company wants, because the HR department isn't going to know every other company out there. So if you say you've worked for X organisation that has 500 employees and is a manufacturer, you've done some of their homework for them and that may get you into the "yes" pile.

**JB:** Sometimes a bit more than that. If it was multi-site and there was thousands of staff and some of the sites had different areas, a clean room or a laundry, the fact that they've managed multiple risk areas might make it sound more exciting.



### State your interests

**HM:** The first thing you see on some CVs is a list of family members and hobbies and stuff like that, but you need to have the important information up front.

**JB:** Should they even bother with hobbies, unless it's relevant to the job?

**SP:** I always suggest people put theirs on actually.

**JB:** I think it depends on whether they do something unusual. Tractor racing; we've had that one before. Dressing up as soldiers at the weekend.

**MB:** Battle re-enactments? There's nothing wrong with that, if that's your thing.

**SP:** It gives the interviewer something to chat about.

**MB:** The CV should reflect something of the person. If all there is is a list of responsibilities, a career chronology and a few achievements, you don't find out anything about the person. If we know what our clients are looking for we know whether that's important. Some companies couldn't care less what somebody did at the weekend. Others, if they didn't see that, would wonder what the person is like. I know someone who got a job because they were a vintage car enthusiast and the type of car they were interested in was also of interest to the MD.

**SP:** We placed someone at the LCC once because he said he was absolutely mad about cricket. He had all the right qualifications too, but his passion was cricket, and that made a difference.

**JB:** I just think you have to be careful how much you put. I've seen people put their religion and race, how many children they've got, the fact their children went to university. And half of me is thinking, what relevance has any of that got? It's like when they send

in their photo and they've got all their kids lined up. Yes, you've got a beautiful family, but that's not going to get you the job.

**SP:** On the other hand I think it is quite useful to put "married with two children" because then that gives the interviewer some information to ask about. If they don't put anything at all it's difficult to broach the subject.

I think less is more. If they just put the facts without a lot of flowery description, like the name of their dog and stuff.

**HM:** Or their favourite fancy dress costume; that's my all-time favourite. It was a red ladybird outfit apparently.

### Full disclosure

**SH:** One of the other things I see constantly is people who've been working over 20 years tend to miss out the first 10 years of their career, and I think it's quite important they give their entire career history. It only wastes our time because we have to go back and get it anyway.

**JB:** I don't agree. I'd always advise them to do the last 10 to 15 years. Because if they were a hairdresser when they left school and now have a high-powered health and safety career, it's not going to lend too much from one to the other.

**SP:** They could just put a summary, a couple of lines.

**MB:** It leaves a question mark otherwise.

**SP:** They should definitely put the most recent job they had first.

**MB:** As we were saying, their CV is a marketing tool and so many CVs are just cut and pasted from their job descriptions. It says this is what I do, but the person in that job before would have had the same CV, as would the person who does it after. Really you should be talking about what you did, how you did it and what the outcomes were in some sort of quantifiable way so that someone can pick it up and say "this person can bring value to us because this is what they have done before".

### Jo Banks, HSEQ recruitment, training & consultancy adviser, Principal People

Jo is celebrating her 10<sup>th</sup> year with Principal People despite the gloomy financial crisis we all hear so much about. 2009 has brought its challenges for many businesses; however, Jo feels that there is still fresh opportunity for many jobseekers in this niche market.

During the last 10 years Jo has watched many careers flourish in health and safety management and has enjoyed meeting a talented and diverse group of people who work in the industry.

When times are tough, recruiters and health and safety professionals can have many common enemies: cost cutting, poor staff morale and lack of investment in training. Principal People believes that now is the time for professionals and recruiters to improve themselves and develop new skills and services and be creative in finding client solutions. When the upturn comes, those that have invested time and effort into improving themselves will survive and prosper in this market.



### Getting an agent on side

**Mark Burton:** We kind of sit in the middle between the client and the candidates. We have to sell the benefits of a client, an industry, a job, to candidates and to sell the candidate back to the client. If you only have that conversation where they ring up to complain, you are not going to want to put them in front of your clients.

The best thing a candidate can do I think is ring up and say, "I've seen your job ad here, or spotted it on the internet. This is a little bit about me, do you think it might be right for me? I want to have a chat before I send you my CV just so you get to know a little bit about me." That happens only in the minority of cases, but that tells you something about how engaged the person is, whether they just want a job to pay the mortgage or if they are serious about a particular job. Those are the people you will be more inclined to put the energy into getting them the right position.

**JB:** I don't like skills-based CVs but I think you can have a chronological CV plus some information about skills you built up. I normally say to people two to three pages for a CV, maybe two pages of the normal stuff you'd expect and the third page to be used for the achievements and the skills and maybe the things they can do, if they are an auditor or have been on secondment, because that sort of thing can sometimes sell you as well.

**MB:** I think we can all agree there are things you'd expect to see and things you'd definitely not want to see, but I'm not a believer in a CV template. It has to reflect a little bit about you as an individual. Most people who don't work in safety know very little about it and they might think it's boring and if that's what comes across in your CV I don't think you are doing yourself any favours.

### Check the spelling

**SP:** The simple things like spelling and grammar are so important. Basic words like "driving licence"; it's amazing how many people misspell that.

**MB:** Or curriculum vitae.

**SP:** Or MIOSH or NEBOSH.

**HM:** They always make me instantly suspicious because I think if you can't spell it, have you actually got it? Or are you lying to me?

**MB:** It's not like you're on a typewriter. If you can use Microsoft Word, it should be telling you if it's misspelled. If you don't review it it says a lot about your attention to detail.

**SP:** I wouldn't advise people to put loads of boxes round theirs, because that makes it a nightmare scanning it onto a database and emailing it. A simple legible, well-presented CV with no boxes and no fancy fonts, no coloured paper. Then they need to follow up the CV when it's sent. It's no good just sending it off then just waiting.

**HM:** Yes, just keeping track of their applications is always a good start.

**JB:** Some of them do write down a reference number, the name of the agency and what was roughly on offer from the advert and then they can check back. Especially if they are applying for loads of jobs I'd say that's key.

**HM:** Many people believe that if they send off their CV to an agency, their application has automatically gone through to the company.

**MB:** They think that's their part of the process done until we call them for interview.

**SP:** They'll say, "I registered with you six months ago, I haven't heard anything", and you think, "We haven't heard anything from you either".

We can get them the interview but they need to put in the preparation, though we can help with that.

**JB:** To make that kind of conversation the only conversation you've had with somebody, it makes you not want to phone them back.

### Interview technique

**SP:** I think they need to prepare properly for the interview. It's very easy these days to check up on a company from their website, and to look at articles. Sometimes candidates still turn up and they haven't researched the company, they haven't researched the job properly. They really need to do that and to be able to demonstrate that they've done it.

They also need to work out their journey so as not to be late for the interview. They've

got to do their homework to set themselves apart from other people.

There's nothing worse at the end of an interview than if the interviewer says, "Have you got any questions?" and they say, "Oh no, I think you've answered them all." It makes you wonder if they are really interested in the job.

**MB:** They can't possibly have answered every question.

**JB:** At interview people need to be on their guard. I know people who have sworn, or been un-PC or made a really dodgy joke. They need to think that though the interviewers aren't trying to trick me or catch me out, I'm more likely to trip myself up than anyone else tripping me. I always advise candidates to mind their Ps and Qs and not to try to be funny. The best advice is to be yourself and if you are right for the job that will shine through.

**SP:** They need to be willing to put themselves out. Sometimes at the last minute interviews will change, locations change, people they are going to meet can't make it so they have to go back a second, third, sometimes even fourth, time.

**SP:** Keep us in the picture. If you decide to pull out, let the agent know. It's rude just to not turn up.

**JB:** Don't be afraid to say no to an agent. Sometimes if the candidate has a nagging doubt about a job an agent wants to put them forward for they should speak up.

**JB:** Sometimes I think clients are a little unkind in that respect. People are busy and if the client says they are going to meet someone at XYZ spot, be there, we can make apologies on their behalf, but I think the decent thing for clients to do is to do what they say they are going to do. It's their image as well as ours. ■

### Shirley Parsons, managing director, Shirley Parsons Associates

What's in a name? Though Shirley Parsons, the lady, has more than 30 years' experience in the specialist field of health and safety, both as practitioner and in recruitment, that tells only a small part of the story. The company bearing her name — Shirley Parsons Associates — employs 17 people and is a firm of professional talent brokers with an impressive track record of making better matches between client and candidate, as well as reducing overall recruitment costs. Shirley's mission remains the same as when she founded the company three and a half years ago: to improve the way employers recruit and retain talent while enabling HSEQ professionals to develop their careers. This is an approach she has nurtured and honed over her years in the industry. The difference between her team and others becomes apparent when you meet them; there is a good mix of experience and youthful enthusiasm, a combination which scores well when it comes to listening carefully to needs before driving on to deliver.