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Moscow's Heyday of Unskilled Carpetbagging Expats Is Over

By Peter Spinella

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Antal's Luc Jones believes a demand bubble is forming on the job market.

Job market experts and politicians agree, Russia needs more qualified workers — and even some not-so-qualified ones. This year's expansion of the list of foreign specialists not subject to visa quotas is a testament to the growing needs in a wide variety of areas.

Though Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said in his recently published vision for the country's development that 25 million jobs for skilled workers have to be created, Education and Science Minister Andrei Fursenko expressed doubt concerning the ability to find people to fill those positions.

"No matter how well we organize our demographic policies, new people in such quantities will not be appearing soon," Fursenko said last week at the Gaidar Forum for Russian economists, RBC reported.

In the white-collar segment, recruiters are seeing a booming market tipped in favor of employees. "The job market has practically completely recovered [from the financial crisis] and now constitutes a job-seeker's market. The battle for qualified staff is escalating," Sergei Gadetsky, head of Ancor, one of the largest recruitment firms in Russia, told The Moscow Times.

"Project managers and business analysts remain well sought after," said Maria Safronova, recruitment manager at headhunting agency Flex, "but there is growing demand for IT staff." In that field, Moscow companies are most actively pursuing managerial profiles, such as project heads and directors of IT infrastructure development, she added.

Staffing firm Antal Russia sees its clients seeking sales people — mostly in the business-to-business sector for pharmaceuticals, IT and telecoms, banking and finance, and fast-moving consumer goods.

A nationwide survey that Antal released late last year confirmed that the most in-demand specialists are sales and marketing professionals, with 51 percent of companies participating in the research saying they plan to hire such people this quarter. Next in line were supply chain specialists (23 percent), accountants (20 percent), production personnel (19 percent), and administrative and IT staff (17 percent).

Luc Jones, a partner at Antal and a board member of the Canadian Eurasia Russia Business Association, believes that a job market demand bubble is forming but notes that the heyday of unskilled carpetbagging expats is over. His firm fills most of its vacancies with locals.

As a British-Canadian who moved to Russia in the mid-'90s and has seen the post-Soviet labor market evolve practically from its inception, Jones has plenty of advice to offer job-hunters — both Russians and expats alike. In a recent interview, he shared his thoughts with The Moscow Times.

On hiring foreigners:

It comes down to one simple question, what can you do that a Russian can't? And the answer is, usually, not much. Get your Russian up, but you've got to find a niche. You've got to get a foot in the door somewhere, be prepared to do something that you might not necessarily want to do. If you go into a company and do well, then it's easier to move up. Work for a multinational, and prove yourself. Most companies are trying to Russify their organizations. Unfortunately, a lot of companies don't look at what I would call "Russpats," foreigners who've lived in Russia for a while and know the place well. You've got "corppats" who come in, spend three years in an expat bubble and leave. On the other hand, there are some people who know the language and have great local skills and are just completely overlooked by large companies.

On hiring Russians:

The one thing that is most important: English. The level of English here overall is very poor. If

you go outside of Moscow and need someone who speaks English, forget it. Ninety-eight percent of our vacancies require English. Most of the time I say to people you will be speaking Russian nearly all the time, with your colleagues, clients and partners. The only time you'll be speaking English is if some manager flies in or you go off abroad, but you will have to speak to people on the phone. There's probably a call center in India or a boss in Austria. You're going to need English.

I like to see ambition and drive. Far too many people ask what the company can do for them instead of what they can do for the company.

Candidates should also not jump from job to job every six months. I usually allow people one mistake, but on the whole, it's best for someone to stay in one place for at least two years. I look to see that if they moved to another company, they got promoted. In fact, there is a bubble being created because of a shortage of talent. The employment market is growing more quickly than people themselves are developing. Just because we had a downturn in late 2008/early 2009, that doesn't mean that suddenly millions of great candidates have suddenly appeared on the market ready to work for half-price. Companies didn't make redundant the best ones first.

Unfortunately a lot of people are fairly naive about the whole recruitment process. Russians don't oversell themselves, largely because they think it makes them look desperate. Russians will come across as being fairly blase. There's an expression throughout the world that the key to getting a job is acting as though you don't need a job, and there's a fair amount of truth to that. But don't be too blase. Talk up your skills.

Russians expect a promotion far too quickly. In the Western world you tend to work in one position for many years before you get promoted. But here one regular conversation we have with clients is them telling us that your guy is quite good but he's not worth as much as he's asking. And we'll say yeah, agreed, but if he goes to five firms down the road, at least one will pay him that. And some people will even say, if you don't promote me, someone up the road will. And I hate to say, they're probably right. That company needs to consider the cost of replacing the employee. Will they be able to hire someone new at the old salary? When Russians jump jobs, they at least want a 20 percent pay raise.

Employers want someone who's going to be committed. And, in the end, someone they can work with.

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