

# Can't get the staff?

*Optician* assembled some top professionals to discuss the pressing issues in recruitment

## How is the balance of power shifting between employer and employee and what are the key factors affecting recruitment?

● Chris Howarth: My view is that the interface between the employer and the employee is changing a lot and I don't think the employee any longer wants what we, the employers, are trying enthusiastically to give them which is a 9 to 5.30, five-day-a-week career for 25 years. The evidence from other professions shows clearly that is no longer what the population wants. They want portfolio careers, they want flexible working they want to take sabbaticals, they want to disappear around the world, they want to come back and they want pick up where they left off, they want to have babies and they want to come back. All of that fluidity exists in the marketplace and one of the challenges is how we respond to it.

## Is that mirrored elsewhere?

● Scott Liversidge: Yes most definitely across the whole of optometry but also we see that in other areas such as clinical research that it is factored into their week that they do two days from home or they work remotely. It's difficult to do that if you are an optometrist.

● Richard Edwards: In pharmacy they are termed 'melissas' (my executive life is spent searching ahead) – so they are not just going to take a job and sit there – they are looking at what is the next move.

## How does that manifest itself in terms of what people want when they are looking for a job?

● Howarth: We see it manifested in joint venture partnership applications. People are quite open that their aim is to develop into a joint venture role. That mindset is evidenced by the number of people who come to us to work but say eventually I want to do this. Their view is some years in the future they are going to move to that aspect. Others may want to work three days a week.

● Kate Clayton: We have got the joint



**Howarth, Clayton and Litchfield discuss the current recruitment market**

venture option and we have got the employed options and we do find a lot of people, particularly newly qualifieds, have career progression in mind, of becoming a joint venture partner longer term. I would also agree with what Chris said in terms of flexibility. It's trading hours, trying to cover late trading stores, weekends – it's just not as easy as it used to be. You have to have unfavourable shifts but there are enough people out there to get the flex and you can find opportunities for people if you look at it in a structured manner.

## Where is the balance of power at the moment between the employer and the employee?

● Edwards: The answer depends on whether you are sitting in London or East Anglia. The thing that has changed dramatically is that there used to be 250 kids a year qualifying – that is now 550 plus and what we are finding is

## PANELLISTS

- **Chris Howarth** – director of professional recruitment at Specsavers
- **Kate Clayton** – head of human resources Vision Express
- **Sally Litchfield** – recruitment manager Vision Express
- **Richard Edwards** – head of professional resource and development at Boots
- **Scott Liversidge** – managing director of Flame Health

that the apple falls closest to the tree. The areas where the universities are supplying graduates have started to become saturated but it's still almost as tough as ever in East Anglia and Kent and the South West. So the employee absolutely holds the aces there – the balance of power is completely reversed in London and Northern Ireland.

● Edwards: So our approach to the

market is about how we build a proposition that allows that total polarisation of a market to be managed as effectively as we can.

Interestingly, people come into the business and say you just get the optometrists in London to go to East Anglia. But how do you propose to do that? Go and throw loads of money at it. Of course that does not work, it is far more subtle and far more complicated. But that's my reading of the market – it just that it's polarised.

## So where are those shortages? Is everyone agreed?

● Sally Litchfield: It can be coastal – places like Hull, Grimsby, Aberdeen, Inverness and Middlesborough. But essentially it is anywhere where there isn't a university.

● Edwards: We tried to crack it in a sense when we opened Anglia, but when you go to Anglia you realise it is full of London-based students who commute to Cambridge to study. It is like City University with another campus 50 miles up the train line it has not solved the East Anglia problems.

## But why should this be so? If you can practise in a nice area by the sea with a favourable salary why don't more people do it?

● Edwards: That's the irony. There are some places where the quality of life is fantastic and they are the hardest places to recruit. It is the same in pharmacy and it was the same when I worked with dentists a few years ago. And there are some places that are less attractive where it is quite easy to recruit.

● Liversidge: Preconceptions also play a part. We get people who think that once you get past Watford Gap life is grim. Sometimes people go to the emerging cities and see the night life and the restaurants and clubs and are convinced, so it's beginning to change.

● Clayton: It is age as well. The younger optometrists particularly are the ones that want the city life and trying to get them to go to somewhere other than London, Manchester or Birmingham is very difficult. There are certain people who are throwing money at it in different areas and then that throws out the whole scale of salaries in those places. I've heard of some newly qualified earning huge salaries in the difficult to recruit areas but as soon as you move that benchmark up it has a knock-on effect on the rest and the ability to recruit in that area becomes more difficult. With



**Liversidge:** there are a few more mercenaries around

Batemans now we have 75 stores in the south west to recruit to, so it is an interesting challenge.

## How do those attitudes get changed?

● Edwards: When I talk to our summer students I am quite open with them about where the market is going to be for them in the future. The scary thing for me is that I am talking to people who are well into the second year of their degree course. I am clearly the first person who has landed that message with them. They need to understand that they have to be more flexible if they want to earn a higher salary. I think the people who are not getting the message are those who have been qualified for a number of years who probably never had to worry about it until they phone an agency and get a fright because they realise that they can't really move.

## So how willing are optometrists and DOs to adapt to what employers want?

● Litchfield: As pre-regs they are quite keen on the idea of going somewhere new but once they are qualified their perception changes.

● Liversidge: We get some newly qualified coming through with such very high and tight criteria

somewhere in the region of £50,000 to £60,000 and control over working hours. That is very strange and if they had been given more guidance in universities their expectations might be more realistic.

● Howarth: Everything we have said would have been highly applicable until about a year ago when our supermarket competitors suddenly lost the plot on salary. So the reality is that if you want to earn 60 grand a year you can. If we hold this meeting again in another 12 months' time after 12 months of recession and credit crunch we will be having a completely different conversation because job security will become very, very important and a lot of the things we are talking about now will be of less value than job security.

## So will factors such as these begin to change the way people think about their employment prospects and take the emphasis away from the big pay cheque to longer term issues?

● Clayton: I think career development, with optoms in particular is becoming increasingly important. It has moved very much back to questions such as: 'What are you going to do to develop me?' They are wanting more management skills, more business skills. That is one of the big shifts I have seen over the last couple of years.

## Do the employers have to respond to that?

● Edwards: As the market tightens up people will realise that they have to have additional strings to their bow to make themselves more employable. We made a decision three years ago that we wanted more professional staff to manage our businesses and therefore we had the opportunity to develop optometrists and dispensing opticians in a management role. That's working really well for us. We did it because it was strategically the right thing, but the collateral benefit of that is that it has helped us to retain some of the more talented individuals and give them what they want.

● Howarth: Our experience has been similar. Specsavers has always had this immense commitment to career development. We have offered that to the optom population but they have disregarded it to a certain extent but in the recent past they have started to engage with it more. It's always been there. The professional graduate these days is looking for different things in general than they



were looking for before. In portfolio careers, dipping in and out is all very important to the professional because they are not going to do 25 years of 9 to 5.30 again. I certainly think that the pre-reg population has become more inquisitive in terms of what potentially lies ahead for them.

● **Liversidge:** We see that more laterally across numerous sectors. They want more diversity in general that could involve travel experiences, responsibilities across the spectrum. I think people flirt with opportunities much more than they used to.

### If they want to do all of these things have they got the right skill set?

● **Liversidge:** Employers are looking for people who have commercial awareness and interpersonal skills. Retailing, personality, the multiples are after very much the same things.

● **Howarth:** Pre-regs are well aware of what goes on in the multiple sector [as opposed to the independent sector] and about time.

● **Edwards:** If you don't want to work Saturdays you are half way though the wrong degree.

● **Howarth:** The universities are saying the same things to them that they were 30 years ago – it is the corporate sector that is doing all of the positioning with students.

### What are some of the factors behind mobility. Why are people leaving jobs?

● **Edwards:** It always boils down to their manager. People don't leave their employer they leave their manager.

● **Liversidge:** There are few more mercenaries and mavericks around who are chasing salaries. There are some chasing kudos. I know of a situation where a job spec was the same but was given a good job title and it won the candidate over to change jobs.

● **Litchfield:** We are seeing a lot more locums coming back to us because it's not the dream they thought it would be.

● **Clayton:** The retail side is very different to the professional side. On the retail side there are very much more opportunities.

● **Howarth:** In the main a professional employee doesn't move for money. We try and build our experience for employees around that reality. Career development, security and flexibility are genuinely available to them – giving them more money doesn't solve the problem.

● **Edwards:** It's about engaging professional staff – if you don't



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engage them you don't retain them.

● **Clayton:** It's about the total remuneration package, the total reward package not just the salary. It's about highlighting that value.

● **Howarth:** We must all be pretty good at it because our retention is pretty good and we get very few people from Boots or Vision Express unless they have changed geography. They are not leaving because they don't like where they are working. There are others that we do take staff from. Within the major employers we all provide a good deal and it comes down to the different cultures and which you prefer. There's market segmentation but between the three of us there isn't massive interchange.

### Do employers understand the science of recruitment?

● **Liversidge:** Optometry and pharmacy are very similar, clinical research and biotech companies are much more advanced in their structure and strategy. The generation that are now at work interact a lot more with the potential jobs that are available to them. You used to wait once a month or once a week for a publication to come out and everyone

would flick to the jobs section. Today people are online every day.

We are finding that passive job seekers are a lot more active in the market even though they don't know they are active. They might see a job alert and before they know it they are speaking to a consultant. That would never have happened in the past.

● **Howarth:** Our position is that we will move with whatever trend we need to ensure that our vacancies and our options are visible in every way and actually that is a problem, because the online solution is not the only solution. What you need to have is complete representation in all the available options. We have to continue to use *Optician* while using the internet, social networking and all those options.

● **Edwards:** We are in a real transition phase. We know the recruitment marketing is going to be online in five or 10 years. We can all see where it is going but at the moment we are at that in-between phase. The optics profession has been slow to adapt to that change.

● **Howarth:** There is another challenge coming. As we go headlong down the business ownership model what it actually means is we are trying to manage a process of corporatisation in a world where everybody owns their own business and that is hard to do. The business owner is going to want to have control over their employment.

● **Edwards:** We all have our own proposition and we have to protect our employment brand so it becomes harder to manage.

### Who are the pool of job seekers out there?

● **Litchfield:** It does vary. We do get a lot of people coming from one place – but they are not necessarily the ones we employ. Sometimes those seeking work may well have been attracted to jobs with a high salary but then found the elements of their roles are not what they expected and are seeking a change in culture and a more holistic approach to employment.

● **Clayton:** A lot of us you will find are growing our own through our pre-reg programmes and summer schools. Various different things we do bring so many newly qualified into our brands each year you can almost fill all of your vacancies, that is why it is so important to run a good summer school and pre-reg programme. In an ideal world we would grow all of our own. ●