



# Robert Half®

## ROBERT HALF PODCAST SERIES

### March 2009 – Finding a job in a tough economy

**Interviewee:** Tim Hird, Director, Robert Half Singapore

**Interviewer:** Stuart Cameron

**Stuart Cameron:** Hello and welcome to the Robert Half podcast series. My name is Stuart Cameron. In today's difficult economic circumstances, finance and accounting professionals are finding themselves suddenly facing retrenchment and unemployment. In this pod cast, I'll talking with Tim Hird, Director of Robert Half Singapore about steps you can take to secure your self-employment in the current market.

Tim Hird, today's employment market is getting more difficult and many good people have found themselves in a situation where they're suddenly unemployed. Are there really any opportunities for candidates in today's challenging market?

**Tim Hird:** Even in a difficult economy, there's always opportunities for skilled candidates but there's no question that certainly in the current environment, you may need to work that much harder and be a little more creative to uncover the opportunities. I think while the general environment is very much one of caution and there are fewer job opportunities, we're seeing several forward thinking Robert Half clients using this actually as an opportunity to hire staff that perhaps they previously couldn't get access to in a tighter market. These dynamic organisations are exactly the types of firms that will provide you with the best long term opportunities. But I think the key ingredient to be successful in winning jobs right now is flexibility and adaptability. You know, the trend in recent years in finance and accounting was to strive for commercially focused roles or specialist finance skills and functions but certainly in the current economic climate those specialist roles are less of a priority now as companies really strip back to the basics of finance. And that means traditional finance and accounting roles.

The second interesting trend we're seeing beyond, I guess, flexibility, is that employers are increasingly using temporary replacements when vacancies occur. Until they really see how their businesses ride out over the next few months, the opportunity of hiring flexible, just-in-time temporary labour for special project work presents organisations with a good opportunity to evaluate cost saving initiatives, improve processes and enhance value.

**Stuart Cameron:** Getting retrenched or having a contract cancelled is extremely stressful and difficult, not just for the individual concerned but also for their families.

What advice would you give candidates who find themselves out of work and having to look for another job?

**Tim Hird:** The first bit of advice we'd give is almost, sort of, emotionally, just accept the fact that a job search is going to be challenging, even in the best of times. A job search can be especially difficult especially if you're reeling from an unanticipated change in your employment status. And especially if you weren't planning on re-entering the job market at this time, it's natural to really feel some shock and sadness over your situation and losing a job can be a very traumatic, disruptive event, you know, for yourself personally and families.

So, the first bit of advice we'd say is, you know, allow yourself – give yourself time to accept what's happened, to share your feeling with your friends and other displaced colleagues. But then the key thing is you have to move on, both physically and mentally. Put any negative experiences or situations or feelings on the situation behind you because above all, a positive attitude will be one of the best assets in your job search.

So, I guess hiring managers are always seeking candidates who are not only exceptionally well qualified but also people who they want to work with on a day-to-day basis. So, job seekers that exude enthusiasm, confidence, good vibes, you know, I guess for lack of a more business sounding term, these are the types of people that hiring managers are looking for. And employers want people who are prepared to roll their sleeves up, be positive and obviously help organisations survive in the current time.

And I think the third piece of advice we'd give is, you know, you may have to accept that you're not coming to duplicate the job that you had in the current economy. So instead, you need to be able to identify transferable skills and experiences and think creatively about how to apply them in a different capacity or industry or work environment. So, I guess in the current environment, it's really vital to be realistic about your compensation and your benefits. Do not expect huge increases in salary but really look for opportunity to broaden and advance your skills and, you know, be proactive in your career development as such.

**Stuart Cameron:** Given the current job market, what other options could candidates consider if they don't find work straight away?

**Tim Hird:** If you've experienced an unforeseen and unexpected job loss, you're naturally going to be at, sort of, I guess, a career crossroads and it's really wise to view this as an opportunity to re-evaluate your career aspirations and direction in a much broader way. Some possibilities that may be worth considering, you know, including education. You know, it's an opportune time now to return back to school or to university and take some additional courses or even earn an additional degree such as a Masters in your field. And, you know, or have you thought about getting a professional accreditation in your field, as this might actually be a good time to move ahead with those plans. And I guess, beyond education, do you want to make a significant career change, i.e. move from a corporate position to one within a government agency or non-profit organisation.

So, it's not only limited to education but also to significant career changes. I guess another option if you're at a career crossroad would be to consider working as a project professional on a consulting or an interim basis. This is always a good choice for skilled professionals, in particular, in finance because you have the opportunity and the flexibility to accept or decline projects. It gives you a very flexible lifestyle.

The compensation is naturally very competitive and, you know, you benefit from having ongoing visibility and exposure to prospective employers through the various pieces of project work that you do. And many companies are bringing in interim professionals to evaluate them for potential full-time hires obviously, when the economy picks up. So, there is also the opportunity that project work could lead into something permanent.

**Stuart Cameron:** What value can a recruitment agency like Robert Half offer to a candidate who is suddenly out of work?

**Tim Hird:** Well, I guess there's two forms of finding that dream job especially in the current market. You know, one is through your, sort of, invisible networks if you like. The second is through the visible job sources. That being through your job boards, your classified advert responses and of course working through a third party recruitment agency such as Robert Half. The major advantage of working with a recruiter is effectively it improves your odds of finding a desirable position. A recruiter can help you stand out in an increasingly crowded job market. They can often get your resume before an employer whose attention you might not be able to attract on your own through a direct application. Similarly, a recruiter can give you an inside track by being represented by a firm that has really well established relationships with companies that you may want to work for. And, you know, I guess a specialised recruiter fundamentally has a pretty key grasp of who is hiring and what are they looking for. And I think the most important benefit of all, a recruiter can tell you the truth about your strengths, your opportunities and of course, your areas for development and how you can improve those.

**Stuart Cameron:** Tim, how important is the interview process to get re-employed as quickly as possible?

**Tim Hird:** Interviews are essential to get your foot in the door of an organisation and interviews are really the only opportunity for you to showcase your skills, abilities and strengths to your prospective employer. So, working with recruiters, you can really hone your interview skills so you make the interview work for you. You ensure you perform at your best ... to the best of your ability and of course, showcase all your strengths during that interview process. It's an essential piece of the job search process and one that we'd always encourage our job seekers to continue honing and practising those skills in.

**Stuart Cameron:** Are CVs the only way really to get an interview?

**Tim Hird:** No, CVs are not the only way. Networking is a very good way to secure an interview. Interestingly enough, from one of Robert Half's surveys, we found out

that over 60% of job seekers actually found interviews or got interviews through direct networking. So, what does that networking entail? It could involve calling one of your old contacts, inviting him or her to lunch. Having face-to-face meetings can do a lot to build your career. Attend industry events, you know, update your personal linked-in profile.

Get in touch with recruiters who can really keep a good eye out for you. I guess in addition to your CV, we'd also encourage you to consider developing a short biography which is a great way to briefly introduce yourself to a networking contact or prospective employer, especially in the modern world of online. And although it differs very much in format from the CV, the biography effectively serves the same purpose. It's a one page description of who you are in three to five paragraphs and describes what you have to offer to a potential employer. It's normally written in the third person and really the purpose and objective is – of the design of the biography, is for you present a powerful, positive, immediate impression of your skills and experience to a prospective network or employer.

**Stuart Cameron:** So, let's assume you've made the first interview. What advice can you give to ensure that the candidate leaves with a second interview in the bag?

**Tim Hird:** Getting the interview off to a good start is, essential as many managers form really, an opinion on your suitability for the job, within the first ten minutes of meeting. So, it's really important to project enthusiasm and confidence from really the minute you walk straight into that interview. When it actually comes to the in person interview, it's essential to understand what are the main hiring considerations from the interviewer's perspective. And effectively, there's three main considerations that the hiring manager is looking for. The first one is, can you do the job. Interviewers want to know whether you have the ability to handle the basic responsibilities of the job. They're interested in the skills you have and your previous work experience. And they also want to assess whether you'll perform well in the position.

The second thing they're looking for is, do you really want the job. Companies want to hire someone who is genuinely enthusiastic about the job opening and opportunity. Your attitude and the questions that you pose through the course of the interview will indicate the sincerity of your interest and how motivated you are to, I guess, to land the job and succeed in the job. And the third and most final consideration the hiring manager will make is, will you fit in to the organisation. A hiring manager wants to gain a sense of what you're really like and whether you'll fit in to the corporate culture and with others in the office and on the team. So, interestingly enough, of those considerations, soft skills are actually two of those three and they – those soft skills can be even more of a decisive factor than some of the harder technical skills, especially when there's a number of several well qualified candidates in the interview process. So, the big thing with that, a thorough preparation is essential. Be sure to familiarise yourself with, you know, certain fairly predictable interview questions. You know, the classic interview questions such as, "Tell me about yourself. What are your strengths and weaknesses? Why do you want to work here?"

**Stuart Cameron:** In your experience, how long does it take for an interviewer to make up his or her mind about how suitable the interviewee actually is for the job?

**Tim Hird:** According to a recent Robert Half survey of hiring managers, it was evident that the majority of managers formed either a positive or a negative opinion of the job candidate within just the first ten minutes of meeting them in the interview process. So, this really underscores the importance of getting the interview off to a good start with a firm handshake and eye contact and also as mentioned earlier, just projecting that enthusiasm and confidence in the opening ten minutes of the interview. You know, and at the same time, you know, be prepared to engage yourself in the appropriate small talk with the interviewer.

The second bit of advice we'd also give. It's important to remember that the majority of executives really value their assistant's or receptionist' opinion when evaluating job candidates at all levels. So, always be sure to put your best foot forward with everyone you meet through the interview process.

**Stuart Cameron:** If an interviewer does make up their mind within the first ten minutes or so, is everything lost after that and what can you do to turn their opinion around?

**Tim Hird:** There's definitely a lot you can do to influence opinion and all is definitely not lost after ten minutes. You know, before any interview, you need to ensure you have thoroughly prepared and considered all the possible questions that could be asked. But interviewers are effectively looking to find out, you know, only if you can do the job and so are interested in the skills you have and your previous work experience. So they're looking for that all round enthusiasm about the role and also to ensure that you'll fit within the culture of the organisation. You can certainly turn around that interview after ten minutes and there's going to be plenty of opportunity to do that but at the same time, you know, really view this as a two way interview process because it's your opportunity to evaluate the organisation, its culture, and importantly, the hiring manager and their leadership qualities and what you're going to learn from them in your career move.

**Stuart Cameron:** You mentioned to be realistic about your expectations around salary and packaging but is it advisable to negotiate on offers in today's market or should you just accept what you're given, bearing in mind how few and far between jobs actually are?

**Tim Hird:** It's important to be realistic in today's market yet, at the same time, don't be afraid to aim high. You know, we just need a – we just encourage everyone to keep expectations reasonable so you don't price yourself out of the running. So, you gather information that would help justify the compensation and benefits that you're looking for, for example. Always remember that your strongest, or your strongest position of negotiating is at the point you receive the offer. And no matter what your first reaction is to the offer, be enthusiastic when talking to the prospective employer. You don't want to give the hiring manager second thoughts based on your initial response. But the key to successful negotiation is flexibility.

An employer who is unwilling to offer a concession in one area may be willing to offer something in another. Be it through, perhaps, extra holiday, flexible hours, an adjustment in the variable or flexible compensation or bonus scheme.

So, and always keep in mind that if you do accept an offer, you'll be working with this person in the future so always keep your negotiations positive. But, you know, above all, we'd encourage, I guess all job seekers, to think of it in two levels. First of all, you know, what is your ideal compensation and secondly, what is the baseline that you're actually prepared to do this job for because there's two very different numbers and, you know, through your interview and negotiating process you want to make sure you come either, sort of, as close to the top or mid way between those two.

**Stuart Cameron:** Tim Hird, thanks for your time today.

**Tim Hird:** Thanks.

**Stuart Cameron:** Thank you for listening to the Robert Half podcast series, for more information on global employment opportunities and career advice visit [www.roberthalf.net](http://www.roberthalf.net)

**End of Interview.**