

# Caught in a **crossfire**

Demanding employees and a market at standstill are draining employers dry by *Anastasia Rassi*

**O**ctober is the month when Lebanese – the young, the old, the families and the friends – go back to their daily routines after having said goodbye, once again, to numerous expats that came visiting for the summer; the Lebanese are still leaving the country in droves, as soon as they get the chance, searching for a better life and a better salary abroad. “Unfortunately, in Lebanon, we are very good at exporting talents and very bad at retaining them. In this country, the industry is simply surviving; every year becomes tougher and tougher, and there is no sign that the situation will get better any soon. We must remunerate good talents to retain them, which is not easy knowing the [country’s] situation. So, automatically, [good talents] are looking elsewhere – mostly in the Gulf,” says chief operating officer at advertising agency Lowe Pimo, Georges Slim.

Marc Dfouni, CEO and managing partner at digital agency Eastline Marketing, gives a very concrete example of that sad, albeit usual, state of play: his company has lost four employees to Dubai in the past year. Dfouni anticipates a couple of more losses from now until the end of the year. “This problem is getting worse every year. The retention of these people is not an internal or a motivational problem, but mainly a political one,” he says.

**REPULSIVE MARKET.** It may sound like we are rehashing the same issues time and again, but what can we say? The Lebanese market remains,

year after year, stagnant; employees still search for better salaries abroad, while employers are still stuck between the catastrophically bad economic situation and the need to retain their staff.

“There is stagnation in terms of new clients entering the market and, therefore, less opportunities for employees to build their careers with new brands. The industry still does not appeal to higher-end talents, who are lost to banks, consultancies and some multinationals,” says founder and CEO of PR agency RPR, Mark Daou. On the same note, general manager of media agency Havas Media Levant, Georges Naaman, points out that every candidate’s objective is to be exposed to international clients, which is hard to achieve in Lebanon. “In one year in Dubai, a candidate can build the experience he’d get in five to 10 years in Lebanon.”

Not only isn’t the market attractive to employees in terms of career opportunities, but neither are the salaries. “In the good old days, agencies used to increase their salaries every year for all of their staff. In the past few years, salary ranges haven’t changed much, except for some remuneration offered to some employees,” says Slim. In fact, if some agencies are increasing their salaries, it’s to try and retain good team members “who are no longer interested in a career in Lebanon,” says Daou, adding that: “The hope that these people stay is little, thus the pressure [on employers] to keep them pampered.” ▶



**GEORGES SLIM.**

*Chief operating officer at Lowe Pimo*



**MARK DAOU.**

*Founder and CEO of RPR*



**HUSSAM HARB.**  
Managing partner at  
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General manager at  
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**MAYA KARANOUH.**  
CEO and co-founder of Tagbrands

Training within the agency offer another way of retaining talents. “The [financial] situation of most companies is not at its best, so the first budget to be cut is unfortunately the training one, which, in our opinion, is the wrong thing to do; we try to cut elsewhere, for we believe training can play a great role in terms of talent retention,” Dfouni points out.

**TALENT WITH ATTITUDE.** On the upside, “the market isn’t saturated with talents, therefore there is a continuous need for candidates. We don’t have a big flow of talents or a [high] unemployment rate in this field, so talents are shifting between agencies,” says Lowe Pimo’s Slim.

In the communication field, some skills have been vital since forever, while others are newly required, due to the evolution of the industry itself. For example, Dfouni says that the one area that still sees a salary increase is online and digital. “On a yearly basis, our salaries increase between 30 percent to 40 percent for the people within the company and approximately 20 percent for new entries. Candidates today understand more about what the digital market is and the increasing demand for such positions, so they raise the bar in terms of salaries,” he explains. Additionally, skills involving interpersonal communication, time management, concept- and idea-oriented writing, prioritization, organization, team management, group dynamics, public relations and networking are what recruiters look for, first and foremost, when looking at fresh candidates. Managing partner at PR agency Soapbox Communications, Hussam Harb, says that the aforementioned repertoire of skills “is vital, as it has a significant impact on the attitude a team member brings to the interaction with clients, colleagues, stakeholders, etc. Moreover, owning this set of skills fosters great team performance and

leads any team member to contribute strongly to the organization’s vision and strategy”.

The CEO and co-founder of advertising agency Tagbrands, Maya Karanouh, is currently looking for more well-rounded personnel. “New hires should have a core skill set from their university training, but should also add to this core a range of skills which complement and diversify their CVs. The new hires we look for should be entrepreneurial within the structure of the company, by suggesting and developing ideas and products for the company, thus adding higher ROI to us hiring them. The new hires, as well as current staff, should continuously be working on developing new skills to add to their skill set range, such as learning new software, new languages, etc., thus becoming more versatile in their capabilities,” she explains.

“Experience can be acquired through training, exposure and time, but what we look for in any candidate, are strong communication skills, which is a part of the personality of the person. Moreover, we look for a certain mindset, an entrepreneurial spirit; it is not enough anymore for a candidate to have a good educational background. Besides, we look at people who aren’t necessarily tech savvy, but who are at least updated with the latest technologies,” says Havas Media’s Naaman.

On another note, general manager at Rizk Group, Serge Dagher, sees a growing demand for experts in activations and guerilla marketing. Clients today increasingly want to activate their brands and work on the ground. “The nature of the advertising agency business has definitely changed, which requires from us a whole new set of skills to be able to produce the work we long to produce. This translates into a need for digital designers, programmers, developers, brand community managers, digital planners, etc.,” says

founder and CCO of creative boutique B, Ramzi Barakat, while Eastline Marketing's Dfouni stresses on the importance of mobile app developers today. "The demand for mobile apps boomed in this past year; we've got at least five times more demand on mobile apps when comparing with last year."

Most of all, agencies today are looking for passionate and patient candidates, as Lowe Pimo's Slim explains: "Passion and patience are important skills to everyone that wants to work in advertising. While patience is needed to understand consumers' needs and fulfill them, a passionate creative talent shows up whenever a person goes this extra mile that isn't theoretically required; when an employee takes the initiative to come up with new ideas for clients." This, unfortunately, happens to be a rare find nowadays.

**YOUNGSTERS...** "The biggest challenge we are facing in recruitment is finding passionate and talented juniors, and this is mainly due to the universities' poor level of education on one side, and the lack of focus and seriousness of the new generation," says regional executive creative director of advertising agency Drive Dentsu, Alain Shoucair. Slim adds that: "Students aren't getting the right basic level of knowledge in advertising at the university. They are graduating just for the sake of graduating, without enough knowledge about what advertising is all about. Moreover, the young generation is [very] different from the older generation. The new generation wants to move fast; they don't have the passion, the culture and the motivation of the old generation. Previously, people used to stay 20 years in the same agency, growing step by step, whereas today, juniors are expecting high salaries and immediate growth."

"There is a lack of well-rounded talent. For some reason, potential hires are focused on their university degree qualifications and are not expanding their scope to include peripheral skill sets that would increase their chance to be hired. I think a partial solution would be universities starting to focus on this issue in their curriculums, but, at the same time, the ambition of the person being hired is much more of an issue. We need to see more ambition in potential hires and less complacency. The Internet today provides a wide variety of free and paid courses to learn practically any new skill set that a candidate thinks may reflect well on their CV. I don't see enough of that in the CVs we receive unfortunately. Continuing an education is something that all personnel must do, even when one is an employee, for their own growth and for their growth at the company," says Tagbrands' Karanouh.

Besides the lack of passion in the younger generation, even finding candidates for particular positions is a hassle for recruiters today. "A good copywriter is someone almost impossible to find. Candidates either have a journalistic background and mastery over the language, but no conceptual abilities, or are good conceptually, but very weak in writing. There's no proper training in advertising and design schools at this level," says Shoucair. In fact, "creative writers are a must in advertising

agencies, whereas the students are graduating without actually knowing what a copywriter is. People think that whoever is good in language can be a good copywriter, which is not the case; aside from perfect language skills, a copywriter needs to be very well educated," adds Slim.

"Another problem we are facing is in online media. On a scale from one to ten – ten being an expert – people have knowledge of three to four maximum, so basically we are teaching the people we're recruiting. On the university level, there is no program that is pushing this knowledge to the mass. There is no doubt that professionalism in the online field comes from experience, so probably it will be easier to recruit talents in this field in the next years, knowing that a lot of digital companies are being established. Talents will start shuffling between agencies," says Eastline Marketing's Dfouni.

**FOR BETTER OR WORSE.** Like every industry, the communication field sees emerging trends every now and then – some are beneficial, while others bring the industry down. Among the latter, Slim notices that, today, some graduates start teaching at universities right after graduation without having any work experience. "This will slowly create a burden on the people graduating," he says.

On another note, The Quantum Group's head of HR, Khaled Tayara, has noticed a request for a certain flexibility among candidates. "People from graphic design, media and communications are doing a lot of jobs outside of the company – this new generation is kind of impatient, wanting to succeed quickly. So, they prefer working on multiple projects simultaneously. The company can't be very strict on this, otherwise it won't attract talent. In the past two years, we realized that we have recruited people who are doing other jobs in parallel outside of the company."

Tayara adds: "We have realized that career-wise, people are not into functional development, but rather into lateral development. In fact, every time we give a project to the employees, they are more likely to stay. Thus, they are not asking to be a manager or director, but they prefer doing something more creative than executional. Another thing that attracts people is the CSR and pro-bono work we are doing. We realized how much this new generation of people is into doing this kind of stuff. The more we do pro-bono work, the more surprised we are about people interested in such things, even without being requested to."

Then, as RPR's Daou explains, the job market needs to integrate "startups by executives who are no longer seeing lucrative opportunities being employed, but are being able to compete with the big boys because of their low overheads".

This all paints a pretty complex picture of an industry in the throes of an economic downturn and undergoing fundamental structural changes, while having to deal with generational gaps increasingly hard to understand and handle. No wonder that year on year, the question marks stand and solutions are hard to come by. ■



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