

Conference calling

A push by firms to recruit their own event managers has created a skills shortage, writes **Jane E. Fraser.**

EVERYBODY wants to be an event manager," says Paul Christie, managing director of the Axis Events Group. "We get three or four emails a day from people wanting to get into the industry."

The good news for those people is that a growing skills shortage is prompting the conference and events industry to widen its recruiting net. Strong growth in the sector - reflecting the growth of the economy - is causing upward movement among experienced staff, creating opportunities for those looking to get a foot in the door.

Christie says many skilled event and conference managers have been absorbed into large corporations, attracted by higher salaries and the ability to work for one company instead of several clients.

"There are a lot less people around for our industry," he says. "The talent that was available to companies like ours has gone in-house. There is also a general shortage because the economy is booming and the industry is doing well. I think there is a great opportunity for people to come into the market."

Event Recruitment director John Hackett says many people make a logical progression from general administrative roles to event administration, while a few manage to take organisational skills from other industries and apply them to a second career in conferencing or events.

Axis's Christie says people from allied industries such as travel or hospitality make the easiest transition, with others usually limited to junior roles.

The bad news is that the industry is not as glamorous as it is often held up to be.

Christie says it is 20 per cent creativity and 80 per cent "number crunching and logistics". He

believes many seeking to get in have unrealistic expectations about what they will be doing. "They don't understand the depth of the industry, and it is very, very hard to tell someone until they have been in the business," he says.

Christie says creativity is valuable, but the most important skill is attention to detail. Jobs such as making sure all name badges are correct are tedious but vital to a successful event.

Avanti Events managing director David Addison says he is seeing more realism among well-briefed college students, but most people still have an idealistic view of the events industry. "The general public sees events as the Grand Prix, the Australian Open or the Sydney Olympics, rather than a meeting of scientists in a room for three days," he says. "They are not aware of the grind and the hours and the hard work that goes in."

Event Recruitment's Hackett says many people seeking to switch from other industries are underwhelmed by the salaries on offer, with entry-level positions about \$32,000 a year and event manager positions from \$60,000 to \$70,000.

However, the skills shortage has placed upward pressure on salaries, Hackett says. "It's changed quite a bit in the last six to 12 months."

And Avanti's Addison says it is an industry that provides a great deal of job satisfaction. "You can take a lot of pride with you after meeting the requirements of all sorts of events," he says.

"There is a lot of satisfaction in achieving client fulfilment and seeing the delegates enjoying the experience."