

Fancy a job at a salary of €75,000, with potential bonuses on top of that, and regular office hours alongside a young dynamic team? Would it tempt you to know that this office can be reached by Luas from St Stephen's Green in the heart of Dublin in just 22 minutes and is located in an area well served by fashionable restaurants and shops?



By John Meagher

If you are interested and have the required skills, Vero Solutions is very keen to hear from you. An Irish software development company based in Sandyford, it is growing its business and is

enjoying an excellent 2010.

"To be honest, we're not really experiencing a recession at all," says affable General Manager John Power. "Business is good and we're signing new contracts" - including, this week, a deal with the Department of Transport - "and that's why we need to take on new people and we're offering them a very good package to join us."

It sounds perfect, but there's a snag: Power simply cannot find suit-

ably qualified candidates.

"We had 25 jobs to fill, some of them carrying €75,000 salaries, but it's been really difficult to find the right people. We have filled some positions but we have 17 vacancies left. We have advertised everywhere and tried to headhunt people on (social networking site) LinkedIn, but we're coming up against a brick wall.

"We need very specialised people with several years' experience in

[programming languages] Java and C++ and those people tend not to have been hit by the recession. Unlike other careers, they haven't lost their jobs and they are very reluctant to move from the company they're in. It's a case of 'better the devil you know'.

"We have tried to tempt them by offering them up to 15pc more, but it's very difficult.

"Now, the first question a potential new recruit asks is 'how solvent is your company?' It's a perfectly valid question, but it's also a sign of the times. There's an awful lot of fear out there. Sure, times are bad at the moment, but not as much as we are being led to believe."

Some other bosses are having the opposite experience. The owner of a chip shop in Donegal had 400 applicants for a washing-up job (see panel, right) while a new cinema in Gorey, Co Wexford, had 939 applicants for 25 positions. "We had applications from people with PhDs, masters degrees, from accountants, from all walks of life," according to "flummoxed" manager Eugene Tobin.

Such stories have become more and more commonplace, and would have been unthinkable in the Celtic Tiger years. But they have come to epitomise the grim reality of life in Ireland today, particularly for the unskilled.

"People might wonder why can't we take someone off the dole and train them," John Power says. "Unfortunately, it's not as simple as that. In an industry like software, you need very

specialised people, not just those with an IT qualification. These guys here" - he spreads his arm to take in the open-plan office - "all have masters degrees and several years' experience.

"Unfortunately, there aren't enough people in Ireland with that specialisation and that's why we have to look abroad, particularly to countries where there's a brain-drain, like Russia."

Dimitri Zakharov, from the Siberian city of Omsk, is one of several foreign nationals - including Poles, Spaniards and Italians - employed at Vero Solutions. Previously, he had worked for the company's St Petersburg office, but last September moved to Ireland with his wife and 11-year-old son when an opportunity arose in Dublin.

"I'm happy I made the move," he says. "The quality of life is good here. I live close to work, my son is in school nearby. Money goes further - I can save more here. St Petersburg is more expensive to live in than Dublin."

He seems to enjoy his job. At 43, he is older than the typical Vero employee. Like most software firms, the office is overwhelmingly male - female software developers are very thin on the ground - and in their early to mid-30s.

Dave Whelan from Greystones, Co Wicklow, fits that description. A com-

named, is more blunt: "Unskilled people did fine during the Celtic Tiger. There was all sorts of work going around when money was no object. Now, that everyone is being so careful with their cash - if they have any - the shit has really hit the fan.

"That's why you find so many applicants for McDonald's jobs - sure, they'll find one CV among the whole lot from an architect who's out of work and the newspapers will run with that, but the rest are likely to be unskilled and that's the reality of it.

"Of course, being on the dole is miserable for anybody who has to experience it, but it could just provide the impetus for them to go and get further education which could make them more employable when things pick up.

"And the jobs situation really is getting a bit better - maybe not as much as some recruitment people will tell you - but it's certainly more positive than it was this time last year."

John Power, meanwhile, is loath to offer advice to anyone on the dole. "I would hate to be seen to preach to anybody in that situation," he says, "but let's say if someone in a call centre lost their job and wanted to get into this industry, they could do an upskill

course over a period of six to 12 months, come in here on a graduate salary - earning between 20 and 30 grand - working in the operations and engineering role and then, after a period of two or three years, you'd see that money substantially rise."

Vero employees - and those of sister company The Now Factory - are about to move to a substantially bigger space within the same building. It's a concrete sign of good times, and quite at odds with the empty apartment buildings and half-built office complexes in the area, which tell their own story about the difficulties Ireland has faced for two years.

"There's no doubt that the country has had a tough time of it," Power says. "But we have to pick ourselves up as best we can and be competitive. This is potentially a great time for start-ups because the overheads are much lower than before and there are some very advantageous tax breaks."

Meanwhile, Power is strengthening his resolve to fill 17 positions at the company. "We are exhausting all avenues," he says. "I think we have some fantastic opportunities for the right candidates."

The search continues.

O'Reilly believes employers should temper their expectations. "Some of them are unrealistic about the type of candidate they think they can attract. They have all these different boxes that they want ticked and they assume that such people are easier to find because of the recession. That's not the case.

"There are still many opportunities out there for multi-skilled people. For the unskilled, who make up a significant proportion of the unemployment figures, the future is not looking so good. In fact, I'd be worried for them."

Another Dublin-based recruitment specialist, who does not wish to be

paratively new recruit to the company, he believes software development is an area that Ireland can grow in the future, but it needs the manpower to do it.

"We need to be getting the message into schools at an early age," he says. "Other countries are good at that and as a result, they are far further down the road than we are. I have to laugh when I hear politicians talking about the 'knowledge economy'. We've a lot to do to get there."

Peter Watters, 24, from Blanchardstown, Dublin, is one of the firm's youngest employees and is thankful that his choice of career has proven to be recession-proof. "It is a relief, to be honest," he says.

"A lot of areas have been hit so hard and it's difficult for graduates coming into the workforce. A previous company I worked for were very good at giving us the impression that there were no other jobs to be had - it suited them to put fear into us."

Whelan warms to this theme. "There is an awful lot of fear out there and it suits some companies to give the sense that there are no other opportunities for their staff. There's such an air of negativity about the jobs market at present, but some industries are buoyant. The media doesn't seem very interested in focusing on them."

Caroline O'Reilly of Brightwater Recruitment agrees with this assessment. "We are seeing more and more jobs coming on the market, and some very appealing ones at that, particularly in areas such as engineering and food processing and yet, it can be very difficult to fill those positions.

"We have been trying to place a suitable candidate in a €100,000-a-year job with a multi-national in Galway for the past five months, but are having no luck. People are petrified about moving, even if the pay is substantially better. With companies going to the wall, they are afraid that they will move to somewhere that isn't as stable as where they are already."