

# Surviving Armageddon – recession proofing your career in 2009

by Satnam Brar, Maximus

Does anyone remember good news? There was a time, not very much more than a year ago when everything seemed to be going rather well both in ERP and in the wider IT world. Business was booming across the board, profits were up, pay rises were generous and seemingly never ending and the only worry seemed to be where we were going to find all the people to satisfy the demands for services. Which just goes to show just how long a year can be.

Thanks to the still largely incomprehensible decisions of many at very senior levels in the banking sector, 2008 saw us move into an altogether different economic situation than the very comfortable one we had all grown used to in recent years. Now we hesitate to pick up a newspaper, switch on the TV or listen to the radio in case we hear the latest piece of news on the impending end of civilisation as we know it. But just how bad are things for IT and more specifically ERP? And are we perhaps in danger of being talked into a more severe downturn than really exists?

There is no denying that there has certainly been a slowdown in the ERP market and a consequent knock-on effect on jobs and career development prospects for individual

specialists at all levels. However this does not by any means mean that recruitment has come to a complete stop. Rather than being an old-fashioned, general downturn as we experienced in the early 1990s, this particular one seems to be developing a very specific nature, which hits certain areas extremely hard whilst leaving others relatively or even completely unscathed.

The public sector in the UK, for example, is still pushing ahead with major ERP projects to the extent that local authorities and government bodies now account for as much as a fifth of all domestic contract and permanent opportunities. And whilst some generalists are finding it more difficult to find regular contract work, specialists in areas such as niche supply chain or

Hyperion work are in as much, if not more, demand than ever. Organisations of all sizes seem to have finally learned the lesson of the early 1990s troubles that every downturn will come to an end and if you don't have access to the right people to take advantage of this, you can end up in serious trouble.

Organisations are now therefore taking a much more strategic approach to staffing, targeting cuts at weaker members of the team rather than at whole classes, focusing on those who may have been hired in haste during boom years and redeploying good people if at all possible. Therefore the key to not just surviving, but thriving over the coming year (and perhaps even beyond it) lies in focusing on the 'survivor' sectors, locations and skill-sets, whilst also honing those all important 'soft' skills that can further enhance your marketability.

The first and perhaps most important step in dealing with a downturn is to accept it and accept that you will need to be more flexible in your working life. Of course we'd all like things to be going well, but sometimes they just don't. Once you have got over this particular hurdle you can get on with doing what you need to do to get through it.

Being flexible means being ready to negotiate on rates or salary. Whilst the general level of recruitment has held up the balance of power has started to shift from individual to employer, which means that pay has, on the whole, either flattened out or moved downwards. With the economic downturn hitting a wide range of sectors, salaries for Oracle professionals in the UK have dropped steadily since early 2008 with permanent consultants now expecting to earn 10% – 20% less than last spring. This is especially true of private companies and end users which are now becoming more reluctant to take people on board on high salary packages. In comparison, consultancies are still experiencing relatively strong demand for their services and can consequently afford to be more generous in terms of both salaries and benefits. On the contract side there have been varying declines in rates, with some roles, for example a mid-level HRMS consultant, dropping by as little as £25 a day and others by a lot more – a DBA, for example, is now commanding up to £135 a day less than in early 2008.



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However flexibility means more than just negotiating on pay. It can also mean chasing work no matter how far away it is from your home base. Despite the fact that large parts of Western Europe are now either in or are approaching a recession and that the boom in the Middle East is slowing, both regions still offer lucrative opportunities to UK ERP specialists. For example, Martin Higgs, a hybrid technical and functional specialist from Twickenham thought his days of working extensively overseas were behind him when he left Oracle more than a decade ago. But now he finds himself commuting to Lyon in central France on the Monday morning ‘red-eye’ for his latest contract. “It certainly wasn’t an ideal choice,” he says, “after all I’m married with a daughter and the only contact I’m getting with my family during the week is by phone and email. However this was the contract that came up, so rather than sit around twiddling my thumbs I decided to take it. And it does have its advantages. Lyon is an attractive place, I’m getting to improve my rusty French, the quality of experience I’m getting is excellent and the pay isn’t bad either.”

As supply starts to outstrip demand, we may see an armistice in McKinsey’s famous war for talent and ERP specialists will consequently need to learn how to sell themselves more effectively to potential employers. When the phone stops ringing as regularly as you would like and your email inbox stop filling up with offers of work, there will be no alternative but to develop good networking skills to find your next contract or career move. Networking may not be the most natural skill of a successful ERP specialist but it can be developed quickly with a little time, effort and commitment. Make sure that you take any and every opportunity to tell colleagues, friends, acquaintances, etc what you can do and what you are looking for. This doesn’t mean boring everyone stupid

with a lengthy, detailed monologue, but it does mean having a quick 20-30 second summary ready to deliver whenever the opportunity presents itself. Remember that the emphasis should always be on simplicity, clarity and what you can do to help – after all that’s the bit that people tend to recall. If you are in contact with recruitment consultants (and if not, why not?) ensure that you keep them informed about what you are doing, what you are looking for, where you are prepared to work and at what rate of pay. In a slower market a recruitment consultant’s time has to be focused on client management and development, not I keeping in such close contact with you, so anything to make their professional lives more effective will pay dividends to you in the long run.

2009 will also be the time to think about how you can broaden your skill-set outside of the classic technical range. Do you have a rusty language from school or university, for example, which, with a little brushing up, could open up opportunities overseas? Is managerial or leadership training available within your current organisation or, if not, would it be worth investing some time and money in one of the short programmes in these areas offered by the major business schools? Could you even write a helpful, insightful article for Oracle Scene? Anything that can provide you with a way of differentiating yourself could provide you with that all important competitive advantage and help you to stand out from the crowd.

This year, perhaps even the next couple of years in the ERP market will certainly be quieter than the preceding ones – the boom is over, at least for now. What organisations and individuals need to do now is to accept that the downturn is here and overcome it. That means acknowledging that pay will not keep rising all the time, that desirable jobs and contracts will be more difficult to get and that life in the sector will be a lot more hard, competitive and unforgiving than it has been for some time. Once this happens the panic will stop and ERP specialists at all levels will get on with getting back to basics, focusing on clients, delivering good work and developing the new business we all want to see coming through the pipeline.

## About the Author



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