



Work in progress

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SHUM Chee Hong, 24, holds a mass communications second-upper class honours degree from a British university.

He returned from Britain seven months ago, and has sent out over 30 job applications. So far, he has only gotten five interviews, and one job offer.

The offer was for a position as production assistant that paid RM1,600. It also required him to have his own car.

Chee Hong felt that he would not be able to afford a car with that salary, as he also had to pay for other expenses like rent and utilities. So, he turned the job offer down.

He has signed up with recruitment websites and attended job fairs, but still hasn't got what he considers "a feasible offer".

"It's very frustrating," he said. "There were a few times when I felt like I will just take anything I'm offered. My housemate faced the same problem; he told me not to give up, so I'm still waiting for the right job."

Chee Hong and his housemate aren't the only young people struggling to get decent jobs.

Last year's Barisan Youth Lab report showed that over 60% of youth in Malaysia were worried about their careers, which resulted in the BN Youth Job Fair about two months ago.

Almost half a million people turned up to apply for the 40,000 jobs on offer at the three-day fair, including Chee Hong.

Last month, the United Nations Country Team in Malaysia, together with the Economic Planning Unit in the Prime Minister's Department, released the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) 2010 report which stated that 11% of young people aged 15-24 were unemployed in 2008. These people count for 60% of unemployed Malaysians.

According to UN coordination specialist Dr Lin Mui Kiang, the unemployment rate for the 20-24 age bracket exceeded 10% in 2009.

What all this means is that more than one in 10 people from that age group who are trying to get a job have not found what they are looking for.

Dr Lin says that although the youth unemployment rate in Malaysia is not as bad as many other developing countries, it is still high in relation to the adult rate – six times higher, in fact.

But apart from the obvious economic waste generated by having 10% of our youth not working, Dr Lin says that youth unemployment also carries a social threat.

"Massive youth unemployment is a social menace, breeding vulnerability and feelings of exclusion and worthlessness which may lead to 'personally and socially destructive' activities," she said in an e-mail interview. She added that addressing the youth unemploy-



Learn to adapt: Malaysian Employers Federation executive director Shamsuddin Bardan says there is a disconnection between the world of study and work.

ment rate should be a "priority" for Malaysia.

But why does this generation of young people, armed with college degrees and various online job-searching tools, have such a high unemployment rate?

Changing attitudes

There are over 1.8 million foreign workers in the country, and about 450,000 registered

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Changing scene: Corrina Ho said companies are listing 'the right attitude' as one of their requirements when seeking to employ a fresh graduate.

ONE possible reason for the increasing youth unemployment rate could be that some young people these days have the luxury of waiting around.

The growing middle-class society in Malaysia, according to career counsellor Sheela Chandran, means more young people are not under any pressure to accept jobs that they feel does not suit them.

"Before, getting a job was a need, it was for survival. Young people don't have those survival instincts now. They have food on the table, a roof over their heads, so what's the rush?" she said.

Multimedia graduate Aizyl Azlee, 23, graduated 11 months ago and still doesn't have a full-time job.

After he graduated, Aizyl spent a few months saving money through a

Hanging around

few freelance jobs and went back-packing in Turkey.

"It was the most fantastic time of my life. Turkey opened my eyes. It made me try to find out what I wanted to do," he said.

What he wanted to do, was move away from his film and animation major in university and go into a completely different line of work – copywriting.

"What attracts me about copywriting is the creative process, the brainstorming sessions where people shoot ideas around. It's more exciting than sitting in front of a computer doing animation," said Aizyl.

In order to get into the industry,

Aizyl has to start from the bottom of the food chain – being an intern. He doesn't mind it, though.

His internship started in April, but he has enjoyed the experience so much that he is now applying for full-time copywriting jobs.

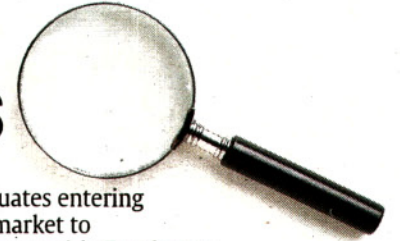
Corrina Ho, who's been in the recruitment business for 11 years, says finding a job that you enjoy is the most important thing.

"You need to have a passion for your job. Even until now, I get candidates who ask me – which industry pays the most? If you don't like the industry and don't like your job, you probably won't advance in that career," she said.



Though they're armed with degrees and online recruitment websites, young graduates are finding it increasingly difficult to get hired.

Tips for job hunters



Polish your communication skills

All three of the experts RAGE spoke to said that most young Malaysians in the job market lack good communication skills.

Malaysian Employers Federation executive director Shamsuddin Bardan said: "Employers don't care so much about your GPA. If you can communicate well, especially in English, you will be hired."

Career counsellor Sheela Chandran, couldn't stress this enough: "If you can't communicate well verbally in English, you won't be considered. You can improve your written language over time, but if you're poor verbally, you fail at the door of the interview."

Don't be fussy about salary

According to Shamsuddin, the average pay for a degree graduate is between RM2,000 and RM2,300; while non-graduates are paid between RM1,000 and RM1,500.

But the starting pay isn't everything, as there are bonuses to consider as well.

"If you perform well, if you contribute to the company, they will be willing to reward you with increments and bonuses - especially in the private sector," he said, adding that the average annual increment now is around 5%-6%.

Plus, if you get that first job out of the way, it is likely your salary will jump a level when you decide to change jobs.

Don't hang around too long

Staying unemployed for too long could create a vicious cycle.

Employers will be looking for those who are experienced, and if you are too fussy about your job, you'll lose out on that.

"Then as your peers become more experienced, you will also have new fresh

graduates entering the market to compete with. Employers will definitely have a different perception of you if you are unemployed for too long," said Shamsuddin.

Be open to other options

Sheela said that young people today are more fussy, and less open to exploring other opportunities.

"They think 'I trained for this, so I won't accept any other jobs'. That's why the unemployment rate is high.

"Be adventurous, try other things, and don't limit yourself to what you studied," she said.

Sheela also recommends that if you try a new job, give it at least four to six months, or you won't get a real feel of it.

Don't just study, learn

With the supply of graduates constantly increasing, Shamsuddin says employers are no longer willing to train people on the job like they did in the past. They want to hire people who can contribute immediately.

"Employers will want to choose the best, so students need to equip themselves with what the market needs. You need to start learning what is needed in the real world even as you are studying," he said.

Shamsuddin tells students not to be shy in asking for part-time jobs, as practical experience now is "very critical".

And as for students who don't have tertiary-level qualifications, Shamsuddin says: "It's not the end of the world.

"Go for skills training. There are programmes by the Ministry of Human Resource that can give you the equivalent of a diploma."

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companies - so a shortage of jobs isn't the problem, says Malaysian Employers Federation executive director Shamsuddin Bardan.

"There's just a big mismatch of expectations, especially among new graduates. They don't know what it's really like in the working world," he explained.

Corrina Ho, consulting director of recruitment agency VXcel Consulting, has been in the business of pairing people with the right jobs for 11 years, and she believes much of it comes down to just one word - attitude.

"Now, a lot of clients (companies who approach Corrina for potential employees) are looking for candidates with a fairly new requirement, which is the 'right attitude'.

"It's a new thing. Back in the day, a fresh graduate is a fresh graduate. They will always work hard. But now, young ones have their own sets of requirements, which are often longer than the clients'. No working on weekends, no doing over-time and things like that," she shared.

As much as Shamsuddin is sympathetic to the struggles of unemployed youth, he said that a lot of fresh graduates are becoming very demanding.

"They must prove they can work first, there must be a compromise. Prove you have value to the company, then you can start demanding," he advised.

Working life

For Steve Lam, getting a job wasn't the problem. It was finding a job in which he could see a viable future that was tough.

Even as a first class honours degree holder, Steve said he's still "anxious and worried" about his future.

His first job at an advertising agency required him to work for about 18 hours a day, for RM1,800 a month.

"I don't think it's fair to say that young people don't work hard, because I have friends from college in this industry who are sacrificing their health for work," he said.

Steve took the job even though the pay was below his expected market rate because he felt it would give him some valuable experience; but he quit after several months. He then applied for a scholarship to do his Masters degree in Britain, and got accepted.

"Fortunately for me, I have the option to study, to improve my career options. At least I will have the option of going into teaching or lecturing now.

"But most of my classmates who have jobs, they're not happy," he said.

Certified career counsellor and behavioural consultant Sheela Chandran noted that young people now are more idealistic. They are looking for jobs that give them the flexibility to do what they want, and allow them to have an impact on society.

She believes there's absolutely nothing wrong with them knowing what they want from their lives and careers.

"There's a bit of a generation gap there. Today's youth don't want to be dictated to. They don't want to be just another robot. They want to feel like they are adding value to their job, and making a difference.

"They grew up in an information-rich world, with a lot of knowledge, so naturally they'll know what they want from life. Employers need to adapt to that in order to attract today's top talents," she said.

Bridging the gap

Shamsuddin believes that there's a huge difference between what graduates learn about their respective fields in school and what's out there in the working world, and as such, they need to keep their minds open.

"There's a perception that you should only find jobs that are relevant to your degree. That's not necessarily true; you must be able to adapt," he said.

Corrina gets complaints from some employees she had recruited for her clients, saying that they were being given roles that they didn't want.

"If you are a fresh graduate, especially those working in smaller firms, you can't afford to be like that. They could argue that they're just trying to be professional, that they want to focus on what they are good at, but at the same time it also shows they are not adaptable, that they don't have a capacity to learn," said Corrina.

The all-important thing, Shamsuddin revealed, should be getting that first job: "Once you get that, you jump from being unemployed to employed. Everything gets much easier from there. Even if it's a low-paying, entry-level job, your next employer would probably see you as a hard-working guy for having taken it."