

The jobs are out there

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EVEN while he was sitting for his Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR) examinations, Robert Ng, 22, had planned his career path to a T.

"I knew that I wanted to work in the financial market and make lots of money. To do that I had to get into the right stream for Form Four, choose the right subjects, join in the right co-curricular activities, etc," he says.

He worked towards his goal through internships and gaining work experience during his undergraduate years. "Then the economic meltdown happened. I've had to rethink my strategies," says the fresh graduate who has just returned from Britain.

He admits that he, unlike most of his peers who still do not know what they want to do in life, is a go-getter. But they have one thing in common – they are all feeling the pinch of the current economic uncertainties.

"I had wanted to stay back in London and try to get a job in the City (financial district) but so many people have been laid off there, so my chances of getting hired are close to zilch. Even places for unpaid internships are becoming competitive," he says.

The good news is that there are various opportunities available for him in Malaysia from training to internship and postgraduate studies. There are even various job openings in related and non-related fields.

"I might have to take a detour but it is not all hopeless. If I stay focused, I will still achieve my dreams," he shares.

Ng is not alone as approximately 250,000 Malaysians complete their studies at higher education institutions locally and overseas in these few months.

Graduation should be the big moment when they get to reap the rewards of two decades of tuition classes and examinations. In fact, it's the day that most have been living for – or drilled to live for – to get their degrees and start their careers. Although it is not panning out as planned for these fresh graduates, many remain positive about their future prospects.

Tough market

Statistics show a massive challenge for the class of 2009 to break into the job market. According to the Higher Education Ministry's Graduate Tracer Study, 55.1% of graduates were employed six months after they graduated last year while about 80% secured jobs within the same period in 2007.

The 2009 job market, however,

They have slogged over their final exams but the graduating class of 2009 is about to face the real test – getting a job in a tight market. However, the situation may not be as bleak as expected.



Not all gloom: Approximately 250,000 Malaysians completed their studies at higher learning institutions locally and overseas in recent months. Although it is not panning out as planned for these fresh graduates, many remain positive about their future prospects.

»They (employers) are looking for people who can hit the ground running«

SHAMSUDDIN BARDAN



has shrunk, as companies close or downsize to minimise operation costs in the world's economic uncertainties which began last year. Even those that are weathering the troubled times are adopting a more cautious approach in hiring new staff. Many are not even filling up vacancies in their companies unless they are crucial positions.

As the Labour Department disclosed recently, about 30,111 Malaysians have lost their jobs since last October.

In addition, thousands of Malaysians who were working

overseas have also returned home, says Malaysian Employers Federation executive director Shamsuddin Bardan.

"During the good days, more than 720,000 Malaysians were working overseas in the Middle East, Africa, the United States and Europe. Many were working in construction projects and petrochemical industries but now, many have returned home after losing their jobs due to abandoned projects and production cuts brought on by the global recession," he points out.

Worse, the global employment

market reached another low last week with the Euro zone recording a 9.5% jobless rate. US jobless figures also hit 9.5%, their highest level in 26 years. Malaysia's unemployment rate, which has been stable at 3.5% for the past few years, is expected to hit 4.5% by the end of the year.

Hence, although there has always been stiff competition among fresh graduates in the job market, this year is tougher as they have to contend with job seekers who have more work experience. "If more of our workers return home from overseas, we will have an oversupply of skilled workers and a higher number of unemployed," Shamsuddin notes.

The good news is that although the outlook for the local employment market remains subdued, companies are still hiring, especially to fill key positions.

On Friday, it was reported that the electronics and electrical sector is hiring again with a rebound in demand for its products.

According to *The Star's* job por-

tal Star-Jobs senior executive Joyce Lee, other sectors are also hiring.

Based on the job advertisements that Star-Jobs is receiving, the sector that is growing and hiring is the service sector.

"There are various job openings in the call-centre and hospitality sectors. Other industries still hiring are accounting, sales and marketing, and administration. As for Information Technology, there is high demand for web developer, designing and administration," she highlights.

"If the fresh graduates have a positive attitude and are not choosy, they can catch a break," says Lee.

Opportunities abound

Careers and employment resource portal Graduan concurs. Its managing counsellor and director Elia Talib says companies have started to recruit again, especially in areas like financial, services, education and health but it will still be an employers' market.

"There will be openings for entry-level positions. This means that fresh graduates still have a good chance of getting a solid career but they have to compete for fewer places with more people," she says.

This is supported by the findings of the latest *Malaysia Employment Outlook and Salary Guide* issued by Kelly Services (M) Sdn Bhd which was released last month.

According to the report, employment opportunities remain in information technology, engineering, digital and telecommunications, call centres, healthcare, Islamic banking and finance.

Despite the global slowdown, there is also a continued demand for people with specialised skills in areas such as marketing, business development, healthcare and mechanical engineering.

Although the employment outlook for some industries continues to improve, fresh graduates with no work experience as well as non-skilled candidates face a challenge in securing positions as many organisations, looking for immediate results, prefer to hire people with skills and experience.

Shamsuddin laments this perennial problem.

"They are looking for people who can hit the ground running

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Grads need to upskill and be ready for upswing

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and this would generally be the people with more experience.

"There have been many unemployed graduates in the market today, even during the good times, because they lack communication skills – they can't interact and can't engage well with other people," he opines, adding that graduates need to upskill themselves by taking opportunities provided by the private sector and Government.

"For instance, the train-and-place programme introduced by the Government gives them an opportunity to upskill themselves in the soft skill areas, and be ready for an upswing in the job market."

Many organisations are deferring on hiring permanent staff and opting for contractual or temporary jobs.

A spokesperson for recruitment agency Select Appointments (M) Sdn Bhd, who declines to be named, points out that the hiring trend for fresh graduates is for contract positions (three to six months) as many companies do not want to risk hiring the wrong people.

"Companies are also still very cautious and unsure of what the economic situation would be in the near future. Graduates should take advantage of these opportunities anyway. They need to be proactive at a time like this and grab whatever opportunity they can. It won't come knocking on their doors," he says.

Lee echoes his views. "The fresh graduates must first identify the skills that they want to learn and go for jobs that they know will get them the kind of training and experience that they need," she adds.

On whether the experienced workers or fresh graduates were more in demand, Lee says it depends on the job function of the particular position.

"If it is a significant position in the compa-

ny or position that needs technical skills, then experienced workers are more in demand.

But for frontliners, sales, marketing and administrative staff, the company would prefer fresh graduates as they are cheaper to hire and they are full of creativity and energy," she says.

Associate Prof Dr Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf, director of the Alumni and Career Services Division, International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), observes that many are happy to accept whatever is available before landing themselves their dream job.

Many, she adds, would opt for the training programmes offered by government-linked companies for two months and spend a further seven months working at the GLC for RM900 a month.

"If they are good, they will be absorbed by these companies. If not, they will have job experience which will strengthen their CVs and chances of getting a job later. I think the best of the young generation are not afraid of any situation.

"Good universities would have equipped them with enough skills, knowledge and the right attitude to survive any crisis."

She adds that even with the economic crisis, IIUM graduates continue to receive offers from big corporations.

"Although it appears that most companies are freezing vacancies, a few big players such as certain oil and gas companies are still approaching the university for new talents and recruits.

"In this sense, there isn't much change in demand for fresh graduates. But I think it is because they are happy with our graduates due to their English language proficiency, their knowledge of more than one language (Arabic, Malay, English and other European languages), their ability to interact in a multi-national/multicultural environment as well as their computer skills," says Dr Nor Faridah.