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Gen Y gets down to work

Young 'entitled generation' adapts to harsh job market

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ONLY last year, jobs were theirs for the taking. And they sought flexi-hours, interesting careers and a fun workplace. But faced with one of the worst job markets in decades, Generation Y is proving more adaptable and resilient than previously thought.

Bosses and recruitment companies are pleasantly surprised by the change they have noted in their youngest workers. Many have lowered their pay expectations, are shouldering more responsibilities to help cut costs, and even putting their firm's needs before their own.

Mr Colin Ng, 26, an IT graduate from Glasgow University, has been working as an intern at a software firm for three months for just \$1,200 a month, in the hopes of being offered a permanent job.

"When I went for the interview, the boss wasn't sure I could do the job. So I offered to be an intern for three months," he said. "So far, so good. I am hoping to land the job eventually."

Besides programming software, he has also been putting in extra hours making pitches to potential clients in the hope of landing a big contract for the company.

He is typical of Gen Y workers - born between 1977 and 1999 - known for being technologically-savvy, self-assured and able to multi-task, and who have invaded the workplace in recent years.

Gen Y numbers close to 400,000 persons aged 16 to 32 in the workforce, holding positions from interns to middle managers.

Figures released for the third quarter of last year showed that Singapore had some 17,300 jobless young people under 30. According to the Manpower Ministry they made up the largest group - about 31 per cent - of an estimated 55,800 Singaporeans who were out of work. At 4.1 per cent, the unemployment rate of this group was higher than the national average of 2.8 per cent. Analysts predict these numbers will spike in the coming months, as more fresh university and polytechnic graduates enter the labour market.

Their salaries are also heading downwards. Human resources firm The GMP Group estimates that the starting pay for fresh graduates will dip by as much as 15 per cent this year.

A year ago, diploma holders in the information technology field commanded monthly salaries of \$1,800 to \$2,000, while degree holders earned between \$2,500 and \$2,700. This is expected to fall to between \$1,600 and \$1,800 for diploma holders, and from \$2,000 to \$2,300 for degree holders this year, said GMP.

Recruitment agency PeopleWorldwide Consulting's managing director David Leong said the companies he represents are offering lower salaries, about 10 to 15 per cent less. On average, fresh university graduates can expect to earn about \$2,000.

According to Gen Y expert Ms Cheryl Liew-Chng, 41, who runs Lifeworkz management consultancy, the recession has been a sobering reality check for this "entitled generation".

"They are used to a world in which jobs were plentiful and firms fell over one another to recruit them. Now they are lucky to be invited for an interview," said Ms Liew-Chng who runs courses on managing Gen Y workers.

Employers agree that they are shortlisting fewer applicants. But they have been pleasantly surprised by those they interviewed.

Mr Stephen Tjoa, executive director of human resources at KPMG said Gen Y applicants used to be "very specific" about what they wanted to do at the auditing firm. "Now they leave it to the firm to decide how best it can use them," he said.

He added that KPMG carried out its annual mass recruitment exercise at the end of last year, but trimmed the number it took in to 200, about 10 to 20 per cent fewer than the previous year.

Computer gaming accessories company, Razer, a favourite employer with Gen Y because its "fun" work culture allows them to de-stress on pinball machines and the pool table, says its 20-something employees have shown that they are not all about play. About 60 per cent of its 80 staff are under 30 years of age.

When it comes to crunch time, Razer's chief operating officer Soh Yeow Teh noted that his young employees buckle down to work. "Don't be surprised when you see them stay long after hours just to get things done."

Indeed, with their resourcefulness and energy, Gen Y workers are proving to be a boon to firms struggling to cut costs and stay afloat in these lean times.

Mr Augustine Sim, 44, who owns a company that sells handicrafts to the Middle East, said he has particularly benefited from Gen Y's technology skills.

"Business has been slow so I enquired about setting up a website. It would have cost me over \$10,000 which I don't have.

"Fortunately, two of my young workers offered to do it for me for free. All I had to do was organise a night out for them at Clarke Quay, and pay for food and drinks."

Gen Y hires are also good value, in that they can juggle multiple portfolios, travel at the drop of a hat and do not mind venturing to new markets to scour for new business.

Said Mr Aaron Lim, 48, who recently started an education business: "One of my new hires, a business graduate, can set up websites and do marketing and sales. And he is willing to travel to the depths of China or inner Mongolia to look out for new student markets.

"Although times are bad, I am hanging on to him."

As bosses like Mr Lim indicate, another plus for Gen Y hires is that once they get a job they are more able to hang on to it.

Their skills and the fact that they cost less than older workers means they are more value for money. MOM data shows they account for only 9.2 per cent of those retrenched in the third quarter of last year. Those in the 40s accounted for 37.1 per cent.

But for those out there still on the hunt for jobs, the going has been tough. Many like Ms Teo Wan Choo, 21, a Nanyang Technological University accountancy student, who will complete her course in April, have yet to land a job. Ms Teo is now considering teaching as a Plan B.

"I always thought of giving teaching a shot but later on after a few years in the private sector after I made some good money. But now it looks like I may have to go into teaching direct if nothing else comes along."

But what happens if despite lowering their expectations they are unable to find a job? The irrepressible Gen Y has many ideas.

Two out of eight youngsters interviewed said they will set up online shops selling accessories such as second-hand handbags and hand-made jewellery.

Some like Ms Claudia Lim, 27, have already plunged into setting up their own businesses. Ms Lim set up a social media consultancy firm, 24seven, to help businesses market themselves through blogs and websites.

"I don't see a downturn, just more opportunities," says the technology-savvy Ms Lim who holds a business diploma from the poly and a teaching diploma from the National Institute of Education.

Polytechnic business graduate Rosie De Cruz, 20, who has taken a shiatsu massage course at a beauty and spa academy here plans to offer elderly people home massages for \$80 an hour.

Ms Liew-Chng is optimistic that such flexibility will help Gen Y ride out the recession better than their predecessors.

However, not all employers agree that their young hires have come to terms with today's harsh market conditions.

Mr Desmond De Costa, 50, who runs a food catering service, rants: "I had a couple of 22-year-olds quitting on me, because I did not give them the Saturday and Sunday off for them to attend the rave party Zouk Out last month.

"They don't seem to care about holding on to their jobs in these hard times. They need this recession to grow up."

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