

The Straits Times, Pg B8 26 January 2009, Monday

Youth less picky about jobs now

[SOAPBOX]

First-time job seekers have become more humble and pro-active

YEN FENG

I CANNOT tell you how grateful I am to have a job.

Every day, I read about axes flying about in this or that company. And not since 2001 have I seen so many unhappy words used in one story: downturn, crisis, woe, trouble, meltdown and, of course, recession.

Young people are not impervious to the news. So it is no surprise they are singing a different tune when it comes to interviewing for that first job.

The global downturn has been a harsh wake-up call for many of the workforce's youngest members - those who were born in the plum times of the 1980s and 1990s, or "Generation Y".

As recent as 2007, recruitment managers remember the swagger of many interviewees, fresh from this or that university, who walked into their offices demanding high wages and fat signing bonuses.

Ms Tulika Tripathi, director of recruitment consultancy Michael Page International, said: "They wanted the snazzy cars and the designer clothes - and they wanted it now.

"Expectations, and along with attitudes, have changed a lot since."

In general, young people have become more humble and pro-active; they want to show that they can "value-add" to the company, she said.

Mr Josh Goh, senior manager of the GMP group, a human resource firm, observed that young, first-time job seekers have become "more flexible", given the volatile economic situation.

He said: "It would be difficult for them to secure jobs if they are not open to new challenges."

It is not yet clear exactly how many youth will be affected in this downturn.

The latest Q3 report from the Manpower Ministry pegs the number of unemployed youth under 30 years at 4.1 per cent, still ahead of the United States' 7.3 per cent and a fraction of the European average of 25 per cent.

But going by Facebook updates, coffee-shop talk and the occasional distressed mobile text message, everyone expects the numbers to go up.

From university campuses everywhere to interview rooms, the reality is sinking in: Not in almost a decade will youths have to work so hard to prove they deserve their jobs - and keep them.

Their tune has changed with the tide.

Or, as one friend who has just lost his job put it: "No car, no bonus also can. Got table, chair, can already."

The upshot to all this gloomy business is that it could still spell good news for everyone in the end.

For one thing, novices can take the opportunity to challenge what older managers tend to think of Gen Y: that they are overly confident, pampered and more about "brand me" than the company.

Managers, on the other hand, can learn how to harness and play to the strengths of this cohort: their openness, Internet savvy and constant innovation.

Every downturn will eventually right itself.

Young workers - no matter how clever - still need experience, and that will be something they can take with them when the recovery comes.

zengyan@sph.com.sg