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Good economy, big events boost demand for workers

By: Sue-Ann Chia & Lynn Lee

MOM report shows number of job vacancies in third quarter up 30 per cent from last year

FOUR Seasons Hotel had more staff than usual in September. They were part-time employees such as waiters, kitchen staff and "lobby greeters".

The reason: More manpower was needed for the influx of bankers and politicians attending the International Monetary Fund and World Bank meetings here from Sept 13 to 20.

Such major conferences and a growing economy have boosted the number of job vacancies between July and September.

The demand reached 25,700 in the third quarter, an increase of nearly 30 per cent over the same period last year, said a Ministry of Manpower report released yesterday.

The services industry continued to take the lead in creating jobs with 16,278 openings, while manufacturing had 7,781 and construction, 1,248 vacancies.

Among the top hirers in the services industry are companies in the transport and storage sectors, as well as wholesale and retail.

Some of its hot jobs include waiters, security guards and electronic equipment assemblers.

The fact that large numbers of jobs are for lower-skilled workers was not lost on Mr David Leong, managing director of regional human resource company PeopleWorldwide Consulting.

It is a reflection of how the good times are filtering down to these workers who formed the biggest pool of unemployed people during the recession, he noted.

"The number of jobs for lower-skilled workers is not drying up," he added, noting that some employers like those in the marine industry find it difficult to get workers like welders and pipe fitters.

In terms of qualifications, those in big demand are secondary school leavers and university degree holders.

Human resource consultants interviewed yesterday said the figures are concrete evidence of an economy that is humming.

More new jobs were added in the first nine months of this year than the whole of last year: 124,500 against 113,300.

This swell in new openings is the highest since the compilation of such data began in the late 1970s.

It is expected to grow further in the festive season and the next three months, in tandem with the forecast of continued economic expansion, albeit at a pace slower than this year.

Ms Annie Yap, chief executive officer of recruitment firm GMP Group, said it had about 50 per cent more job openings in September compared to a year ago.

These were primarily for retail, IT and engineering positions.

There were also more vacancies during the traditional lull period for hiring, October to December, compared to previous years, she added.

What had given a fillip to hiring is the opening of several giant retail stores in Tampines such as furniture and furnishing sellers Ikea and Courts, as well as shopping mall VivoCity.

"The overall jobs outlook is likely to be upbeat for the next six months," said Ms Yap.

This is a boon for job seekers, but employers like retail chain Isetan find it tough-going getting suitable workers.

Mr Gerard Cheng, its human resource manager in Singapore, said: "It has never been easy finding people with the right attitude, pleasant personalities who are willing to work shifts, weekends and public holidays."

It would be "a dream" just to fill 60 to 70 per cent of the 30 vacancies each month, he added.

But unionists like Mr Francis Lim want even more new jobs.

He is president of the United Workers of Electronic and Electrical Industries, representing workers in an industry that has seen several major layoffs, the most recent of which was by hard-disk drive maker Maxtor.

While heartened by the job growth, he said: "It is good, but still not enough."