

TODAY, Front
Monday January 8, 2007

WHO'S DOING THE ASKING NOW?

By: Jasmine Yin
jasmine@mediacorp.com.sg

With talent becoming more mobile than ever, HR bosses have to do more to attract and retain best and brightest

As bonuses are decided by many employers around the island, human resource managers are getting increasingly jittery.

They know that once the money changes hands - resignation letters are bound to start appearing in their in-trays.

Going by all the growth figures being announced, the Singapore economy is doing well, and executives - especially those with talent and promise - are already eyeing their next employer.

The truth is that talent is mobile.

And that truth is hitting Singapore's employers harder than ever before, in what is now a borderless playing field.

In just the past month, recruitment ads by overseas organisations looking to hire prosecutors, engineers and managers to work in Australia, Mexico, Britain and China have been spotted locally.

"You have to be different when managing talent in today's world, where there is a global shortage of talent," said the Singapore Human Resources Institute executive director David Ang. "Globalisation is pulling down a lot of barriers and talent - whether you are Singaporean or foreigner - you can move about freely."

Industry observers have warned that in Singapore human resource departments are largely responsible for hiring, firing and retaining talent - yet many HR practitioners here have simply not kept pace in the race to attract, manage, nurture, reward and ultimately retain talent.

They are still bogged down with the nitty-gritty of compensation and benefits, when what they should be fussing over is talent management, said manpower firm GMP

Group's CEO Annie Yap. HR practitioners here, she said, should think more strategically - to boost the firm's brand - and less administratively.

"The global economy is getting more competitive ... without a strong pool of talent, we are at the losing end."

Are local employers on the constant prowl for talent? Or do they just whip out the same old recruitment ad whenever someone quits? Are they flexible enough to tailor an employment package to the individual - and throw in the extras when they have to, or do they stick to well-thumbed HR guidebook?

Corporate head-hunter Karen Kwan pointed out that as Singapore makes in-roads to being a regional and international hub, the diversity of people coming to work here is changing. "An Eastern European's needs may be vastly different from a North American's needs; their interpretation of HR issues may be different. So HR practitioners need to have the sensitivity and flexibility to deal with these issues," said the sales director of global recruitment firm Hudson.

What some firms have done is to outsource tasks like payroll, thus freeing up HR staff to assume a bigger role in developing the organisation as a whole. Larger firms and multi-nationals have even started outsourcing their talent recruitment to headhunters, who boast a wider network of contacts and better resources to profile and match the right candidate for the job.

Small and medium enterprises (SMEs), which form the backbone of the economy, however, are still staying out of the talent ring. In fact, "most SMEs do not even have an HR person," said Mr Ang. But if they think the talent search does not concern them, they are gravely mistaken, he cautioned.

"When the bigger boys (develop and expand), the SMEs supporting them have to also move up the skills ladder."

For a start, smaller firms should move from a seniority-based structure to a performance-based remuneration, to recruit and retain talent, said Ms Yap. Also, there should be a career progression path laid out for staff, so as to motivate and nurture a sense of ownership in the organisation.

Small companies can also adopt less conventional ways to attract and retain talent, such as giving staff shares of the company, Mr Ang suggested.

"When you are small, you can be nimble, so take advantage of that."

Experts say that in an employee's market, senior management must be willing to empower staff and let them know they matter.

"To be honest, senior people have a lot of places with attractive offers they can go to. You can bring really good people in, but if they don't find opportunities where they can make a difference and be successful, they will move on," said Dr Jackie Ying, who was personally headhunted by A*Star chairman Philip Yeo three years ago to leave her post in the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to head the Institute of Bioengineering and Nanotechnology here.

But it doesn't just boil down to the human resource managers. In fact, many industry observers say the task of talent management should no longer be shouldered by the HR department alone, argued Ms Kwan.

Concurring, Mr Ang added: "What I lament sometimes is how we fail to have that HR courage to stand up to the bosses to say, 'I think you're wrong (about an employee or policy)' because the HR person's job is on the line. Talent management within any organisation is key to the success and sustainability of the business."