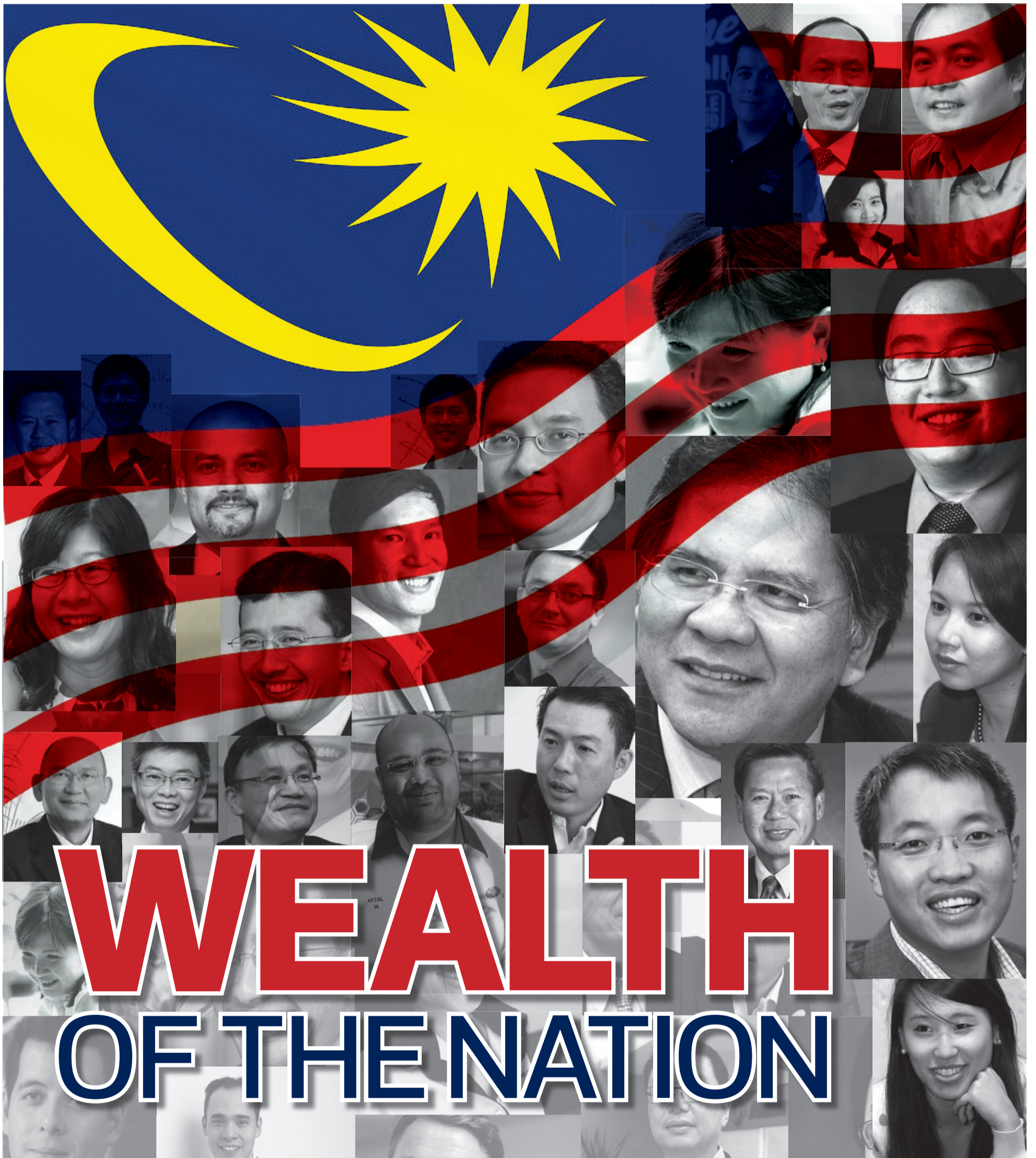


merdeka focus



WEALTH OF THE NATION

IN COLLABORATION WITH

TalentCorp
MALAYSIA

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Wealth of the nation

BY ANNA TAING

Many of us would probably have heard the story of The Star Thrower, about a young man, who, while walking along a beach one morning, started picking up starfish that had been washed ashore by the tide and throwing them back into the sea.

Since the beach where the starfish were found stretched for miles, an old man who had been watching the young man told him that he couldn't possibly make a difference. The young man, as he threw another starfish into the sea, replied: "I bet it made a difference to that one."

This is the story that Johan Mahmood Merican loves to tell people who are sceptical about TalentCorp Malaysia's ability to achieve its goal of building a big talent pool in the country.

However, he acknowledges that it will take time and, to put it mildly, a lot of effort and collective action to achieve what TalentCorp has set out to do.

"I know I can't solve world hunger ... but I do know that if all of us made a concerted effort, we can make a difference [to the talent situation in Malaysia] ... and hopefully, there are many people like us. We need more people who have an unlimited store of optimism to keep pushing because Malaysia deserves to be great," says the CEO of TalentCorp.

One of the biggest challenges TalentCorp

faces is getting "collective participation" from stakeholders, he adds.

"On one level, companies complain about talent problems and when I ask them what we can do together, they say there is no budget to do these projects ... in any situation, there are always opportunities to make a difference.

"For national transformation to succeed, a critical mass of people is needed to unlock it. The question is, can we get enough people to join the revolution?"

Indeed, a large pool of talent is critical to Malaysia's Economic Transformation Programme. TalentCorp was established in early 2011 to jumpstart a virtuous circle in talent building.

The wealth of a nation is its people. A recent study by the UN showed that a nation's prosperity is not measured by its gross domestic product, but by three main pillars: physical capital (infrastructure and so on), human capital and natural resources. In some countries, human capital's contribution to national wealth exceeded 80%.

Malaysia is fortunate — it has all three pillars. Indeed, the key drivers of Malaysia's economic development from the early days have been its people and rich natural resources. Physical capital came later, largely as a result of vibrant growth.

Today, celebrating 55 years of independence, Malaysia is once again on the cusp of great change.

This time, however, Malaysia faces a problem that is common in many middle-income countries — a shrinking talent pool. This is because in such countries, talent has the means and skills to migrate and the magnitude of the brain drain will depend on the pull and push factors.

Still, Johan is not disheartened. More than a year since TalentCorp was established, he is encouraged by the support, by the growing number of people and companies working with TalentCorp on its programmes.

"People need to have hope. Of course, we have problems. Name me a country that does not have problems, but we have many good people in this country, people who are patriotic, hard-working and smart. We have a lot going for us in terms of natural resources and businesses. We have done many good things ... there is a future worth fighting for."

This Merdeka special focus, done in collaboration with TalentCorp, is our way of picking up a starfish and throwing it back into the sea.

The stories featured are about people who have chosen not to leave the country, but who have carved good careers for themselves here. They are also about those who left but chose to come back. At the same time, an increasing number of companies have begun to put in place in-house training programmes to ensure an adequate talent pipeline.

We hope you find these stories enjoyable and inspirational. Happy Merdeka Day!



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Building talent to make the big leap

HARIS HASSAN/THE EDGE

The wealth of a nation is its people. Malaysia's rapid growth since independence has been underpinned by its rich natural resources and human capital. With the depletion of natural resources, it is human capital that will play a greater role in spurring growth. Indeed, the success of Malaysia's ongoing economic transformation exercise hinges on the availability of an adequate pool of talent. Recognising this, the government has put in place measures to build, retain and bring back talent. In this interview, Pemandu CEO Datuk Seri Idris Jala gives **Anna Taing** an update on how things have progressed so far and the challenges faced.

The Edge: Malaysia's economic transformation hinges on its ability to build a large pool of talent to meet its skilled manpower needs. The ETP has entered its second year. Where are we now in terms of human capital development? What are the areas that have seen major progress thus far?

Datuk Seri Idris Jala: As Malaysia transforms itself from a middle-income to a high-income economy, we will also have to move up the value chain in terms of how our sectors are growing and the type of jobs created. Our focus will deliberately shift towards a knowledge-based and service-oriented economy. For example, under the electrical and electronics sector more jobs are created in the area of research and development as we move away from low-value assembly work towards higher value-added manufacturing of core components.

In the broad scheme of things, under the human capital development Strategic Reform Initiatives (SRIs), there are six focus areas being addressed in terms of policies and legislations, as well as on-the-ground initiatives. I would like to highlight the progress made in key reform areas that have a direct impact on the rakyat.

First, we saw the need to modernise the Employment Act to enhance the ease of doing business, increase productivity and efficiency, raise income level and afford protection to employees — improving how we develop as a competitive nation. Amendments have been made to the Employment (Amendment) Act 2012 (Phase 1), which was passed last year and enforced this year.

The passing of the Minimum Wage Order is crucial to ensure that the basic needs of employees and their families are met, and sufficient social protection is provided to employees. This encourages industries to move up the value chain by investing in higher technology, and increasing labour productivity to reduce the nation's dependence on unskilled foreign labour. A minimum wage will positively affect 3.2 million private sector workers or about 25.8% of total employment.



The prime minister also recently announced a policy that ensures at least 30% are women at the decision-making level in the corporate sector as part of the Economic Transformation Programme. We expect to achieve this target within the next five years.

What are the main challenges in the government's efforts thus far to nurture, retain and lure back talent?

The key is in being focused and competitive. We should strive to keep our focus on the 12 NKEAs identified as areas in which we have the strongest and most natural ability to compete globally.

We are pushing for more companies to invest and grow these sectors, and by doing so, create high-value jobs. The availability of high-value and better job opportunities will give talents a reason to stay in the country and attract more talents to come to Malaysia. The growing pool of talents available in Malaysia will serve to attract investors and multinationals, confident that we have a vibrant, industry-ready workforce.

The main challenge has been the level of uncertainty and scepticism among diaspora Malaysians, that there are great opportunities here where they can grow their careers.

It is important for government agencies such as MIDA, TalentCorp, InvestKL and MDeC to collaborate with companies to raise the awareness and convince talented Malaysians of the quality of work and life they can experience back home. In this respect, the government is driving the government and economic transformation programmes to address issues such as security, education, infrastructure, connectivity and the economy — creating an environment conducive to raising families and making a contribution to the nation.

Talent shortage is still a problem cited by many companies. Do you see this as a major stumbling block to the ETP goals?

Annually, Malaysia produces about 500,000 school leavers, the majority of whom will further their studies, either via the academic route or vocational skills training. We also produce about 250,000 graduates every year. Clearly, shortage is not the issue here, rather it is the case of a skills mismatch and the quality of graduates.

There are three key initiatives under the Human Capital Development SRI addressing this

issue — MyProCert, MyUniAlliance and National Talent Enhancement Programme (NTEP).

MyProCert is an incentive-based programme for working professionals aspiring to acquire professional certifications, such as SAP, Oracle, Huawei and iOS. This programme aims at accelerating the upskilling of Malaysian professionals to meet the demands of a knowledge-based, high-value economy.

Collaboration at university level has also been established under the MyUniAlliance Programme with SAP, Huawei and Google to ensure the graduates are equipped with industry's best practices in the course of their studies and graduate 'industry ready'.

The NTEP is a 12-month attachment programme that gives engineering graduates the opportunity to hone their technical skills or even to specialise in certain engineering disciplines to enhance these graduates' employability in the electrical and electronic sector. To date, 159 trainees are on board with 31 host companies, while 32 trainees have been absorbed by the host companies before the completion of their 12-month traineeship.



In Malaysia, the issue is not talent shortage but rather a case of skills mismatch, says Jala

It is said that Malaysia will have an ageing population by 2020, which means heightened pressure on the labour market as we move towards the 2020 goal of becoming a high-income nation. How are we addressing this problem today?

We would like to see a more synergistic relationship between industry players and educational institutions, where students graduating from universities are 'industry ready'. At the moment, there is a gap in terms of what is being taught at the universities and what is required as best practice in industries.

If we go back to the Roadmap, it already tells us the types of skill sets required in the next 10 years. For example, the Regional Oil Storage and Trading Hub project under the Oil, Gas and Energy NKEA will call for specialist engineers as well as skilled workers, such as welders, derrickmen, technicians, fitters and electricians. Our educational institutions need to be ready now to produce talents with these very specific skill sets.

The introduction of the minimum retirement age at 60 will also do its part in easing the pressure on talent requirement in the coming years. We see this reflected in developed economies such as Japan, where the skills of the elders are highly regarded and respected as birth rates decline and life expectancy increases.

Do you think Malaysian corporations are doing their part to help the country build its talent pool? If not, how can the situation be improved?

The private sector plays a pivotal role in developing talents, and should step up to play a bigger role in growing the skills and capacities of their employees.

I have often said this to company leaders that they should make a commitment to pay their talents more and give them a reason to stay — in your company and in the country. If we are not prepared to invest more in our people, they will of course be encouraged to accept opportunities elsewhere, especially in our neighbouring countries that are prepared to offer better pay packages and benefits.

The government can support the private sector by developing and implementing policies as well as sustainable incentive schemes that will encourage the private sector to invest in training and upskilling their talents.

Raising the participation of women in the workforce

For every 13 female graduates in the country, there are 10 males. Yet women only represent 37% of the skilled workforce in the country. And as the war for talent intensifies, Malaysia is finding that it can ill afford to lose its women.

BY JENNIFER JACOBS

A few years ago, management consultancy McKinsey & Co surveyed 77 companies all over the US, Asia and Europe across a spectrum of industries and concluded that over the next 20 years, the most important corporate resource would be talent — smart, sophisticated businesspeople who are technologically literate, globally astute and operationally agile. In fact, talent has trumped capital, strategy or R&D in the hierarchy of corporate needs.

But as the demand rises, the supply falls. And this is why Malaysia cannot afford to let its highly educated women quit their jobs to take care of their children.

JobStreet.com country manager Chook Yuh Yng says that when the Internet recruitment website did a survey on women in the workforce last year, about 64% of them said they expect their career goals to change after having children.

What would their career priorities be, post-children? Some 61% said flexible working hours while 16% claimed they would settle for shorter and fixed working hours. Some 44% said they planned to stop working after having children, but most were unable to as they still needed the money.

"If we want them back in the workforce, we have to look at their pain points. What actually stops them from going back to work? I think firstly, a lot of them want to take care of their children. I'm a new mother so I can really understand that," says Chook, who has an eight-month-old son.

She says many new mothers find it difficult to concentrate on their work once they get back from maternity leave. "So unless you have a very good child support system, your priority will always be split. It is difficult to keep working with peace of mind if you're always worrying about 'what ifs'."

And Chook thinks that maternity leave in Malaysia is way too short. "I would think it's the shortest in the world. Even our kiasu neighbour has four months and in the UK, you can take up to a year of unpaid leave. These are places that have recognised the need for women. It's the comfort of knowing that if you leave your work for one year and then you come back, you can still pick up where you left off."

The civil service has extended its maternity leave to three months, but the labour laws have not been amended to the effect. "I think it's important to legislate the increase in maternity leave or you hope that companies will do it."

For every senior woman who leaves because of childbirth, the cost of replacement is three times her salary.

If we want them back in the workforce, we have to look at their pain points. What actually stops them from going back to work?
— Chook

People can opt for flexible working arrangements. They can take a career break.
— Ho



LEE LAY KIN/THE EDGE

41% of the directors. "How does 64 become 41 and then become 36? It's because there are a lot of people who drop out along the way. Therefore, we are not happy that we are still losing a lot of good female talent. We are never happy about losing talent, whether male or female," Ho hastens to add.

Case in point: Ho recently had a discussion with one of her managers in her twenties who said she would have to quit as she was getting married because she did not think this was a career that would allow her to get married and have children.

"I said, 'Hello, look at your partners; most of them are married with children. So why do you say that?' And she said, there are different expectations from her husband-to-be and her future in-laws. They wanted her to have more steady working hours and not to be too successful in case she overshadows her husband," she says.

Ho rolls her eyes. "So I suggested that she transfer to Internal Firm Services and then when things are more stable at home and she wants to come back, she can. She said she would think about it. I see that as very sad. It's not like she doesn't like what she's doing. And she's doing quite well."

Ho thinks part of the reason women drop out of the workforce is that they try to live up to all these external expectations. "We set our own boundaries and we make our own lives difficult."

When she had just given birth to her triplet boys six years ago, Ho was guilty of the same thing. "I put a lot of stress on myself trying to be the best mother by the definitions of my mother, my father-in-law and my husband. That was just too tough. In the end, everyone accepted that I would still want a career. Those are the communications that have to happen. So now I have basically set up a support system at home so that things that need to be done will be done."

And no, she does not feel guilty about it. "I think my children would prefer to have a mum who's happy than a mum who's unhappy because I know if I stay home and work I'd be an extremely unhappy person."

Childcare then, is a major issue. Chook says she is lucky to have a good childcare support system. "If I didn't, I know how much pain and trouble it can be. I know the Ministry of Women [Family and Community Development] is trying to provide incentives to companies which set up childcare centres within the premises but it's not that easy. It's not only about assigning a room to put your babies in. It's about maintaining the place and having trained personnel, which is a business in itself and not something that's easily done by small and medium-sized companies."

Steps have to be put in place to address this issue on a national rather than ad-hoc level. "We need world-class training and courses to create a pool of professionals to work at these childcare centres. At the moment, it's more of a household thing and not at all professionally run, but not cheap either. So a lot of women tend to stay back and raise the child themselves. Lacking the support system, this becomes their priority," Chook points out.

And what do we lose? "When you look at the enrolment and graduation rate, there is something like 60% of women graduating compared with men. It's such a shame that we are losing so many of these women. This is the talent we want to retain. A lot of MNCs have already introduced working arrangements such as working part time or on certain days a week, working from home or flexible working hours to retain their women. Unfortunately, most Malaysian companies are not ready to follow suit. So it is something that we can work towards," she says.

Basically, Chook adds, keeping women in the workforce is no longer a nice-to-have, but a necessity. "Sooner or later, companies will have to learn that there's a lot of competition out there for good talent. It's very expensive to keep going out and hiring and every time you do, you have to put up with a lack of productivity as a new person is trained for the job. If you retain your staff, this can be avoided."

Malaysia is moving in the right direction. "We are quite a way behind but we are moving forward. You've got to start somewhere," she concludes.

And in knowledge-based companies, that can go up to five times. So companies are starting to find ways to keep their top female talent, one of which involves flexible working arrangements.

PwC Malaysia partner Pauline Ho says the accounting firm, for one, has introduced these working arrangements, and not just for women. "People can opt for flexible working arrangements. They can take a career break."

Recently, at Invest Malaysia, it was announced that beginning 2013, employers would be given a double tax deduction incentive for training expenditure incurred by companies re-employing women professionals on a career break.

Ho, however, has some reservations about this. "For those who actually go away for five years and decide they want to come back and be a full-time auditor, I think it will be very tough. A lot of standards will have changed and there will be such a steep learning curve. You wouldn't be able to come up to speed with just a two-week training programme."

What she suggests instead, is that if the woman has an interest to come back to work, she attends trainings whenever there is a change in standards. "So you keep the job for this person and they will be trained and updated throughout the period, so when they come, it's very natural. It's important to keep yourself relevant and not just be given one incentive before you come back."

JobStreet's Chook thinks that a lot more infrastructures need to be put in place before you can allow anyone to take a career break with impunity. "It's not as simple as it sounds. Many times, companies are not properly organised and if someone goes on a sabbatical, someone else will need to be trained or hired to take over the position. So you need to look at succession planning, job rotation and the ability of other people to step in. It needs a lot of thought in the organisation planning as well."

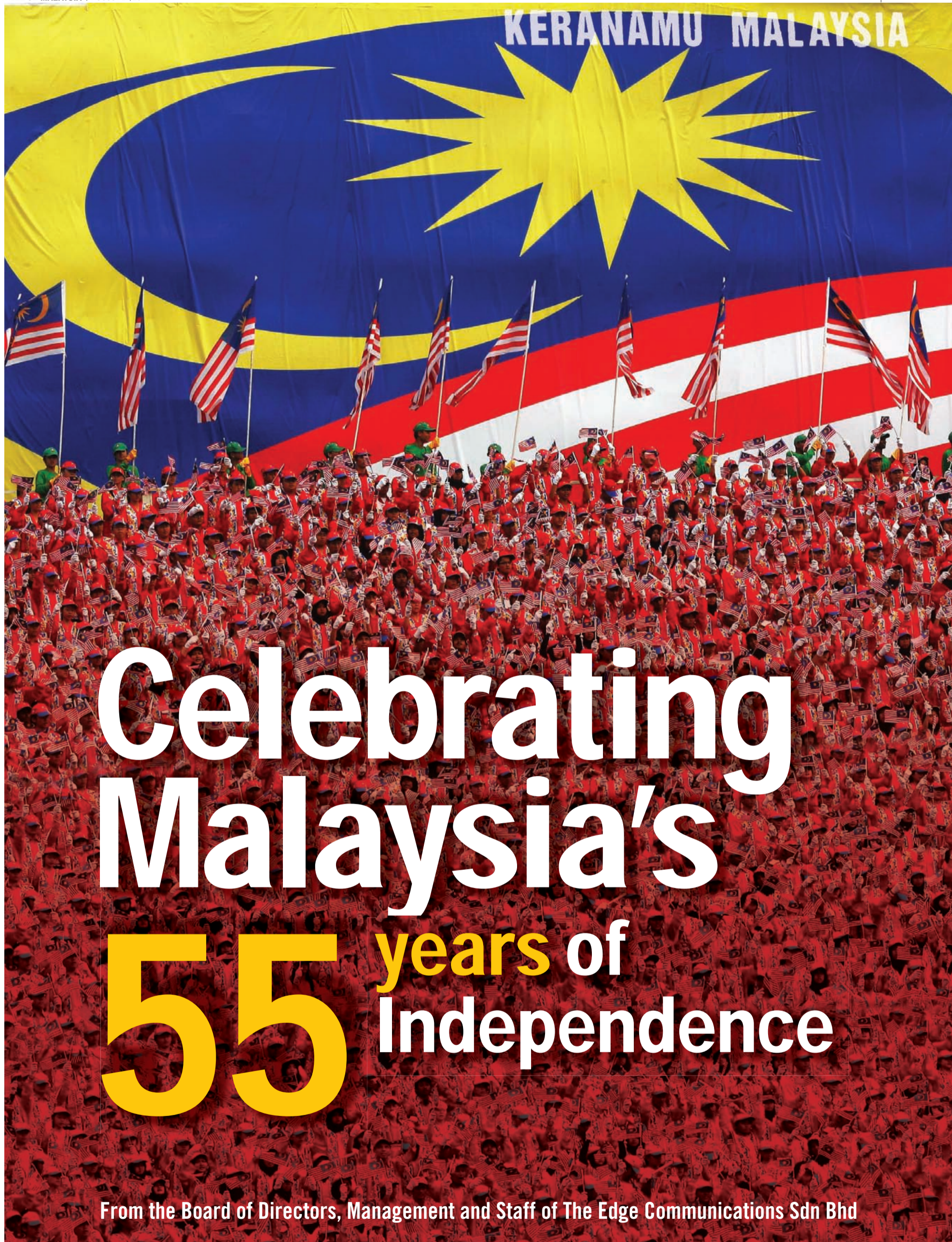
Malaysia was ranked No 97 in the Gender Gap Index last year, an improvement from 98 the year before. In terms of economic participation, it did slightly better at 95. Not bad, but not good by a long shot and still indicative of a long way to go.

Ho points out that in PwC, however, the Malaysian office is one of the best in terms of women in senior positions. Some 36% of its partners are female. "That's a very good average if you talk to my colleagues overseas. They would be amazed and ask, 'How did you do it?' We don't have any specific policies to add more female partners. I think it's just that everyone's given equal opportunities."

However, if you were to dig a little deeper another picture emerges. Some 64% of the managers are women, and



HARIS HASSAN/THE EDGE



Celebrating Malaysia's 55 years of Independence

From the Board of Directors, Management and Staff of The Edge Communications Sdn Bhd

It's about the right opportunities

BY JENNIFER JACOBS

Bringing people home is more a matter of giving them the right opportunities than a fat paycheck. If the job is interesting and challenging enough, many would gladly avail themselves of it.

Ask Shell Malaysia human resource director Darrel Lourdes. "We have no trouble recruiting some of the best and brightest minds. I know from the market that my peers who are HR directors for other companies do struggle, but for some reason, we don't."

This, he feels, is driven largely by the brand name. "It's a good brand and the promise of a challenging job is very attractive. So if someone is struggling to bring a Malaysian home, one thing I would like to ask is, what kind of job are you offering them? Because in our experience if the job is challenging and interesting enough, people are willing to come."

He spoke of a recent conversation with Shell Malaysia's new chairman Iain Lo. "Iain's just come back and one of the things he mentioned is the difference in pay and that at some point, that doesn't matter. People do move at a certain level for meaningful jobs."

His experience bears this out. Lourdes was working at the Shell office in The Hague, a nice cushy job with a comfortable lifestyle. "But while the job was high impact, it was basically a coordinating role behind people who coordinate and manage the talent process in Shell. It was interesting to some extent but not as engaging as my current job."

"I think a big draw in coming back was the job. The Shell scope right now is quite wide. We operate in six locations so the job stretches out to six different places. And everything under the sun that has to do with our people in Malaysia falls under my remit. I have about 80 people in the organization to execute HR strategies and it's probably one of the best HR jobs I could have in the country," he enthuses.

His work, Lourdes maintains, is highly meaningful, because Malaysia is a very important country in the Shell universe. "So things are very attractive from a work standpoint. I think the meaning of Shell in the country is also quite significant. A feeling that you're working for a company that is the largest foreign taxpayer in Malaysia makes you feel quite good. It is also one of the top five revenue generators in the country. So I have a sense that this is a company that contributes in a big way and I'm the HR director, which is in my own mind quite a big deal."

Lourdes says that for the more senior roles, money is only a hygiene factor. "You need a certain amount to live a fairly good life. But after a certain point you're also not sure what to do with it. Your greed does go down with time," he says with a laugh.

And another thing is impact. "I notice that the gap between where people are in Europe and what they are striving for is pretty small, because it's already developed, it's already mature and the market changes at a rate of about 1%. Whereas in Malaysia, the gap between where we are and where we are trying to get to is quite wide."

"So your impact on society is a lot higher compared to what you can do in places like the UK or Holland. I don't think it's pure ideal. It's just a fact that you have so much more opportunities to do stuff in a less mature market. And that can be quite fulfilling," he says.

It's a point that comes up again and again throughout the course of these interviews. Impact; the possibility of making a difference; bringing expertise, education and a different set of perspectives to tackle issues and grow fledgling markets.

This is where the action is

Khairil Kevin Abdullah is the new group chief marketing and operations officer for Axiata Group Bhd. Until about a month ago, he was heading the Kuala Lumpur office of strategic consultancy Bain & Company. He had been with that company for 15 years.

As head of the Bain office in Malaysia he is quite familiar with the vagaries of hiring staff from overseas to take up positions in the Kuala Lumpur office. But his pitch was simple. In fact, it was the equivalent of Steve Job's now-famous question to the then

Pepsi CEO John Sculley: "Would you rather sell sugar water to kids for the rest of your life, or would you like a chance to change the world?"

Khairil studied in Cambridge University and he has worked around the world. And after all that, he realises that east or west, opportunities at home are still best. "The mission was always to do something for this country because I think there's tremendous opportunity here. So when we got the business (Bain) to the point where it was up and running, I said, well, I've done this from an adviser's perspective, now I want to be hands-on. That's why when discussions started with Axiata, it was very clear to me that I wanted to make that transition."

He admits that many Malaysians abroad are not clamouring to come back. Maybe they don't see the opportunity. Maybe it's the way the idea is put to them. "I think the challenges are in many dimensions. There are those who feel that the country is not managed well enough to create opportunities for them and would therefore rather stay in the US, Europe and Australia and gain as much as they can from those environments."

Khairil sees things differently. "There are enough fundamentals in this country for anyone, talented enough, to come in and create those opportunities for themselves. If you think about it, the whole world is going through a global crisis and here is Malaysia, standing tall."

"The pitch I've been using to try and bring some of these Malaysians back is that there are two types of people; the ones who sit and wait for opportunities and the ones who go out and create opportunities for themselves. I tell them that Malaysia is basically an oyster. This pitch has been successful and last year I was able to bring back two Malaysians from London, one from the oil and gas industry and the other from investment banking."

Basically, Khairil laid it on strong; this is where the action is; this is where the big projects and groundbreaking deals are going down. Why wouldn't they want to be a part of it?

Khairil hasn't been back very long. He's still trying to find his feet, and wondering whether to drive to his office in KL Sentral or take the train. Parking, of course, is a problem. And he's not too thrilled about the traffic. Taking the train, he has found, can be painful. And his second child is still on the waiting list for a school. In fact, it's been more of a culture shock coming back to his own country than setting up in one of the many countries he was posted to in the course of his career.

Lourdes came back last September. Since he's been back, he's been trying to figure out why some Malaysians prefer to remain abroad. For them, it's not a simple case of money and opportunity. There are deeper forces at work.

"Economically, they see a level of growth and some programmes that are well managed such as the ETP (Economic Transformation Programme). But on the political side, we don't have a common narrative about what this country is all about and where it's going which causes a lot of concern among the people I've met," he says.

It doesn't help that there is a lot of white noise out there to divide people into one camp or another. "I think that is one of the key drivers in the choice to remain outside. It is important to consider that we don't seem to have a common set of values and

There are enough fundamentals in this country for anyone, talented enough, to come in and create those opportunities for themselves — Khairil

I think a big draw in coming back was the job. The Shell scope right now is quite wide. We operate in six locations so the job stretches out to six different places. — Lourdes

that seems to be dividing the people further."

The problem is more complex than mere economic transformation. "We need some transformation with our cultural and political systems because those also make up the nation. And that is probably the biggest challenge I've seen for people to come back. They don't know how to place themselves in this cultural confusion. And I'm talking about experienced staff here," says Lourdes.

The fears about security don't help. "The people who struggle with coming back to Malaysia talk about security, they talk about schooling for their children and they talk about the political climate." **E**



SUHAIMI YUSUF/THE EDGE

MOHD IZWAN MOHD NAZAM/THE EDGE

'It was time to come home'

BY ANNA TAING

Had Jamal Bakri stayed on at Microsoft, he would have been based at its headquarters in the US today. It would have been the pinnacle of his 14-year career at one of the world's largest IT companies. His last position at Microsoft was regional director for HR services, Asia.

Despite the lure of the US, Jamal decided that it was time to come home to Malaysia. That was more than a year ago. "I have gained this wealth of knowledge and experience working with an MNC; it's time to come back and contribute to the nation, applying the best HR practices in local companies," he says.

Today, Jamal is group head of human resources at the recently listed IHH Healthcare Bhd, which was the world's third largest IPO this year.

"Coming back to Malaysia and working at the HQ of a company based in Kuala Lumpur, but with a strong presence overseas can be equally exciting," says

Jamal. "Look at IHH — it was just listed and is the second largest healthcare company in the world. We aspire to be No 1 ... It cannot be more exciting than this for me."

What prompted him to come back?

Jamal cites two reasons. "From a personal standpoint, I missed home. When I was abroad, I learnt to appreciate how good home is. We tend to take these things for granted, like the food and the people. The second reason is I want my children to be brought up the Malaysian way. My children, for example, are forgetting the Malay language. When you are away, this happens, so it is time for me to come back so that they can appreciate the culture of being Malaysian, this is important for me."

So far, it has been good and he has no regrets, Jamal says.

But he acknowledges that insofar as talent is concerned, coming back is one thing and staying put is another. "It's not easy, it depends on the organisation. The country is trying to do its best, and what I have been experiencing — the measures put in place — made it a lot

easier [for my family to adjust], for example, I don't have problems sending my children to international schools because I have been provided with this flexibility ... you have to manage it, you balance it off."

Jamal sees huge opportunities in Malaysia, where the companies are getting bigger and many are venturing abroad. Furthermore, Asia is where the growth is, while the US and European economies are slowing down.

He notes that IHH is just one of many Malaysian companies that have grown very big. "If you look at all the other companies, the big ones — there are tremendous opportunities for people to make a difference."

Jamal is a mechanical engineer, having studied at the Technical Institute of Kuala Lumpur and completed his master's degree in the UK. He started his career at Petronas in 1984, but left a few years later to join the ICI group of companies. "At the time, ICI was building the most modern facility in Malaysia. It was the biggest investment, at RM800 million, by a British company. From an engineering perspective, it was exciting. I was also provided exposure because I was based in the UK for one year. There was an opportunity to grow outside Malaysia, and it was a good way to build my career."

It was at ICI that Jamal changed his career path to focus on human resources. He was put in charge of training and from there on, it was HR all the way. **E**

I have gained this wealth of knowledge and experience working with an MNC; it's time to come back and contribute to the nation, applying the best HR practices in local companies. — Jamal



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Brave new world

They are like a breath of fresh air, whisking into an old building and brushing away the lingering cobwebs. Young, highly educated and vibrant, they are not interested in moaning about the way things are, so much as changing it.

BY JENNIFER JACOBS

The air is buzzing with electricity. There is an injection of new blood in the country, freshly returned from some of the top schools abroad and intent on making a difference. They wear their education easily, like an old garment, and are busy figuring out how to be the change they want to see in Malaysia.

Take Joyce Tagal, a senior analyst with the Education NKRA (National Key Resource Area) in the Performance Management and Delivery Unit (Pemandu). She majored in political science at Yale and always knew that she wanted to come back and go into government.

Why? "There are very few sectors in the country which affect people in general that are not in some way decided by the government. I think of it in terms of impact. How many people are you impacting at any given time? How many people's lives are you touching? How many people are you trying to get from Point A to Point B?"

Joyce, 26, grew up in Miri, Sarawak. Her father was the deputy minister of infrastructure in Sarawak for a long time. Her mother quit her job as a teacher to take care of her five children.

Joyce's sister Jacintha, 24, majored in East Asian studies at Harvard and is now a fellow at Teach for Malaysia. She teaches undocumented children and those from the squatters at a school in Gombak. The children are, to put it bluntly, poor. Living next door to the opulence of Mont Kiara, they get to see how the other half lives. But many of them have never ridden in a car or tasted a bowl of pasta.

Jacintha gets to see first-hand how being poor affects a child. And although it was initially a culture shock for someone from her comfortable middle-class, all-girls-school background to have rowdy, disruptive boys in class, she feels a sense of fulfilment when the children understand what she is trying to teach, when they open up to her and when there is a change in their attitude towards learning.

"I teach Forms 1 and 2 mathematics and I do everything a normal teacher does. I teach, write exam papers and am involved in at least three extra co-curricular activities. Perhaps the difference is in the more detailed lesson plans and the fact that we are very closely mentored," says Jacintha.

Joyce cuts in: "One of the best things about Teach for Malaysia is that you get people like my sister, who traditionally would not have considered becoming a teacher in a Malaysian public school, for two years. After that, they can either become a teacher in a public school or take that experience and go and do something even more awesome with it."

The Tagal sisters are ideal driven. When they were at university, there was the usual troop of corporations presenting at job fairs that were trying to recruit the graduates of these prestigious universities but nothing really spoke to them.

"But when I heard [Datuk Seri] Idris [Jala] speak on stage at the Khazanah Megatrends Forum, I knew that was what I wanted to do," Joyce says.

She had been covering the forum for Karim Raslan, a temporary job while waiting for the January intake for the civil service. "I got to meet Idris and I applied for Pemandu when I heard that education was one of the things that they wanted to do."

"It was the same for me," Jacintha chimes in. "In my senior year, I met the Teach for Malaysia staff three or four months before I was about to graduate. I really enjoyed talking to them and was taken with their vision. I felt it was a worthwhile cause and it was the only thing I applied for. And I got accepted. Otherwise, I would have just come back to Malaysia to look for a job. I didn't know what because I didn't have a specific career path mapped out."

Joyce thinks there is a growing interest among the young people to be part of the government. "They are beginning to realise that you can't just criticise from the outside. You have to change things from within the system and if you don't have the

right people, that's very difficult."

She sees Pemandu as a great organisation to effect that change. "We have a lot of bright young people in Pemandu who are all very passionate about making a difference. My boss was in corporate finance in RHB and she left her job to come work in education.

"I feel very lucky because I work with people who genuinely want to make a difference and change the country in a realistic, non-naïve way. And I think that's very, very powerful," she concludes.

Jacintha agrees: "Some of our friends leave Malaysia for places like London or New York because they say there are more opportunities there. I think it's how you define 'opportunities'. In Malaysia, there are a lot more opportunities to create, innovate, expand, explore ideas and be really adventurous. In the US, everything you try to do has already been done before."

Their friend, Khazanah Nasional's research and investment strategy associate Nicholas Khaw has roughly the same mindset. And he believes he can use his great love of solving math problems to save the world. Or at least, Malaysia.

"When you prove a mathematical statement in the fewest steps possible, complete the argument and fix all the holes, it's one of the most elegant things out there. And when you reach the conclusion and put QED at the end, there is nothing more satisfying," says Khaw with a smile.

He enjoys the process but his eye is on how to transfer it to other phases of life.

From left: Ong Shien Jin, Joyce Tagal, Jacintha Tagal, Chia Lik Khai, Nicholas Khaw and Joshua Chu



merdeka focus

"When you present an argument, you're always thinking about whether you have covered what you need to and whether there is potential for a counter-argument. It's just a method of thinking."

He studied economics at Harvard and minored in maths. Sometime in his second year, he took some classes in development economics, especially in the public sector. "I figured that if I wanted to work in the public sector, it should be my own public sector."

Khaw agrees that the public sector is problematic, but this thought fills him with the same excitement that a particularly knotty calculus problem would. "And here, if you can find a solution, it is not only intellectually rewarding, but you're also helping bring about development for people, which is even better."

After he graduated, the Jabatan Perkhidmatan Awam scholar came back and reported to the government. He was placed in the Economic Planning Unit (EPU) and then transferred to Khazanah. "I love my work. I'm an economist at the research division at Khazanah and I'm part of the team that looks at the macro conditions of countries. Khazanah has an interest in. I also look at economic corridors in Malaysia to see how we can build value in those economic sectors."

And, to his immense delight, he also does development economics. "We work with other government stakeholders like the Ministry of Finance, EPU and TalentCorp to see what policies Malaysia can undertake to make the country, or at least our regulatory system, better."

He has a refreshing can-do attitude and is surprisingly still neither jaded nor cynical about the system. "There is this movie called *Devil* by M Night Shyamalan. At the end of the movie, the protagonist says, 'The good thing about knowing that the devil exists is knowing that God must also exist'. So it's the same thing. If you know there are problems, you know there must be solutions. And if there's a solution, you want to be a part of it."

Going forward, Khaw wants to be involved in public policy whether as a researcher or policy maker. "I love this country and I genuinely want to be a part of the thing that drives it forward whether it's through economics or thought leadership."

So does Ong Shien Jin, 30, who returned to Malaysia to set up a school for talented youngsters to prepare them for, and get them into, top universities overseas. Talent Academy will open its doors to students from Form 4 to Pre-University in the Klang Valley in January next year. It aims to help these students develop their full potential and bridge the gap between the current education system and what top universities are looking for.

Not that he had any trouble getting into top universities. Ong did his bachelor's degree at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), his master's at Princeton and his doctorate at Harvard. His background spans finance, computer science and mathematics. He joined Goldman Sachs in 2007 and before he resigned last year, he was the vice-president of the quantitative strategist group.

With such a brilliant career mapped out before him, why did he come back? "Ever since I stepped foot in MIT as an undergraduate, I realised that I wanted to bring my MIT experience to talented students in Malaysia. This is my passion and now feels like the right time to start."

Classes will be on weekends. Admissions will be very selective beginning October this year with only 20 to 30 students to begin with. And it will not only emphasise the academic side of it. What Malaysia needs is leaders, so character development and leadership skills will form a large part of the curriculum.

Ong thinks Malaysia needs more private sector initiatives. "I admire the Teach for Malaysia project for raising the profile of teachers and getting young graduates interested in teaching. Empowerment is key. On the education front, parents, students and teachers should be more empowered to make choices about their education."

"I believe the recent debate on PPSMI (learning maths and science in English or Malay)

should be a non-debate. Instead, it should be decided by the individual schools," Ong observes.

Similarly, on the work front, "I was a manager at Goldman Sachs and I learned the hard way that managers who empower employees get better results. In general, talent flourishes under a culture of empowerment and love. It is ineffective to use a bond to tie it down."

For Chia Lik Khai, 34, group corporate development director of QL Resources Bhd, returning to Malaysia was a matter of course. He had always intended to and then there was the pull of his family, which owns the agriculture and fisheries-based company.

"My return was well-timed. If I had come back right after graduation, I would have not learned about various systems and how organisations are structured or get exposed to how US corporations do things. If I'd come back later, there would no longer be an opportunity for me," he says.

He did his undergraduate and master's in engineering at the University of Michigan and his MBA at Wharton. His first job was as a member of the technical staff in Hewlett Packard (now Agilent). And his last, before returning to Malaysia, was as a consultant for McKinsey. His first love is technology and he wondered what value he could add to a company that was primarily agricultural.

The answer? Green technology.

Chia says the assumption is that biofuel uses by-products from agriculture as those materials are abundant. Through the use of better technology, these by-products could yield even more energy. "Malaysia is very fortunate to be in the tropics as we have a lot of raw material for agri-biomass."

He was not looking to do things the old way, which was to burn the waste material or throw them together on a field to rot and produce gas. "You need to extract or create more value from those low value products. And that is where new technology, a new business model, in fact, a new way of doing things, comes in. And of course, new talent. In a way, it's an opportunity to create something new."

In the US, Chia was exposed

to the state-of-the-art. In Malaysia, his family was into agriculture. It was a marriage made in heaven. "The sciences behind these things are well-documented, but not the commercial aspect. I need to work internally with our engineers to design and implement systems that can operate commercially and enable us to achieve both operational and financial targets."

Joshua Chu didn't have a job waiting for him when he came back. The director for vaccine markets of the Clinton Health Access Initiative convinced his superiors to set up an office in Malaysia (it's still in the process of application) because he missed home so much and wanted to come back after 19 years.

It was a long shot. The Clinton Foundation (at least, the vaccines portion of it) looks at countries with a gross national income of below US\$1,250 per capita. Malaysia's is somewhere around US\$10,000 per capita. "So my decision to be here is a purely personal one and the foundation was kind enough to help me set up a base here."

Like the others, Chu, 34, is a brain. He went to the Wharton Business School at the University of Pennsylvania and then Cambridge. He studied business and international development. He's traded in jet fuel and Brent crude oil and managed investments.

Today, at the Clinton Foundation, he looks at the affordability of vaccine pricing and sustainability of vaccine supply to the lowest income countries to ensure that the 54 lowest income countries get the right vaccines at the right price and at the right time. It's extremely complicated and Chu takes about 30 minutes to explain what it is that he does.

He is required to look at poverty and development from a business and private sector lens. He has to negotiate the delicate and labyrinth economics of the pharmaceuticals industry to come up with solutions acceptable to all. To do this, he has to fly all over the world, even though he has lately developed a fear of flying.

It's not a job for either the faint of heart or head. But since he's been back, he's found that there are more kindred spirits here than he thought. "In the past few months, I've met a lot of people who left careers in things like investment banking to become social entrepreneurs. We naturally gravitate together and share ideas. I can't give a value to the power of sharing ideas to spur each other, to encourage each other and to do what we do."

Chu hasn't figured out how he's going to contribute to development in Malaysia but he does know that what's most important is the audacity of hope. "Not so long ago, I was in Myanmar and I could see that the people now have hope for the future. To me, if people have hope for the future and want to see the country do well, it's very encouraging, and in Malaysia, I hope to contribute in a small way to that."

As do the Tagal sisters, Khaw, Ong, Chia and many, many other young Malaysians. They have started to value their work based on its impact and ability to serve, rather than simple monetary returns. A new optimism has taken over and a change is sweeping over the land. The brave new world has already arrived. **E**



merdeka focus

When Khazanah came a-calling

BY JENNIFER JACOBS

When government investment agency Khazanah Nasional Bhd came knocking on Afzal Abdul Rahim's door way back in 2008, telecommunications company TIME dotCom was in a sorry state. The company had been languishing for some 13 years and was bleeding close to RM1 billion. It had gone through all of 13 CEOs, none of whom seemed to have made a dent in its massive losses or moved it forward.

Khazanah decided that TIME dotCom would be better off in the hands of an entrepreneur.

"They came one day and said they'd heard about the stuff that I'd done and they'd liked it and would I like to put in a bid. I said, sure." Afzal had been running Applied Information Management Services Sdn Bhd (AIMS), which had grown into the largest data centre provider in Southeast Asia. Khazanah felt that the larger-than-life, outspoken and no-nonsense Afzal had the right amount of chutzpah to take the company forward.

So, the government agency announced an open bidding process and different parties interested in rescuing the GLC put in their proposals.

Afzal put in a bid too and won. And his deal with Khazanah was unique. "I had a very fast-moving business called Global Transit and they wanted shares in that business. So they flipped the shares they had in TIME dot Com and we flipped our shares in Global Transit and through this combined entity, we now owned shares in TIME dotCom. And as we hit turnaround targets, they would basically hand over more control to me. So I could make decisions that others could not make."

Afzal emerged as the controlling shareholder with a roughly 36% stake in the company. With this kind of clout, he could make the kind of changes that the other CEOs could not. Like getting rid of the top three layers of people. "I told the staff that the only way things were going to work was if we blew everything up and started all over again."

He reworked the business model, renegotiated the deals and the company went from a loss of nearly RM1 billion in 2008 to a pre-tax profit of RM33 million the following year. This tripled to RM119 million in 2011.

But that is not what Afzal wants to talk about. The turnaround story is old and, frankly, a little passé to him. It took an entrepreneur to turn around a government-linked company. And he would rather talk about what it takes to make one.

"You need to go through a near-death experience where you don't know how to pay salaries, you have to pump in your own money, where you don't even have enough money to buy milk for the children, where you have to scrape your nose against the road. Then, you figure out how to make things work," he says.

Either make things work or crash and burn spectacularly. But the thing about entrepreneurs is that they are able to make the dumbest mistakes in the book, pick themselves up, dust themselves off and start again.

"The basis of being an entrepreneur is that you have to have things at your fingertips, build your commercial acumen, hone your risk appetite, figure out what's right or wrong, make 'blink' decisions," says Afzal.

Which is why he is not very impressed

by the new generation. "Call me old-fashioned but I think you have to struggle to get there. I spend time with the younger entrepreneurs who are basically starting up and I think this country has got too many grant programmes, loan programmes; they make it too easy. If you're going to be an entrepreneur, you need to graduate from the school of hard knocks."

Why was he picked for the job? "We knew what we were doing with AIMS. We were cocky and conceited about the fact that we knew the data centre market at that point of time better than anyone else. We dreamed bigger than anyone else, but always had our feet on the ground. We did stupid things to grow the business that put it at tremendous risk. But we were struggling entrepreneurs among many other struggling entrepreneurs in the country that didn't walk up to something or get handed something because we knew somebody."

His background is interesting. Graduating from the University of Sussex in 1997, the year of the Asian financial crisis, he got — in his own words — kicked out at the tender age of 19 to make his way in the world. He got a job at Proton.

"I opened my mouth there, had a Jerry Maguire moment, criticised the management and how they were doing things," he says.

The result? He was sent out of the way to Norwich to be part of the initial phase of the turnaround team for Lotus Engineering. After three years, he had enough of it and decided to come home. "I jumped with both feet into the dotcom bubble."

He got to know of AIMS, which at the time was an ailing IT company, pulled a team together around it to turn it around and managed to turn it into Southeast Asia's No 1 data centre over the next five to six years. "In 2005, we bought it out, grew it even larger, established network businesses, in particular one called Global Transit, our international bandwidth trading company, and invested with Google and four others to build a submarine cable across the Pacific."

It was not all plain sailing. Afzal says he made some of what he calls "the stupidest mistakes ever", but he enjoyed himself tremendously even so. And in 2008, Khazanah came a-calling.

Afzal does not think Corporate Malaysia is doing too badly. There was what he calls a "step change" in 2004, when one of the local dailies ran a front-page story justifying the appointment of Datuk Seri Abdul Wahid Omar to the helm of Telekom Malaysia Bhd.

"The entire article was about how the top jobs in the GLCs would now be given to people who were most qualified rather than be rewards for civil servants. And the poetic part is that the government had to justify putting the best brains into the best business," he snorts.

But he considers it a watershed moment. Because after that, there was a distinct change in the way these jobs were apportioned. "I think that broke the glass ceiling for unaffiliated talent to be brought into the system."

Next thing you know, Khazanah was populating itself afresh and trying to figure out how to govern boards and get them to hire the best people. Suddenly, there were senior managers who were actually qualified; a quiet revolution that slowly built itself up to a critical mass.

"And, of course, along the way there were going to be success stories and failures, but that's normal," Afzal points out.

Talent is an issue that gets him buzzed.



You need to go through a near-death experience where you don't know how to pay salaries, you have to pump in your own money, where you don't even have enough money to buy milk for the children, where you have to scrape your nose against the road. Then, you figure out how to make things work. — Afzal

And personally, he likes what TalentCorp is all about. "I think Jo[han] Merican [TalentCorp CEO] is doing a great job. In the past, I've had reservations about these single-purpose agencies, but I think TalentCorp is seriously, extremely needed. And it coincides with what's happening in Europe where more and more people are coming home."

However, let us be realistic about it. Not everyone is going to come home because we give them a bunch of incentives. "We've had hundreds of thousands, maybe even a

million, students who have gone abroad. Did we expect them all to come back because of nasi lemak and teh tarik?

"I mean, that's the biggest pull, isn't it? Food," he pauses, "and family."

The majority of Malaysians want to come home. There is an attachment. But Afzal says some have just outgrown the Malaysian lifestyle. "I've got a brilliant friend who is now working at the city council in Auckland. And I'm like, what? And she says, 'Afzal, every day, I wake up at 8am, leave for work at 9am, drop my son off at the babysitter at 9.15am and get to work at 9.20am. I'm home by 5pm and I don't work weekends'."

"And for most of us, that would be like, huh? You can live like that? That's why I say some of them have outgrown the Malaysian lifestyle. And you can't begrudge them that."

But for Afzal, coming back to Malaysia in 2000 turned out to be the best thing he could have done for his career, making him into the entrepreneur he is today. **E**

'Maximising your lifetime value'

Groupon operations director for Southeast Asia Yeoh Chen Chow considers himself lucky. From a little Chinese school in Nibong Tebal, he made it to Cornell, one of the top Ivy League universities. Through US Apps, he now helps other students by sharing with them what it takes to get into a top university.

BY JENNIFER JACOBS

When Yeoh Chen Chow was at school, it was a social faux pas to say anything in English. You studied the language to pass exams. But if you were to display any linguistic prowess in the playing fields or at recess, your mates would label you a show-off and shun you accordingly. Thus, he finished his Form 5 at a government Chinese school without actually knowing how to speak the language or what to do with the rest of his life.

But Yeoh, who is now Groupon's operations director for Southeast Asia, is nothing if not bright. He saw an advertisement in a newspaper, applied for and won an Asean scholarship, landed in Singapore — where he walked around with a dictionary to help him understand what everyone was saying — and ultimately won a Jabatan Perkhidmatan Awam scholarship and got accepted into Cornell, one of the top Ivy League universities in the US, to do engineering.

However, he still couldn't speak English and found himself among the bottom eight in his batch, language wise. The university sent him for a remedial course. He quietly settled down to learn and practise the language, working up the courage to ask at least one question per lecture and even volunteering to MC an event, where he repeated his only learned sentence, "Let's give him/her a round of applause ...", so often that it became a standing joke.

For the first two years, he felt very isolated at university. But as his language skills improved, his confidence grew. When he returned to Malaysia, he thought about how his life had been a series of happy accidents. From the little Chinese school in Nibong Tebal, he had made it to one of the top universities in the world. How had he been so lucky? And how could he help others do the same?

He and a few other US graduates from top universities decided to set up US Apps (Applications), an education fair with a difference. "When I came back in 2005, not many Malaysians knew how to apply to US universities. So we gathered a few young Malaysians and organised a US education fair," he says.

Other education fairs are run commercially. At US Apps, instead of admissions officers, the booths were manned by university alumnus. They shared their experiences without trying to sell the university. And therein lay the difference.

After doing that for three years, they realised that an education fair was perhaps not the best format — students sauntered in for a 10-minute chat and asked only basic questions. It would take something deeper and more meaningful to get the impact they wanted, which is to help students get into the university of their choice.

From 2009 onwards, US Apps changed from an "education fair" to a two-day workshop. "Every year, 200 to 300 students would sign up and they would be guided by maybe 40 to 50 people who had successfully got in. The goal every year is for people in the audience to get into the universities and then stand up the following year to share their experiences. This creates a cycle of continuity. And year after year, the students build on their knowledge of what it takes to get into the top US universities," Yeoh says.

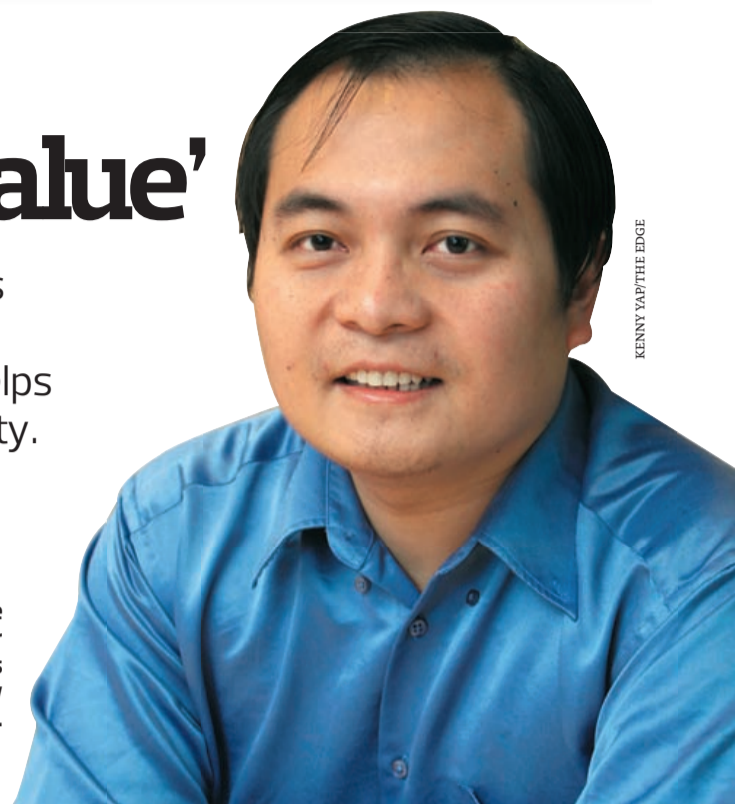
Not that he's partial to US universities. It's just that Malaysian students have traditionally favoured British or Australian universities.

US Apps just wanted to let them know that there is another choice. With this in mind, they started another workshop for parents and counsellors.

"A lot of times, when the students come to our workshops, they go back and their parents or counsellors tell them something else. The counsellors over here are more familiar with universities in the UK and perhaps a few in Singapore.

CONTINUES ON PAGE 15

Yeoh: Malaysian students have traditionally favoured British or Australian universities. US Apps just wanted to let them know that there is another choice.



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An attractive place for expatriates

Malaysia is not yet a destination of choice for talent globally, but many expatriates who are here have found compelling reasons to stay

BY JENNIFER JACOBS

When the government announced a 10-year resident pass for highly skilled expatriates two years ago, many wondered what the take-up rate would be. After all, there was a war for talent going on.

Why, without the lure of family — the strongest pull factor for Malaysians living abroad — would they choose to live in Malaysia?

There is a variety of reasons, apparently. Take Dr David Lacey, head of research and development at European optometric firm Osram. He arrived here quite by accident, on a business trip to Osram's office in Penang. Before that, Malaysia hadn't figured in his "places to live". After that, it quickly did.

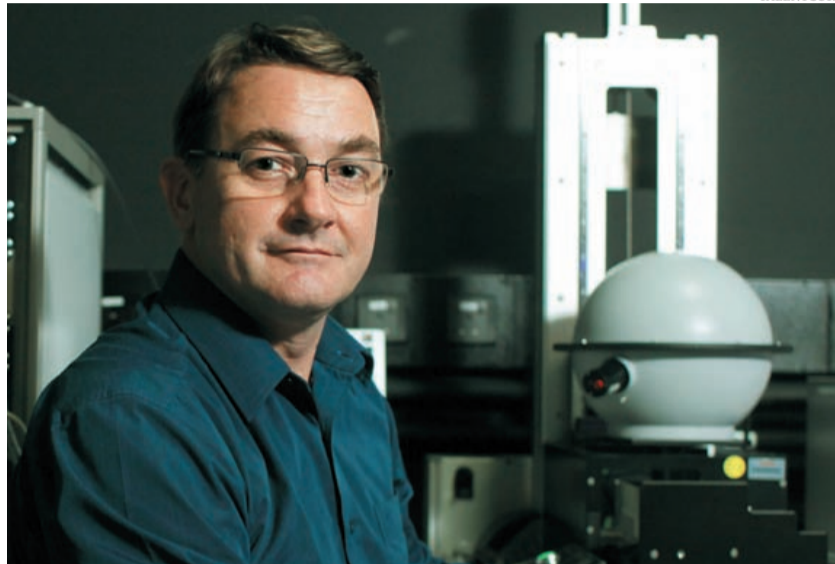
What's most interesting is that the English engineer, arriving straight from Silicon Valley — deemed the mecca of techies all over the world — found Penang preferable. "I was pleasantly surprised when I got here. It's not that I had low expectations. It's that I had no expectations. Malaysia wasn't even on the radar."

So he decided to stay and went from a role supporting manufacturing for a new technology to helping set up the company's R&D division in Malaysia. "We're [Osram] like the others. We went from straight manufacturing to design, develop and manufacture. And the reason for that is the capability of Malaysian engineers allowed it."

But isn't there a shortage of engineers? Yes, but he chooses to see the glass as half full. "Demand exceeds supply. So what you see is salaries creeping up because there's such demand, a very good situation from a Malaysian point of view."

"And the shortage is pushing companies to invest heavily in their own people because they can't just buy skills straight off the market. You see universities adapting their courses to the needs of the industry. It's slow but it's happening," Lacey says.

He adds that many electronics companies are choosing Penang over China because of the intellectual property (IP) issue. "Malaysia offers a stable workforce backed with



TALENTCORP

One of the biggest issues Malaysia faces is that many who studied abroad don't return because they don't think there is valuable work for them here. But this is changing.
— Lacey

some reasonable IP laws. So in the event that a staff was to quit and — in a classic Chinese style — start up his or her own business, in Malaysia you could take action and protect your IP, whereas in China you couldn't."

Lacey says one of the biggest issues Malaysia faces is that many of the Malaysians who studied abroad don't return because they don't think there is valuable work for them here. "That may have been true once but I think it's changing."

And of course, Malaysia does require a certain level of foreign talent. "That's a simple international competition and Malaysia has to at least make itself as competitive as the countries around it. There are all these issues around work permits and visas where I think TalentCorp has done a significant amount to clarify situations, especially in terms of support for the spouse. If someone has a particular skill, they can apply for the resident's pass in their own right and they don't need a company supporting them."

But why Penang over Silicon Valley? "Silicon Valley is overrated. And everything is so intense. Even when you're off from work there is the same crowd and everything is just intense. Over here, you can get off work and go and sit at a coffee shop until midnight. It's more laidback."

Part of it has to do with being British. Penang struck him as less of a culture shock. At least here, people drive on the correct side of the road. He feels more at home here than he did for the past two years in the US.

Also, the cost of living is lower. "So your money goes further and your standard of living can be quite high. If you're from the US or Europe looking to come to Asia, Malaysia is quite a reasonable choice. Maybe the issue is that people don't realise that," Lacey points out.

Another thing is that because the world has "shrunk", he doesn't feel cut off from his home country. "Even as recently as 15 to 20 years ago, if you travelled to a foreign country, you were quite disconnected from your local country. These days, I can still read news from the UK. I can stay in touch with anyone on the planet."

Lacey thinks Malaysia needs to do more to "get on the radar". "Like I mentioned, I never thought of visiting Malaysia till it came up for work. The idea that there might be a technical or business career opportunity here had not crossed my mind. I think at that level, there's an opportunity for Malaysia to highlight some of the activities here."

As he loves living here, he is keen to promote it to other companies. "When I have customers or suppliers visiting, I highlight that Malaysia offers good support and an opportunity to set up a subsidiary company. I highlight Malaysia as a place to do business in the area of technology I work in. And at a different level for my particular technological interests, I highlight to people in the industry that they might consider Malaysia instead of China."

Basically, he thinks that some of the measures to attract foreign talent are successful. Obviously, you're not going to get everybody. But Malaysia is attractive enough for you to get some. "You invite foreigners to your country and some of them are going to want to stay." **E**

'It feels like home'

For Michael Chen, president of Nu Skin Singapore, Malaysia and Brunei, Malaysia feels like home. Which is why the Taiwanese-born pharmacist by training — who is responsible for turning around Nu Skin's operations and making these three countries the most profitable in the direct selling company's global business — got excited when he attended a meeting organised by TalentCorp and co-sponsored by the American Chamber of Commerce that talked about the 10-year resident's pass.

Why? He loves, among other things, the weather; the people for their warmth, hospitality and language adaptability; and the fact that there are still many business opportunities here.

"The weather here is so nice. You probably feel it is hot but for me it isn't. You want to talk hot, look at the weather in Beijing and Taipei at the moment, where temperatures have climbed to about 38°C. Here, it's 32°C or maybe 35°C. And you don't have winter, which is a major plus point. People up north have to burn fuel to survive. People here don't have to. So much better for the environment," he smiles whimsically.

Chen also finds the people here warm and friendly. "I find the people here as warm as the ones in my own country. Taiwanese

know how to make you feel welcome. I feel the same way in Malaysia. I've travelled to other countries in the region ... but I feel the taste, the smell over here is similar to my home country."

And he admires our facility for language. "The people here are so versatile when it comes to language. They speak Mandarin to me, and then they turn around and speak English to an English person. And my dialect is Hokkien and they can also speak my dialect," he adds, happily.

No wonder he feels at home. So much so that he has purchased a house in Kota Kemuning. And when he asked his wife if she would prefer to return to Taiwan where both their children are at university or stay here with him, she chose to stay.

Chen also thinks there is plenty of opportunity in Malaysia for the enterprising businessman. "There are a lot of things that still remain undone. I look at them and think, why hasn't someone here thought of doing such and such?"

It may be that coming from a different country, and having lived in a few places around the world, he brings a fresh set of eyes to the problems. None of which he thinks is insurmountable. "Maybe in the future, if I retire, I can start my own business here. Or my wife can. When you go to

Taiwan, things are very efficient. We can take some of the solutions there and apply them here."

For instance, he talks about how one of the mayors dealt with a traffic problem in Taipei. "The traffic was so bad during rush hour and the motorists complained about it and the taxis complained about how there was no business during those hours. So the mayor, tired of hearing all their complaints, hired maybe 1,000 of the best taxi drivers to act as road monitors. See, the reason traffic was so bad was that people misbehaved on the road, cutting in where they shouldn't, making three lanes where there should have been two.

"So the taxi drivers were given an assignment each and told to look after different junctions and intersections. They were paid for their efforts and were also given due recognition, a symbol of honour, for being a good taxi driver. Soon, the traffic flow improved to such an extent that they had business during rush hour again. Why can't we do something like that in Malaysia?" he wants to know.

— By Jennifer Jacobs **E**

Chen thinks there is plenty of opportunity in Malaysia for the enterprising businessman



The lady with the lamp

BY JENNIFER JACOBS

Professor Dr Teo Soo Hwang was just 30 when she received a call from the then Sime Darby Bhd CEO Tunku Ahmad Yahya to come back and set up a cancer research institute in Malaysia. At the time, she was quietly working as a Royal Society research fellow at the University of Cambridge, a job she got because she had consistently topped her class in the university during her undergraduate days.

Teo had shown considerable promise in her chosen field, having won the Dorothy Hodgkin fellowship, one of the most prestigious research fellowships in the UK. It was named after one of the first female Nobel laureates in the UK and was intended for young talented scientists. Every year, the Royal Society chose 20 out of 300 young scientists. It was an honour, indeed.

"Tunku rang to tell me that he'd been approached by the University of Bristol which was raising funds for cancer research. He was interested in funding such a cancer research but he felt that it should be led by a Malaysian," she says.

Being a Yayasan Sime Darby scholar, Teo had met Sime Darby's CEO before. So she agreed. And over the next two years, she "... cajoled, bullied, begged and persuaded various individuals to support this crazy initiative".

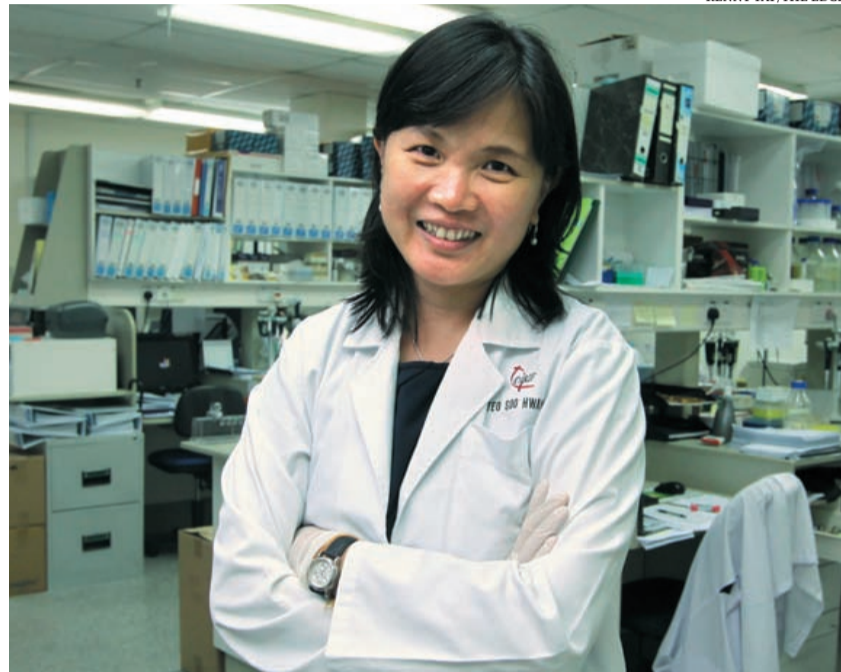
Money was an issue. "The American Cancer Society raises US\$1 billion a year. Cancer Research UK raises roughly £400 million a year, or to put it in perspective, approximately £1 million a day for cancer research. When we started Carif [Cancer Research Initiatives Foundation], we had RM2 million in the bank and a pledge of RM5 million over the next five years -- peanuts compared with what is really needed to do cancer research."

But she came back anyway. Why? "This is home. It's very straightforward. And Cambridge is a place with so much talent. If one of me steps away, there will be a hundred others to take that position. So my life means more here than it ever will be in Cambridge."

One major frustration is that very few people here seem to understand what it is she actually does. "I get asked all the time when I am going to cure cancer and I think there are unrealistic expectations of what is to be achieved. Even in the best possible settings where the labs are properly funded and everyone is doing their best, people will not be able to cure cancer in 10 years or even 20 years. What they will do is add to a body of knowledge that will help us get one step closer to finding a cure."

So what is it that Carif actually does? "Essentially, we're a non-profit organisation and we spend 90% to 95% of our income on cancer research. We focus on three areas in which we think we can make an impact."

Firstly, it looks at specific cancers, namely cancer



KENNY YAP/THE EDGE

I think it's important to set up a system that works and then to stick with it — Teo

of the oral cavity and cancer at the back of the nose. It concentrates on these cancers because some 80% to 90% of the sufferers are Asians. Half the patients die within two years. "So we're looking to develop new therapies for these oral and nasopharyngeal cancers. It's a niche area," Teo explains.

Carif is also trying to understand how Asian genes and lifestyles influence their risk to disease, their response to treatment and whether they require different dosage from Caucasians or Africans. "Asians make up 60% of the seven billion people in this world and our genes are different from the Caucasians and the Africans. Genes influence our risk to disease and influence how we respond to particular drugs in terms of treatment but, at the moment, Asian genetic studies constitute less than 5% of worldwide studies," Teo says.

The third area is looking at Malaysian biodiversity. "We have rainforests until kingdom come but we don't really have the expertise to tap a good anti-cancer compound. The old age anti-cancer compounds kill the cells because they are growing and don't target any aspect of the cancer itself. We're developing ways in which we can find a natural product that hits the specific gene rather than a product that kills all dividing cells."

And what does she hope to achieve for Carif? "If in my lifetime I can do something that would improve the livelihood of the people who suffer, it would be an honour and a privilege."

Ironically, Teo says Carif receives more recognition for its work internationally than it does in this country. "We have collaborators all over the world

who recognise and appreciate the work we do."

Carif has managed to attract some of the best minds in Malaysia. Of the four people in its management team, three were trained in Cambridge while the other was a top student and multiple award winner who graduated from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Carif has seven PhDs holders, 12 master's degree holders and a number of others working towards their post graduate degrees.

Sime Darby shoulders about half of Carif's operating expenses while Petronas and Albukhary Foundation contribute towards it. It has a number of small corporate donors and some 10% comes from charitable sources.

Another 30% to 35% comes from research grants from the Ministry of Science, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Higher Education. Although grateful for the presence of these grants, Teo thinks things can be done more efficiently.

"I think it's important to set up a system that works and then to stick with it. I've been on both ends of grant committees. I've been a scientist and a recipient of a research grant. In Cancer Research UK, I was working in the strategy division reporting to the chief executive of the largest cancer charity in the world and in doing that, I was overseeing how we send money, where we spend it and so on. But even after I left, the system would stay the same. Here, we are sometimes not steadfast in settling on something and making sure that works. As a consequence, we're constantly chasing things," she says.

But after 17 years abroad, Teo chose to come back and for the large part, she's been happy. "Without a doubt, moving back was an excellent choice for my children because now they can grow up with the richness of an extended family. I'm very happy to have worked with Carif because I've met a lot of sincere people. I have a fantastic board of trustees, in particular Tunku Ahmad and Toh Puan Aishah Ong. I think in terms of integrity and honour, I couldn't have had better bosses than these two. And they have made it very rewarding for me to work here."

Teo has also encountered appreciation among her colleagues. "We've collaborated very widely and it's been rewarding to be appreciated by individual doctors, donors and scientists who know what we do and appreciate the talent that we have. Also by the students who get to learn from us. But perhaps more importantly, individual patients who know that we're trying our best and perhaps, offer new hope that things will change in terms of cancer."

So although there may be the occasional bureaucratic frustration, she has plenty of motivation. "There are a lot of people around me here in Malaysia who inspire me and who have made life here and the job that I do really rewarding. That's why I'm here and that's why I stay." **E**



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Vital to provide cutting-edge jobs

Many Malaysian companies are beginning to pay more attention to building and retaining talent. But it is the multinational corporations that appear to be ahead of the curve. Dell and Shell are among MNCs that have little problem with their talent pipeline. How did they do it?

BY ANNA TAING

ain Lo, Shell Malaysia Ltd's new chairman, is still living out of a suitcase, having returned to Malaysia to take over the post only on July 1. He, however, has set himself a target — find a house by September.

In the last two months that he has been back, Lo spent time reacquainting himself with the staff and external stakeholders, meeting up with old friends and rediscovering the hospitality of Malaysians. "This is something I missed living abroad and, of course, discovering the food again."

As chairman, Lo believes he has the opportunity not only to make an impact on Shell's business and growth in the country, but also develop Malaysia's talent pool.

"The attraction for me is twofold: For me to have an impact on Shell's business, help it grow in Malaysia, and about developing Malaysian talent. I was fortunate in my career to have had mentors along the way to help me and I would like to do the same for the young upcoming talent that we have.

"I have been around and I must say there is nothing to stop us Malaysians from being as successful as our counterparts in other parts of the world, in the UK or the US. It has to do with opportunity and guidance along the way."

As country chair, Lo has oversight over the entire talent pipeline of the company.

Shell Malaysia carries out human resource development programmes to ensure that it has a sufficient supply of talent all the time. At the same time, a policy is to put locals in senior jobs where it can and this is done with the help of succession planning, which means grooming talent from the early days.

Lo, for example, is a product of Shell's succession planning. He graduated as a structural engineer in the late 1980s, worked awhile for his father in Kuching, found it was not something that excited him and in 1990, decided to join Shell in Miri. He has not left since.

His first job was building offshore platforms. "It was great fun ... and you feel a great sense of achievement because when we started out, there was nothing but the sea but when we left, there was a platform standing there."

Since then, Lo has been exposed to different parts of Shell's business, from upstream operations to downstream as well as gas and power. "People being groomed will be exposed to different roles and given international exposure so that they will have the experience and understanding of the company by the time they are appointed to the top jobs."

According to him, Shell has standing agendas on talent development. Each individual has a personal development plan, a document that records the person's strengths and areas for development, the action to take within a year to help him do better in his current job or do better in the next role.

"So these are powerful documents to help ensure that the appropriate staff are given the right kind of development."

Lo is also chairman of the Asian Talent Council within Shell, which looks at the more senior staff and best potential for future leadership positions. "This is to ensure visibility of future Asian leaders in Shell and what they need in terms of coaching, mentoring, job exposure and so on to help them achieve their full potential. We do it as Asia, not country per se anymore."



SUHAIMI YUSUF/THE EDGE

"It is in our own interest to do this because we see Malaysia as one of the hub countries for Shell in Asia. [In fact], Malaysia is a microcosm of Shell — we have just about everything we have in the group: upstream, marketing, refinery, gas plants, retail, services and so on ... activities across the whole spectrum of operations that Shell is involved in and not every country we are in is like that," says Lo.

Indeed, Malaysia is a supplier of talent for Shell, which explains why 300 Malaysians are working with the company overseas.

As someone who has worked abroad for 10 years, Lo says you tend to get used to a certain lifestyle and amenities. To compel people to stay, the issues are quite basic — people want a nice environment to live and grow up in and these are about security, infrastructure, education and recreation, or put simply, livability.

Of all these, Lo believes safety is a very crucial consideration. "The perception, despite the improving statistics, is still that crime is high and personal safety is an issue in this country. I think a lot of people can put up with inefficiency and bureaucracy, but they would not tolerate their spouse and children's safety being put at risk."

He says things have become better since he left the country 10 years ago but even so, there is a clear path for further improvement. "We are not there yet, but we need to be on the right trajectory, and I feel that we are on the right trajectory." **E**

Shell Malaysia also works with Talent Corp in bringing talent back to Malaysia. Shell alone has some 300 Malaysians working abroad, which Lo says is a quite a big number.

He believes that incentives to bring back and keep talent go beyond compensation. "It is to ensure that we bring people back to roles that build upon their learning and experience garnered overseas ... what people want is to have a meaningful job that can have impact, make use of the skills they have gained and where they go to the next level in their career. To me, this is quite an important element of attracting talent back."

It is also important to have enough cutting-edge and exciting jobs in the country. In this regard, Shell Malaysia has set up a deepwater technology centre in Malaysia that does all the deepwater development in Asia, including Australia, in the Shell group. "Malaysia is now the hub for deepwater development for Asia, which means that all the exciting jobs are here. So people actually get to do interesting frontier work that is challenging, technically innovative and a learning experience. In this way, employees are able to have an international career without being an expatriate."

Not surprisingly, Shell Malaysia does not have problems in attracting new talent. According to Lo, the company has 6,000 employees now. New graduates are put through a graduate development programme under which they may be given two or three assignments in different parts of the organisation before being placed in positions from which they can contribute directly.

Lo: I have been around and I must say there is nothing to stop us Malaysians from being as successful as our counterparts in other parts of the world



HARIS HASSAN/THE EDGE

Dell focuses on retaining talent

BY JENNIFER JACOBS

If companies stopped complaining about talent shortage and took proactive steps to address it, they would be much further along, according to Dell Cyberjaya managing director Pang Yee Beng.

While he commends the work that is being done by government agencies such as TalentCorp, his view is that we should stop making a lot of noise about the shortage — which gives Malaysia negative branding in terms of talent — which would impact a decision to either invest in Malaysia or increase the staff count here. Instead, we should start looking at the problem in its proper context and applying private sector solutions to it.

“My view of returnees is a little different. Malaysians abroad will return when their parents ask them to come back. I am of the opinion that you can put a lot of money into it, but you’re not going to get a lot out of it. So, why not focus on the people who are already here?” Pang questions.

This is Dell’s approach. Today, it has about 1,000 employees. But its facility can house 500 more. “At one time, we were focused on increasing the headcount. Then we realised that what is more important are the resources currently with us. If I lose a member of my staff, I stand to lose more than if I failed to hire a new person. So we switched our approach and introduced programmes to retain our people.”

First, it is important to understand the problem. A talent shortage, says Pang, is a function of a few things; cost, skills mapping and support from the government.

“If you’re willing to pay, you can get people. If you’re not, you’ll always have a talent shortage,” Pang points out wryly.

Most Malaysians who leave do so for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is money. By just crossing the Causeway, they can draw a salary of three to five times more in terms of value for doing the same job. The solution lies in creating more value for them to stay than leave, be it through monetary means or otherwise.

Second, if you are going to set up operations in Malaysia, it is best to map out the skill set first. “There are a few things in which Malaysian university students do particularly well. First, finance. You don’t find companies complaining about getting finance people. And I don’t mean simple finance but corporate finance, audit, the higher skills.

“The second

is contract management. There are many law graduates here who do not want to practise law. In Dell, we take them in as contract management people.”

The law graduates have three strengths: They study the British legal system, which funnily enough, suits US companies such as Dell to a turn. They tend to be multilingual, which means that they are even able to go through contracts written in Mandarin, call up their counterparts and negotiate the various finer points of the contract in that language. And they are much more cost-effective than law graduates either in Singapore or Hong Kong, who could probably do both.

The third skill base readily available in Malaysia is infrastructure IT. “Our people here are very good at setting up network infrastructure.”

These are the three areas Dell has identified as centres of excellence in Malaysia. “And if we want to grow, we grow these three areas.”

One of the programmes Dell runs is to help ensure that the people who join it are continuously improving, be it through taking on industry-based certification, diplomas, degrees or even MBAs. It sponsors their further development, either in part or whole. Most companies would argue that by doing so the employees are given the means to leave and command higher salaries elsewhere. But Pang finds this a most myopic way of thinking.

“I’m more afraid of our staff not improving themselves and not getting the pay or the experience they want and leaving. I’m less afraid of them getting trained, doing the MBA and then leaving because I think those who leave will be very few.”

This is because if a company invests in an employee’s further development, there is always a sense of gratitude and obligation; in short, an emotional attachment is created.

How does Dell choose

who gets trained for what? “Our scope is that whatever we do in training must be of value to the person in his job in terms of pay, experience or improving his CV. I don’t want to have a situation where someone gets a certification and doesn’t improve so that his manager or even outside people don’t see any value in it.”

When employees demonstrate special potential, and commitment, they are selected for prestigious programmes, which could mean short stints at Dell offices in other countries and being assigned a mentor or coach who is usually one of the top people in the company. “Once you go through that, it creates a deep entrenchment in the company in terms of roots.”

While it expends a lot of time, effort and money on retaining its staff, Dell is conscious of the need to grow its business. And here is where its talent acquisition team comes in. “Most HR departments are passive. They organise your salaries, your leave and when you need to hire, they call JobStreet. But we realised that we could not survive on that or else we’d always be complaining to Talent Corp about a talent shortage.”

The talent acquisition team is proactive. Every time there is a Talent Corp road show, the four members of this team are there, talking to students, telling them what a great place Dell is to work. Even when the company is not hiring, the team is out there, adding to its network and database.

“Their main function is to build a pipeline or funnel of strong candidates. So when we have a job opening, they look through their database, come up with the five best candidates and we approach them.”

It all comes down to being proactive rather than reactive about hiring. And to extending all effort to valuing and retaining the staff once you have them.

And Dell keeps investing in its employer branding, putting the word out there through various means, that it is a great place to work.

Managing diversity is another big issue. And Dell

understands diversity much more broadly than just the male/female dichotomy. There is managing across the generations — Baby Boomers, Gen X and Gen Y. There is managing across the different religions and managing people from the city as opposed to those from the villages.

Some women want to quit their jobs the moment they have children. So Dell flies in women in senior positions who have grown-up children and who, in addition to juggling motherhood and a career, are active in their churches, run marathons and even for office in their respective home states.

How does it do it? And if it can do it, why not the women here? But the single biggest thing that attracts mothers, Pang finds, is flexibility. “When they join, we give them a notebook, printer and a form so they can apply for broadband and then they can work from home. This flexibility is one of the main reasons female leaders stay at Dell. They may be able to get 20% more from working for somebody else, but the same flexibility? Many who leave come back because they cannot take having to be always at the office in the new place and having a boss constantly looking over their shoulders.”

And managing Gen Y staff is very different from managing either Gen X or the Baby Boomers. Pang says he had to retrain his managers who were likely to make remarks such as “I wouldn’t have done this as a fresh graduate” (“I’m not you, I’m me ...”) and “Why can’t you show more loyalty?” (you want loyalty, get a dog), which makes no sense to a Gen Y employee who, more often than not, insists on being treated as an individual and whose loyalty cannot be taken as a given.

With a view to creating an environment for the new generation that is conducive to working, Dell has redesigned its office to include other amenities. For instance, there is piped radio music at the reception, people playing pool and video games, drinking free coffee at one of the coffee stations and playing darts. “Our mindset is that if people are at the pool table, they are not working. But I’ve not received a single complaint from any manager about this. These people work hard, so they are taking time off to relax. “The company has also started special interest groups in photography, treasure hunting, health, movies, classical music, futsal ... the list goes on. “We give them funding to run these programmes and we create competitions for them to participate in.”

Dell cannot stop employees from leaving because competitors are willing to double their salaries, but it can create a great work environment, ensure that its employees feel like they are progressing both as people and in terms of their profession and keep its nose to the ground to sniff out the best graduates out there and play to Malaysia’s strengths in the Dell ecosystem.

Pang’s ultimate aim is to bring down the attrition rate. “We keep our attrition rate below 20% a year. For the IT industry, there is a high turnover and attrition is over 20%. If I can put my hand up and say that Dell Cyberjaya has the lowest attrition rate in the group, that would be my ultimate goal.”

Lower cost of living here

FROM PAGE 11

We need to let them know that there are other good schools out there,” Yeoh says.

The end result? Students getting into better universities. “It’s about seeing someone’s future getting brighter. It’s come to a situation where more than two-thirds of the students who got into top US universities came from our workshop,” he points out.

And the graduates from these universities flow into the system, raising the level of skills in the country. For Yeoh, the pipeline of talent it creates is important. He may have graduated from Cornell, but he never considered not returning to Malaysia and working here. And he has an answer for most of the arguments put forward for staying abroad.

You stand to earn more money? It depends on how you look at it. “If you look at purchasing power, what we get here is not that bad. But if you look at the direct income, then I guess there is a gap,” he admits, hastening to add that many companies have narrowed that gap considerably in recent years because of the war for talent.

And, having taken on a more regional role at Groupon where he is constantly dividing his time between Malaysia, Taiwan, India, Singapore and Thailand, he has a chance to make comparisons.

“There are quite a number of Malaysians in their late 20s or early 30s who own a house. In Taiwan, I noticed that a lot of managers or senior managers in their mid-30s still didn’t own their own property. And when I went to Thailand, I saw the same thing. People in their 30s are not able to afford their own places. Even Singapore, for that matter. So our situation is not a lot worse. They may earn a little more but their property prices are disproportionately higher,” he explains.

The same goes for cars. Most young Malaysians own cars. And our petrol prices are some of the cheapest in the region. “So in terms of the cost of living, I would say we are better off.”

But instead of looking at salary as a push factor, he could consider the opportunities available here as a pull factor.

“Datuk Charon [Wardini Mokhzani, CIMB deputy CEO] said a young person working in CIMB would have an opportunity to work on real big projects. If they choose to go to the likes of New York or Hong Kong, they are just one of the hundreds there and will be stuck doing smaller projects. But here, they are significant because there’s a smaller pool of talent,” Yeoh says.

It all boils down to the potential impact. “In Malaysia, young people have an opportunity to do things that can even influence the country. It is something they can set off against their reasons for leaving. And what you need to look at is not maximising your income today, but maximising your lifetime value,” he concludes.

Pang: If you're willing to pay, you can get people. If you're not, you'll always have a talent shortage.



"WE ARE COMMITTED TO BUILD TOMORROW'S TALENT TODAY."

Dato' Gan Ah Tee,
Regional Senior Partner, BDO ASEAN
and Managing Partner, BDO Malaysia
BDO partnered with TalentCorp to develop
Structured Internships for Malaysian undergraduates
in local universities. Young talent at BDO have won
global prizes in accounting.

"WE ENGAGE WITH MALAYSIANS OVERSEAS FOR THEM TO BE PART OF MALAYSIA'S TRANSFORMATION."

Nora Manaf, HR Director, Maybank
Maybank invests in talent to lead and humanise
financial services in the region. Maybank works
with TalentCorp to engage and attract back
Malaysians from abroad under the
Returning Expert Programme.



"WE ARE AN EMERGING MALAYSIAN MNC AND THE DIVERSITY OF OUR TALENT POOL REFLECTS THIS."

Sandip Das, CEO, Maxis
Maxis is a market leader collaborating
with TalentCorp on various talent
initiatives including providing
Residence Pass for its top
expatriate talent.

Talent to power Malaysia forward

As we celebrate our nation's achievements in the past 55 years, we also look forward to our country's future. As talent has been and will always be key to fulfilling Malaysia's destiny, we at TalentCorp work together with leading employers like BDO, Maybank and Maxis, among many others, to collectively build and advance Malaysia's talent pool for our nation's journey to 2020 and beyond.

Selamat Hari Merdeka