

Sunday, 13 March 2016

Making jobless grads employable

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The search is on: MyStarjob.com is but one portal that helps employers find suitable candidates.

While young job seekers struggle to find work, better outcomes await those who are willing to adapt and enhance their soft skills.

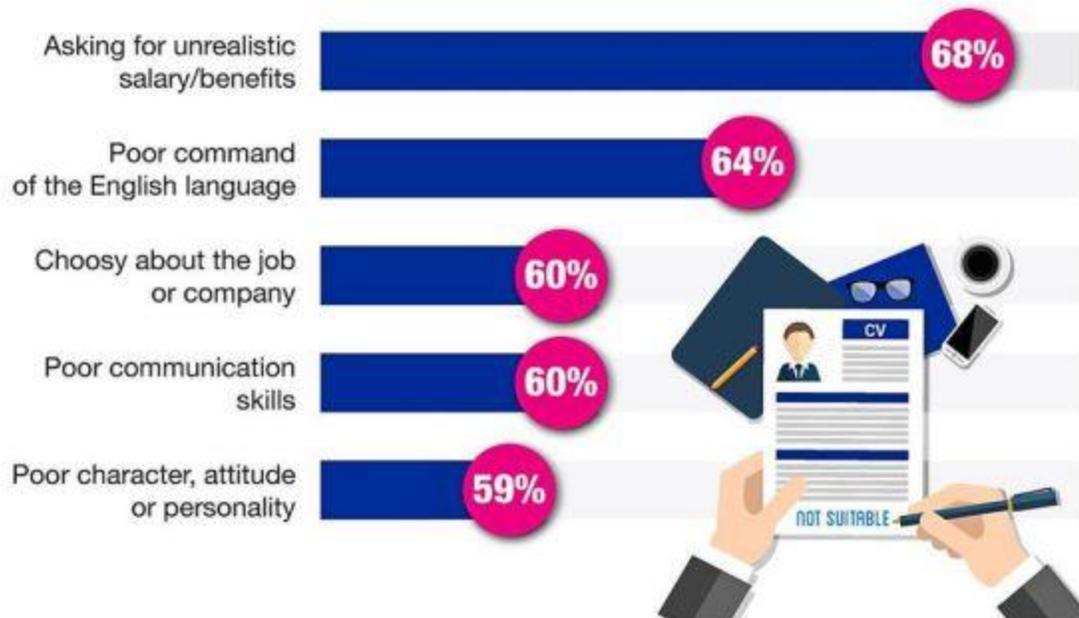
IT used to be that once you stepped out of university, there would be a job waiting for you. But these days, having a degree no longer guarantees employment.

Hiring is expected to slow down this year. Due to economic uncertainties, employers in the private sector are cutting back on hiring, and even the government has placed a freeze on employment. With the retirement age now at 60, the job pool is even more crowded.

In an article published in *The Star* last year, Human Resources Minister Datuk Seri Richard Riot Jaem told the Dewan Rakyat that between 2010 and 2013, the number of unemployed graduates had grown from 42,954 to 52,282. Now, as many as 161,000 graduates or 8.8% of those aged between 20 and 24 are unemployed in Malaysia.

Fresh Graduate Unemployment

Top 5 reasons why fresh graduates don't get hired



These figures were given by Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Abdul Wahid Omar at a Business Leaders Dialogue Session in Kuala Lumpur recently. Industry experts have weighed in various reasons graduates cannot find employment, and the main factor could be a mismatch of expectations.

A fresh graduate may want a good remuneration package with eight-hour work days on a five-day week basis. Unfortunately, such a job hardly exists.

A recent survey by JobStreet.com, an online recruitment company shows that the top reason fresh graduates don't get hired is because they ask for unrealistic salaries or benefits.

Other reasons include being overly choosy about the job or company, a poor command of English, poor communication skills, and worse, poor character or attitude.

Prior to this, JobStreet.com released another survey which revealed that 60% of fresh graduates expect a salary of RM3,500 for their first job while 30% want to be paid as high as RM6,500.

However, the average salary for fresh graduates here is only between RM2,100 and RM2,500, indicating a vast gap between expectation and reality.

Experts weigh in

JobStreet.com's country manager Chook Yuh Yng said: "Fresh graduates are unaware of salary benchmarking and uninformed about the need to do so. It's necessary for them to research this and do proper career planning to ensure a smooth transition into the employment market."



Chook: Preparation is key, so if you've been called for an interview, practise your answers in anticipation of frequently asked questions.

myStarjob.com's product manager Ahmad Yussof Aziz noted that graduates often expect attractive salaries, flexible working hours and an office located close to their home, when instead they should be looking for a good work environment that offers opportunities for career and personal advancement.

Speaking of the job market at a panel session titled Rethinking Employability – Riding the Tough Job Market in 2016, Google Malaysia, Vietnam and the Philippines' managing director Sajith Sivanandan said: "Back then, all you needed was hardware. It was very linear. Graduates just needed good results and to know about the subject of their field. It's different now. Employees are expected to know everything."

He was speaking at INTI International University and Colleges' Subang campus recently.

Another speaker, Cradle Fund CEO Nazrin Hassan, said, "The challenges facing graduates these days are very different from before. With the digital age, they don't just accept complex information given to them but have to digest and analyse it. And as the world becomes more connected, graduates have to be global employees with an international network."

At another talk held at Taylor's College Subang last month, Shell's global ethics compliance and governance manager Brian Puang said geographical boundaries have been torn down so talent is not confined to Malaysia alone.



Puang: Geographical boundaries have been torn down so there is global competition.

“If we can’t find talent in Malaysia, we can find it somewhere else so there is global competition.”

Puang added that the currency for communication in any multi-national company is English and many who come in to the company struggle with language, and with confidence. “Malaysians are pretty insulated, so we feel uncomfortable interacting with people from other cultures,” he said.

Among the other speakers at the talk were Performance Management and Delivery Unit (Pemandu) Education NKRA and NKEA director Tengku Nurul Azian Tengku Shahrman, and Taylor’s College academic director Hoe-Khoo Li Lin.

Tengku Nurul Azian said that graduates should be able to think on their feet and solve problems. “It’s a hybrid of skills that is needed for the future. Employers’ expectations have gone up. At Pemandu, we test a candidate’s ability to analyse and synthesise data in our interview process.

“First, we give them a thick case study and an hour to go through it. They have to analyse then present their understanding to us. What we’ve found is that some candidates don’t have the ability to synthesise or even comprehend data. They feel overwhelmed when they see a thick case study, but it deliberately includes curveballs and red herrings just to test how focused you are,” she said.

Moving forward

So how can graduates increase their employability? “With work experience!” was the general consensus of the experts.

Industries often look for employees who have some exposure in the job market, as that gives them hands-on experience and makes them more realistic about their job expectations. Graduates can participate in internships or attachments at various companies, and also join clubs and organisations such as the United Nations.

In fact, the survey by JobStreet.com states that the top factor that gives fresh graduates an extra advantage is if they have held a leadership position. This is followed by high academic scores, involvement in extracurricular activities and volunteer work.



Nazrin: Education providers have to prepare students to be relevant two decades from now.

Sivanandan suggested that graduates develop transferable skills which can be applied in different industries and positions to enhance their versatility.

And when it comes to interviews, preparation and the right attitude are crucial to making the cut.

“If you want a job, you have to do plenty of preparation even before applying for it. Brush up on skills that you would like to display during the interview, then go in with realistic expectations.

“Even if the salary is not what you want, get into the industry, then build up your skills and competency,” said Tengku Nurul Azian.

“Preparation is key, so if you’ve been called for an interview, rehearse your answers in anticipation of frequently asked questions,” Chook added.

Developing skills often involves various things such as keeping pace with technology – crucial in this digital age – and what one’s peers are doing, especially in the international scene.

“The challenge education providers face is to prepare these students to be relevant two decades from now. So if we foresee the world becoming more international, we have to start making the connection now – and prepare them to be global,” said Nazrin.



Tengku Nurul Azian: A hybrid of skills is needed and employers expectations have gone up.

To ensure that they produce employable graduates, various universities have stepped up their game and are relooking the way they teach. Taylor's College, for one, has steered away from the conventional, teacher-centred approach.

"These days, students download notes from our portal, then come to class for discussions. It's like doing your homework in school, and doing what used to be done in school at home. We call this the flip classroom. Students have to take charge of their learning," said Hoe-Khoo.

Also, instead of a two-hour lecture on theory, Taylor's students are often given case studies. This requires them to collate information concerning an issue and propose solutions before presenting it in class.

INTI has also developed its teaching module, collaborating with companies to conduct employer projects, real-life business projects or case studies that are conducted by its students.

Students pick up soft skills and hands-on experience that they can apply in the workplace after they graduate.

With all these efforts in place, the ball is now in the court of the young students, the future of Malaysia.

This article is taken from <http://www.thestar.com.my/news/education/2016/03/13/making-jobless-grads-employable/>