Bright, young and working for SMEs

Fresh graduates usually head for jobs in MNCs which are perceived as more prestigious and with higher pay. But there are some who prefer to work in an SME, where things are less hierarchical and there are more opportunities

By SUZIE H

A T HEALTH Management International (HMI), young graduates have a big say and that’s how SME attracts and retains them despite the stiff competition for them from the more established organisations. “We definitely don’t have as easy a job as in some of the bigger companies,” says group general manager Chin Wei Jia.

It is no wonder that young graduates tend to veer towards the more prestigious jobs with higher pay.

Still, HMI’s Management Associate (MA) programme, formalised three years ago, has been getting about 100 applications each year from young graduates.

This is because the company – which owns a healthcare educational institute in Singapore and operates two tertiary hospitals in Malaysia – zoomed in on the fact that young graduates appreciate flexibility.

It tailored a programme that allows them to rotate in different departments for over a year before finally settling into a fixed role.

“We give them the opportunity to see what they aspire and then try and match that aspiration. So it’s not a one size fits all, it’s actually very customised,” says Ms Chin.

Indeed, management associate trainee Foo Kah Mun, who graduated with an economics degree from Nanyang Technological University in July 2011, says the MA programme attracted her to take up a job in an SME.

Despite her parents’ hopes for her to join the public sector, she chose to stick to HMI and has now been with the company for about six months.

“My parents wanted me to join a government organisation, because they say it’s more secure. They’re more traditional,” Ms Foo says.

But she had no qualms about joining HMI as she saw the opportunity to gain more knowledge with the MA programme.

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Ms Chin understands that giving young graduates a ringside seat is appealing, and HMI is open-minded about delegating heavier responsibilities to the newcomers, even with their lack of experience.

“We give them that ability to take charge, of course still working with a senior, but they actually the ones actively playing a role in the growth of the company,” she says.

This is especially important to management trainee Kimberly Yap, who graduated in July with a business degree from the National University of Singapore.

“In an MNC, you would already have a fixed set of procedures that you have to follow, but in an SME you get to be part of that process where you help to streamline the activities,” Ms Yap says.

Having interned at a government statutory board, Ms Yap also appreciates the fact that her views are heard more easily at an SME, where the organisation is flatter with less emphasis on hierarchy.

“Ms Yap says that she would not exchange her experience for anything else.

“I think there is some stigma associated with SMEs. People think there’s a lack of advancement, less prestige, things can only be done on a lower scale, maybe lower starting salary... A lot of my fears were dispelled. I’ve experienced it myself first-hand that there are opportunities here,” she says.

And the young graduates are not the only ones who gain. With SMEs always on the lookout for growth opportunities, the enthusiasm and energy of young graduates are indispensable in helping HMI to spin a new angle on issues that they encounter day to day.

“We always want to try new things and if you talk about full-time staff, they have full-time roles; so to look at new things, to have that mental capacity to focus on a new idea and really try and conceptualise it, that’s something a lot of us, unfortunately, don’t have time for,” says Ms Chin.

“So, with the MAs, when they’re assigned to a project, they can have that kind of time to really focus on it and of course work with an experienced team member to pull the thing together,” she adds.

The Management Associate Partnership from Singapore helps high growth local enterprise to attract and develop fresh talent. It co-funds the training and development of local graduates with less than three years of working experience.

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