[ by Suzie H ]

BRIGHT YOUNG THINGS

Fresh graduates usually head for jobs in MNCs which are perceived as more prestigious and offer higher pay. But there are some who prefer to work in an SME, where things are less hierarchical and there are more opportunities.
The choice is very much in the hands of young graduates at Health Management International (HMI) - that's how the SME attracts them amid strong competition with more established organisations. "We definitely don't have as easy a job as some of the bigger companies," says group general manager Chin Wei Jia.

It is little wonder, considering that young graduates tend to veer towards more prestigious jobs with higher pay.

Still, HMI's Management Associate Programme (MAP), formalised three years ago, has been getting about 100 applications each year.

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

It tailored a programme that allows graduates to rotate in different departments over the span of one year before finally settling into a fixed role.

"We give them the opportunity to share 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 that the MAP attracted her to go for an SME.

Despite her parents' hopes for her to join the government sector, she chose to stick to HMI and has now been in 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 that she had the opportunity to gain more knowledge with the MAP. “For MNCs (multinational corporations), they will usually give the chance to higher level people like senior executives or managers, but because I'm in this programme, I'm given the opportunity to be involved in more things,” she says.

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 are 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 government statutory board Spring Singapore, 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. “In an SME, my views and my opinions would matter more, rather than in an MNC or a government body, where there are too many people, and your views just tend to get buried in the midst of everyone else’s,” she says.

Ms Yap has even worked with traditionally out-of-reach senior management staff such as HMI's managing director Gan See Khem.

Starting out at an SME might not be all that rosy though. Ms Yap initially felt frustrated because she had to keep explaining where she was working at, as most SMEs are not as well-known as big-name MNC firms.

“Fresh graduates are usually very ambitious and want to secure a good job that is very reputable and pays well,” she says. However, after about five months at HMI, Ms Yap says that she would not exchange her experience for anything else.

“I think there are some stigmas associated with SMEs. People will 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 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.

And the entry of young graduates has contributed as well to the growth of HMI, which saw its top line revenue increase by about 20 per cent in FY2011.

“I like the infusion of younger people, with new views, new perspectives,” says Ms Chin. ■

*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 (right)