



More pay for engineers to stay on

By AHMAD OSMAN

HIGHER salaries, extra perks, more university places, more courses. These are some of the steps taken by employers and the Singapore authorities to train more engineers and keep them on the job.

The shortage of engineers in the electronics industry is particularly acute in a scenario where five out of 10 engineering graduates from the local universities opt out of the sector to do non-engineering work.

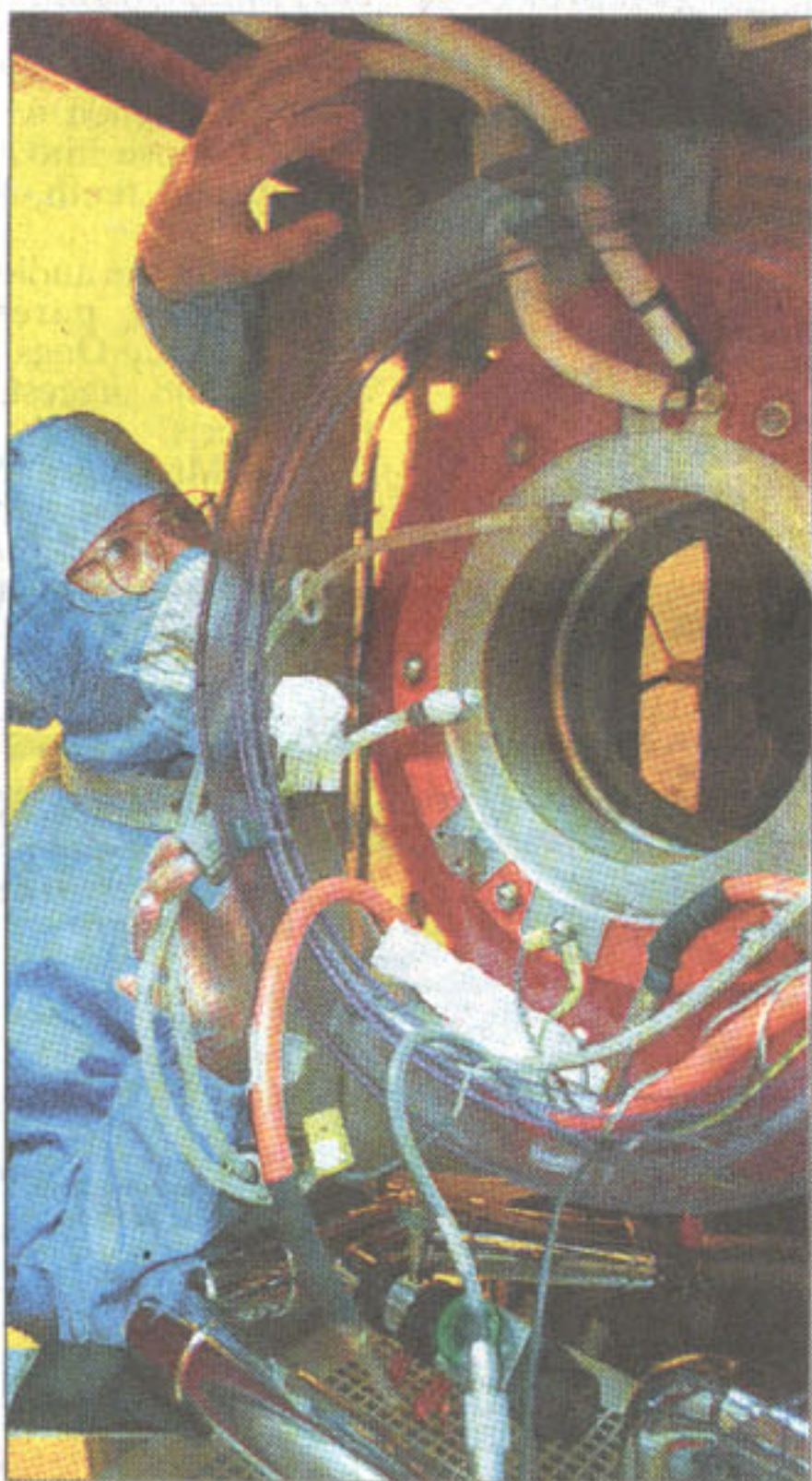
To deal with the manpower shortfall in a buoyant economy, some employers in Singapore are hiring more foreign engineers. Others are offering better pay and giving out scholarships to recruit and retain the engineering staff they need.

If the shortage of engineers persists for a long time, some electronics firms in Singapore may relocate to China and other countries.

"In China, you may have a bigger pool of engineers you can pick from," says Mr David Ang, executive director of Singapore Human Resources Institute.

"Singapore's universities are increasing the intake of engineering students to meet the current high demand for engineers."

Electronics, a key component in Singapore's



The shortage of engineers is particularly acute in some manufacturing sectors

manufacturing sector, needs a ready pool of engineers to propel its growth. Unless the shortage of engineers is quickly addressed, Singapore's role as a manufacturing base will be hampered.

The Economic Development Board (EDB) expects the supply of engineers to the electronics industry to be tight in the short-term and there will be a surge in demand for

manpower in the next few years.

New investments and expansion in the industry will create an estimated 4,500 jobs annually over the next few years and the demand for engineers, technicians and production operators will rise.

The EDB's multi-pronged "ahead of time" initiatives are to ensure that the quality and quantity of manpower are adequate in the long term.

It recently introduced the wafer fabrication specialist manpower programme jointly with Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and the National University of Singapore.

The sponsorship programme to increase the talent pool in the industry encourages engineering undergraduates to specialise in wafer fabrication in their final year.

Students in the programme will be channelled directly to semiconductor companies after their graduation.

The EDB has also been working with other agencies and institutes of higher learning to review the curriculum in the schools to meet the needs of the electronics industry and upgrade the skills of workers.

"We have also, since two years ago, put in place programmes to heighten the awareness of engineering talent needed in the manufacturing sector," says Mr Lim Swee Nian, executive director of EDB's electronics cluster.

The companies are also taking steps to address the tight supply of engineers into the electronics industry in the short term, he notes.

Apart from active engagement with the local tertiary institutions and schools and participation in job recruitment fairs, some companies also go outside Singapore to hire international professional talent.

NTU's School of Electrical and Electronic Engineering produces about 300 electronics engineering graduates every year. "We expect this number to increase in the next few years," says the head of the school, Professor Kam Chan Hin.

It will introduce this month two enhanced courses to provide specialised and topical information on microfabrication and integrated circuit (IC) design.

The EDB's new wafer fabrication and current IC design specialist manpower programmes are sources of encouragement for NTU students.

"Our students have responded positively to the programmes," Prof Kam says. The school will give about 80 scholarships in the academic year from this month.

Prof Kam is not surprised that some NTU engineering graduates are pursuing non-engineering careers.

He says: "We think this happens everywhere, especially when the economy is doing exceptionally well and opportunities abound.

"Their training here does make them highly versatile. Our engineering graduates are sought after by other industries as well, due to their well-rounded education, and a strong foundation in engineering knowledge."