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White-Collar help wanted

As multinationals create bigger and more sophisticated operations in Asean, demand is brisk for workers who can measure up to international standards.

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Despite the global economic slowdown, the job market in Asean countries, particularly in Thailand and Indonesia for mid-level to senior level positions, remains brisk amid a shortage of skilled human resources, say global specialist recruitment firms.



Before recruiters can successfully satisfy this demand, a number of barriers must be overcome. In particular, multinational companies looking to establish Asean branches require employees with proficient English communication skills and a broader cultural understanding, together with the flexibility to adapt to both western and Asian working styles.

Matthew Bennet, managing director of Robert Walters in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Thailand, has said that as demand in large economies such as Japan, China Korea and Europe slows, the focus will be on developed Asean economies to step up and provide a number of services, recognised by international standard.

According to James Vessey, the Thailand country director of Robert Walters, the integration of the Asean community in 2015 will be a turning point for Thailand, especially as it looks to establish itself as a focal point of business within the region.

"When foreign investors and companies look to invest in Myanmar and Cambodia they will come to Thailand first. Therefore our core focus in the region will always be Thailand," he says.

The Thai government's plans for large infrastructure projects in railways linking the region, flood protection, airports and high-quality manufacturing, along with increasing demand in the banking and financial services sector, has open up many skilled job opportunities that companies are struggling to fill.

Furthermore, Mr Vessey has identified Thailand's need to "bridge a cultural gap" in order to allow foreigners and expatriates in mid- to senior-level positions easier access to positions in Thailand.

Attempting to replicate their experience in Singapore and Hong Kong, multinational companies are looking to Thailand's human potential to establish a culturally friendly working environment that will make the country a more attractive option to international companies.

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Regardless of other professional qualifications, a strong proficiency in English is usually a first requirement of multinational companies, especially in accounting and financial services, human resources management and IT.

WHO EARN WHAT (US\$ PER YEAR)						
Position and Years of Experience	THAILAND		SHANGHAI		INDONESIA	
■ Auditor (3-5 years)	17,545	28,710	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
■ Accountant (3-5 years)	15,312	22,968	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
■ Investment Banker (4-8 years)	41,470	79,750	62,960	141,660	32,500	55,000
■ IT Program Manager (3-5 years)	47,850	79,750	55,090	86,570	N/A	N/A
■ Sales Manager (6+ years)	44,660	60,610	55,090	102,310	54,000	66,000
■ Sales Director (8+ years)	70,180	82,940	118,050	141,660	80,000	90,000
■ Sales & Marketing Director (8+ years)	70,180	82,940	173,140	267,580	80,000	90,000
■ Marketing Director (6+ years)	63,800	95,700	125,920	157,400	85,000	95,000
■ Business Development Manager (8+ years)	47,850	63,800	58,238	110,180	48,000	55,000

Excellent interpersonal and communications skills are in high demand and an understanding of western culture, whether through time spent abroad or increased interaction, will also be crucial to employers.

What is needed, say HR experts, is a strategy for localising projects, with foreigners training local people were needed, to achieve an international standard within the AEC that will be recognised by multinational companies globally.

"We need to help people understand that employing foreign talent does not mean fewer job opportunities for the local people; our ultimate goal is to pass on knowledge and bring the local management to the top level," Mr Bennet said.

Renu Arora, associate principal of Heidrick & Struggles, a global executive search firm, explains that there are different problems in different Asean countries. For instance, in Indonesia, despite being an economy with a great potential, there is an unequal distance between senior-level jobs and lower management positions.

Narrowing this gap will require a massive human resources development and training programme to drive the economy forward and improve the hierarchy.

Wasan Chavalivorakul, director (People & Change) at PricewaterhouseCoopers Thailand, added that Indonesia has the highest forecast GDP growth for 2013 in the region of 6.7% compared to 5.1% for Malaysia and 4.7% for Thailand. As a result, there are lots of opportunities in Asean's biggest economy.

"Opportunities in Indonesia are more open than the rest given the rising economic outlook and the size of the population," he said.

JAPAN		MALAYSIA		SINGAPORE		HONG KONG		VIETNAM	
								Minimum	Maximum
76,200	101,600	15,326.4	28,098.4	47,838	59,797.5	38,670	58,005	16,000	20,000
88,900	114,300	15,326.4	26,821.2	47,838	59,797.5	38,670	58,005	12,000	18,000
114,300	190,500	63,860	95,790	159,460	239,190	92,808	154,680	N/A	N/A
114,300	165,100	68,968.8	83,018	135,541	183,379	128,900	219,130	N/A	N/A
101,600	190,500	51,088	57,474	63,784	79,730	90,230	116,010	N/A	N/A
139,700	317,500	95,790	153,264	111,622	191,352	109,565	128,900	50,000	65,000
139,700	317,500	68,649.5	83,018	119,595	183,379	109,565	161,125	50,000	65,000
152,400	279,400	95,790	127,720	119,595	175,406	116,010	167,570	50,000	65,000
114,300	209,550	N/A	N/A	63,784	87,703	67,028	109,565	45,000	52,000

Echoing the sentiments of Mr Vessey, Mr Wasan also noted that for Thailand, "one key challenge, among others, is to define how to solve the issue of managing Generation Y and how to boost our people's capability up to international standard in order to compete better with other countries.

"I think this concern is no longer just a private company issue. It has become the country's issue, which the government needs to pay attention to in order for change to occur."

What needs to be done in Thailand to fully utilise its appeal to multinational companies and foreigners wanting to work here? Mr Vessey observed that the workplace in Thailand "is a very protected part of Thai society and although that isn't necessarily a bad thing, it will have an affects on the Thai economy as the regional job market for mid- to senior-level positions becomes more competitive in the coming years."



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