

How can youths secure jobs in the wake of Covid-19?

IT took more than a year for 23-year-old Ridwan to finally secure a full-time job after completing his degree in virtual reality and 3D animation at a local university.

Ridwan, who only wishes to be known by one name, graduated last year and got an offer this week to work at a cafe in the Klang Valley. He says it is difficult to find employment as many companies are not hiring or are only interested in people with years of experience.

“I started looking for a job right after I completed my studies but Covid-19 hit at the same time and many companies were downsizing,” says Ridwan, who sent his resume to 30 to 40 companies and got called for about five interviews but never heard back from any of them.

“The lockdown definitely had an effect on the job market and limited our ability to build connections outside. Before this, companies came to my university to look for talent and I was able to meet them face-to face. That was how I got an internship,” says Ridwan. “But now companies cannot come to campuses due to Covid-19 and I’m not sure how my juniors can create this connection with industry players,” he says.

to his difficulty, Ridwan says that other batches have since graduated and the field is becoming more competitive.

“My friends are still looking for full-time positions. About 5% have secured employment while the rest are freelancing or taking up part-time gigs,” says Ridwan, who is still on the lookout for a position that is related to his field of study.

For the time being, Ridwan is working on strengthening his skills by practicing 3D modelling and developing augmented reality and virtual reality designs.

“Things will get better but it takes time. For now, businesses are opening up and we have to prepare and sharpen our skills.”

Sharpening skills

When Covid-19 struck Malaysia in March 2020, it caused the worst economic downturn in the country since the height of the Asian financial crisis in 1997/1998. Many people were retrenched, faced salary cuts, or had to resign to take up care work at home. Among those most impacted are youths about to enter a narrowing job market – who are further handicapped by limited experience, low starting wages and student debt.

The Malaysian unemployment rate in 2020 was 4.5%, the highest in almost three decades, and is expected to average the same this year. Globally, youth employment fell 8.7% in 2020,

with middle-income countries being the hardest hit. Statistics Department of Malaysia data shows that Malaysia experienced a 22.5% rise in the number of unemployed graduates last year, amounting to more than 200,000 people.

A survey on the impact of Covid-19 on Malaysian youth published in December last year by the Research for Social Advancement think tank found that out of 534 students and recent graduates, only 22% received an internship or a job offer while 65.7% (74) of those who received such an offer said their offers were postponed or retracted due to the pandemic.

The current crop of fresh graduates – those who finished courses during the pandemic period – have spent less time on campus compared with their seniors as Covid-19 forced them to pivot to remote learning. They may have missed out on opportunities to network with industry reps in face-to-face meetings, and many are having difficulties landing interviews because of this as well as being forced to rely purely on their resumes.

While this might mean that recent fresh graduates may not be able to hone some skills or opportunities that require face-to-face interaction, they may be able to maximise new digital skills instead. Creative graduates can hone in on these skills to make themselves sought-after in the workforce.

Because in times like these, a degree alone is not enough. Some young jobseekers have adopted alternative ways of networking and innovative methods to showcase their abilities. For example, through independent content creation, building a strong public profile, taking advantage of alumni communities to scout for employment opportunities, and gaining abilities beyond their fields to make themselves stand out.

Virtual communication

Dr Patricia Lau, who specialises in human resource development and management, points out that this is a valuable opportunity for students to learn and grasp global virtual teamwork and communication skills so that they are well-equipped for the new normal of work.

Lau says that these digital communication skills, often embedded in the design of the learning activities in universities, are essential and required by employers as many businesses are going global.

“In the context of the pandemic, the new normal of work is boundaryless. With the advancement of technology, we can use Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, FreeConferenceCall, WhatsApp, and many others to communicate and work with others across borders.

“Although fresh graduates are generally technology savvy, some of them experience communication problems. This affects their working relationships to achieve team efficiency and effectiveness,” she says.

Apart from submitting a good resume to a potential employer, there are two other important preparations before an interview. The first is to research the job advert so that jobseekers can evaluate how their learning experiences fit with the job; they should map out their own knowledge and skills against the job advert, says Lau.

“For example, one essential soft skill required by employers is strong interpersonal and collaborative skills to establish strong relationships with key stakeholders. Fresh graduates can map these skills against their teamwork and communication skills learned during their undergraduate studies, and how they used these skills to resolve issues,” says Lau.

Secondly, fresh graduates’ personal characteristics must match with the organisations’ requirements.

“They can evaluate if their values can fit with the corporate values. They can also look at the company’s corporate social responsibility to see if there are any valuable experiences to share and contribute to the organisation,” says Lau, explaining that these two important preparations will increase an applicant’s self-confidence during the interview.

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