

Matched for the job

HAVING built a long career in a multinational recruitment firm, it may seem like a natural step for Melissa Norman to carve out her own hiring company to begin the next phase of her journey.

But Melissa says that was never really part of her plan. Striking out on her own was not something she had previously envisioned for herself.

However, life often takes on unexpected turns and before she knew it, Melissa found herself building on a new dream.

“The turning point for me was when I came to the realisation that the industry was dominated by large players, and that there was a diminishing focus on people partnerships and personalised service.

“That was when I decided that I wanted to create something of my own, which would cater to Malaysia-based businesses and Malaysian workers, addressing specific challenges facing the locals,” she says.

So after working her way up the ranks for 22 years in a large firm, she left her role as the managing director and founded talent consultancy company Aisling Group (pronounced as Ash-ling) in 2017.

The company offers development programmes for leadership, technology, human resource and sales, among other things. It has since trained over 1,000 talent and helped over 1,200 candidates find employment with over 60 clients across 10 industries.

They also carry out assessments to help employers and employees better understand their strengths and capabilities, making use of profiling tools to identify candidates for personal development or particular job competencies.

One of the things which Melissa notes have become more apparent over the past few years is the skills mismatch among jobseekers.

“We are seeing a mismatch in the job market in terms of qualifications and available positions. Jobseekers, especially fresh graduates, face difficulty in finding work that is related to what they have studied, necessitating them to take up part-time jobs or full-time employment in fields unrelated to what they had studied,” she says.

According to the Statistics Department, tertiary-educated employed persons in skill-related underemployment rose to 1.85 million persons in the second quarter of 2021, compared with 1.67 million persons in the previous corresponding period.

The rate of skill-related underemployment remained elevated at 37.7% during the quarter against 36.5% in the second quarter of 2020, which chief statistician Datuk Seri Mohd Uzir Mahidin says signals some prolonged structural issues in terms of skills mismatch.

With an increase in the use of digital tools and solutions in the workplace, Melissa points out that jobseekers would need to have at least a basic level of technical and digital literacy.

Having said that, she adds that it is equally important for talents to have good soft skills, such as communication, problem solving, creativity, and leadership skills – all of which are highly valued by employers as these make a tangible difference in terms of getting along with superiors, colleagues and subordinates from all walks of life at the workplace.

A recent report by Coursera notes the urgent need for the country to address the current skills gap as the pace of skills transformation is slower than the pace of digital transformation in Malaysia.

The report reveals that while Malaysian learners are relatively more adept at digital skills like cloud computing and data analysis, there is a significant skills gap across business, technology and data science. It urges learners to invest in both soft and technical skills to prepare for jobs of the future.

Overall, the report considered Malaysia rather competitive with 57% proficiency, ranking 46th globally and fourth in South-East Asia. Malaysia lags behind Singapore (10), Vietnam (20) and Indonesia (45), but is ahead of the Philippines (69) and Thailand (76).

“I think one of the challenges for talent acquiring these skills would be the time required to learn these skills. These skills normally come with work experience and in facing real-life challenges that require on-the-spot solutions.

“Fresh graduates with no work experience, in particular, would have to have the resilience to prove that they possess the skillset that employers are looking for in their employees.

“However, it is encouraging that institutions of higher education have started equipping their students with digital skills and soft skills, such as critical and analytical thinking, problem-solving and creativity, and positive education to address some of the challenges fresh graduates face when they join the job market. Work experience and internships definitely help in this regard,” says Melissa.

There are also various training programmes offered by learning and development institutions and industry players, like Aisling, in Malaysia that enable local talent to acquire these skillsets.

Notably, as the job landscape changes, employers will also need a mindset change and will have to alter the way they hire and retain talent. Melissa notes that employers may also be challenged in identifying the skillsets they require when hiring a new employee.

Traditionally, employers have predominantly looked at experience and qualifications when hiring. But in today's workplace, factors like having the right skillset and being the right fit are increasingly important.

"This is why more and more companies are looking at skill testing to help them find the right talent for the right job, in addition to merit."

She emphasises that employers are also on the lookout for talent who are equipped with positive character such as ingenuity, innovativeness, and the willingness to learn – all of which support business efficiency, productivity, and competitiveness.

Beyond skills, a trait that every talent should have, now more than ever, is an openness to learning and trying new things.

"Being open to picking up new skills and being willing to try out different sectors and industries outside of your trained field may also boost your employability."

The pandemic has also highlighted other challenges faced by local talents in looking for gainful employment. One of these, says Melissa, is the issue of reduced earning power.

The pandemic and the implementation of the many restrictions to movement have adversely affected businesses across various sectors. With the declining trend in available jobs, jobseekers will also have to come to terms with the fact that they are not likely to earn what they would have been able to earn just a couple of years back.

She points to the **Statistics Department data which shows that the median monthly salaries and wages** in Malaysia recorded a doubled-digit decrease of 15.6% last year, from RM2,442 to RM2,062.

Additionally, the debate on lives versus livelihoods have also affected jobseekers.

"We have seen many instances of jobseekers pulling out from the job hunt or declining job opportunities if they do not have the option to work remotely, because of the very real fear of getting infected.

"Most of these jobseekers are fresh graduates still living at home, and for those who can afford it, we see them holding off looking for a job for now. I think this situation will persist until we see the promised lower number of new cases with higher vaccination rates," she says.

As the economy gradually reopens, stakeholders in the recruitment sector will need to not only relook the hiring process, but also the development of talent for the future landscape of work.

Melissa says this boils down to closer collaboration and cooperation between the various stakeholders which include, but not limited to, effective public and private partnerships, including learning institutions.

“It is crucial for education providers and industry players to work together and align their goals and operations, to strike a balance between supply and demand in the job market, and to better prepare graduates for the future of work. On an individual level, talent should embrace a lifelong learning mindset and be open to continually learning new skills to broaden their knowledge and remain resilient in an increasingly competitive and uncertain job market,” she says.

Being a lifelong learner is something Melissa can relate to given her experience in having to pick things up along the way in her venture with Aisling. Nonetheless, the pursuit for her passion has been an enjoyable one as she is able to scale down the training and recruitment process for smaller players.

“I wanted to create valuable partnerships with Malaysian employers and employers with a footprint in Malaysia, and make an impact in the world of work by purposefully supporting the niche needs of employers and jobseekers here,” she adds.

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