

Having a job but not building a career

Job-hopping is a growing trend among young Malaysian graduates these days. They seem not to hold on to their jobs for long and leave when it suits them. Quite often these young employees, who appear content with their jobs and whom employers have invested heavily in, decide to move on after just a few years of service.

It would be understandable if the skills of these young graduates were very much in demand and their careers were rapidly progressing. There are those, however, who just want to try something new.

At the same time, many fresh graduates may remain unemployed for a considerable length of time, not least because employers generally prefer to hire people with some experience. Some are forced to start their own businesses even though the risks are high and they lack the necessary know-how. Others are forced to take on flexible commission-based jobs.

This begs the question: Does job-hopping signal mere restlessness on the part of graduates who have a wide selection of job options or is it the result of a decreasing quantity of stable jobs, ones that offer a well-established career path?

What we are used to is the standard employment relationship in which workers are assumed to work full-time for a particular employer at the employer's place of work, often moving up job ladders within the company or industry.

But employment practices are quickly changing. There is increasing job uncertainty in the face of globalisation, technological advances, outsourcing and offshoring, which leads to workers questioning job security.

An International Labour Organisation (ILO) study in 2007 shows that shorter duration and more flexible jobs are concentrated on younger workers. A recent US survey finds that the median number of years that workers aged 25 to 34 stay in one job is 2.7 years, compared with 9.9 years for employees aged 55 to 64.

Outsourcing of workers is also a major labour market development. This allows a company to transfer the responsibility of hiring its workers to another party. In this way, the company will have a high degree of employment flexibility, which can be essential for its success and survival.

Another trend is the rise in part-time work, which is partly linked to the increase in women's participation in the job market. Many part-time



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jobs — especially for women — are in fact voluntary and become regular jobs in double-earner families, allowing women to work and raise a family. As a result, there is an increase in long-term part-time jobs. In the EU, part-time employment rose from 14% of all jobs in 1992 to more than 19% in 2005.

In Japan, this has given rise to the phenomenon of freeters and Neets. Freeter is a combination of "free" and "arubaito", the Japanese word for part-time work, while Neet is the acronym for "not in education, employment or training".

Following the 1990s recession, Japanese companies ceased to offer lifetime employment (that is, the end of the salaryman). Many young people could only get temporary or part-time work. It is estimated that freeters form an estimated 10% to 20% of all young Japanese. This group also includes those who defer choosing a profession because they are unsure what they want to do.

Since 2000, there has been an increasing number of young people who do not enter the labour market even after they complete their course of study. This group of people falls under the Neets category. The numbers are not alarming but the Japanese government is making a serious effort to tackle this employment problem among the young, especially since many of them are now in their late twenties or early thirties.

Some countries, such as Italy, have introduced reforms to allow flexible employment contracts to help young graduates enter the job market more quickly. However, the standard employment contract applies as they progress to permanent jobs after getting some experience.

In Denmark, job flexibility is supported by social security. Security in any one job is relatively low but labour market security is fairly high because unemployed workers are given a great deal of protection and help in finding new jobs. Their "flexicurity" system combines "flexible hiring and firing rules for employers and a social security system for workers".

In short, while long-term jobs are still the major form of employment in many countries, part-time contractual employment arrangements are becoming widely adopted in many developed countries. The policy goal is to effect a transition of flexible and non-standard employment into standard practices that provide job security.

While the norm in Malaysia is full-time employment and climbing the ladder within a particular company or industry, we must recognise the rising

need for flexible and part-time employment.

This is both to meet the demand requirement for companies to respond to changes and remain competitive, as well as familial needs that allows a parent to take time off to raise a family or fulfil other personal needs.

Education is the key to helping young people get good jobs and build careers. Malaysian higher education institutions have incorporated employability as one of the outcomes of education delivery. Besides competency in their academic subjects, students are also given training in communication and other soft skills. Equally important is the effort taken by universities to tailor their courses to the needs of industries and society.

Careful planning that matches the supply of graduates and demand by industry is essential albeit difficult. Take the current issue of jobless nursing graduates. Many nursing colleges were established to produce enough nurses to elevate the shortage problem some years ago. These graduates (diploma holders) also work overseas because of the high demand for Malaysian nurses.

Unfortunately, the general training they received did not prepare them to become specialised nurses. Moreover, the economic slowdown in a number of target markets has drastically reduced the demand for our nurses. Hopefully, these unemployed nurses do not end up in jobs not related to their training.

Remember the oversupply of information technology graduates in the 1990s? Again, there was exuberance over the potential high demand for IT graduates then. Many were qualified but the training they received did not meet the specific requirements of the industry. For the sake of these young people, we should plan with foresight so that they will have careers and not be left jobless or doing just any job.

Malaysia should consider these new employment trends, especially among young graduates, young workers and women. Unstable employment will cause greater economic inequality, insecurity and instability. Earnings would become more volatile and unstable. Low wage work would persist because young graduates and young workers may not progress into good jobs, which can provide them with a higher standard of living and job security. ■

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