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**EMPOWERING WOMEN**

# Plugging the leakage

Women form a huge talent pool. But in Malaysia, this is not reflected in their participation in the workforce, especially in middle management and higher. Many of them leave the workforce midway to raise a family. Coupled with the brain-drain problem, this talent leakage has grave implications for companies, businesses and the economy.

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BY ANNA TAING

The statistics are disturbing.

In Malaysia, women make up only 46% of the workforce even though more than 60% of students in tertiary institutions are female. According to the World Bank, this makes our participation rate one of the lowest in the region, behind even Thailand (70%) and Indonesia (52%).

The picture gets more worrisome because the number of women gets smaller as they move up the management ladder. According to a survey by Mckinsey & Co, 52% of entry-level professionals are women but by the time they get to the mid-senior management level, they comprise only 11% of the workforce. At the CEO and board level, the number becomes even smaller — just 7%.

“This signals a leakage in the labour pool ... we need to seriously look into reasons why women de-select themselves from the labour market, and do something about it,” says Datin Teh Ija Mohd Jalil, executive director, corporate resources, Securities Commission Malaysia.

This leakage, coupled with the brain-drain issue, has grave implica-

tions for Malaysia’s economic development, which hinges on talent.

The point to note is that already, this country is facing a shrinking talent pool. It cannot afford further leakages, more so when half of the population comprises women. Over the long term, the backlash will be felt if nothing is done to plug the leakage.

Johan Mahmood Merican, CEO of Talent Corporation Malaysia Bhd (TalentCorp), believes that the leakage of women from the workforce is a form of brain drain and its magnitude is just as large. TalentCorp is mandated by the government to address the talent issue under the Economic Transformation Programme.

A recent survey by ACCA and TalentCorp found that a large number of women leave the workforce to raise a family or care for a family member. While 93% of the women surveyed said they had considered re-entering the workforce, 63% found it difficult to do so.

The reality is this: With shifting demographics, women have become a huge part of the talent pool. For companies and businesses looking to optimise talent, they cannot afford to ignore this demographic change. “Failing to tap the entire talent pool would be a loss on the part of the

company; it is a case of unlocking value by optimising available talent. Many have argued that it is not only the right thing to do, but the bright thing to do,” says Teh Ija.

Yet, the statistics show that companies are not doing enough to enable women’s participation in the workforce. For example, the ACCA survey found that 34% of the respondents cite the lack of support facilities from the employer as one of the reasons they had to quit their jobs.

“Unlike other countries, in Malaysia, we don’t see a second peak, that is when women leave the workforce to raise a family, they don’t come back. Corporates can do more, and I think women value flexibility over money,” says Chin Suit Fang, senior executive director at PwC Malaysia.

Chin believes that companies should view the women issue as a business opportunity and not through gender lens. The most challenging time for women, she says, is when their children are still very young, but not many companies have “adjustment periods” that enable them to re-enter the workforce.

**BRINGING MEN INTO THE EQUATION**

“The other thing is about bringing men into the equation. This is seen as a women’s issue rather than an organisational or business issue, so we need to change this mindset among the men. If we can get men [who dominate the top management posts in Corporate Malaysia] to champion this, it would help,” says Chin.

One of the biggest stumbling blocks that hamper efforts to promote women’s participation in the workforce is the lack of buy-in from the men, particularly the CEOs. Indeed, when *The Edge* contacted several CEOs for their views on this issue, many saw it as a human resource (HR) problem. Not surprisingly, the task of talking to this newspaper was left to HR managers. Similarly, most forums on the gender issue are attended by HR managers as well.

The SC’s Teh Ija has strong views on this. “Where are the CEOs? I don’t need a roomful of HR managers because they already buy into the women story. I don’t need to preach to the converted. We must have the CEOs’ participation because they are the decision makers.”

**UNLIKE OTHER COUNTRIES, IN MALAYSIA, WE DON'T SEE A SECOND PEAK, THAT IS WHEN WOMEN LEAVE THE WORKFORCE TO RAISE A FAMILY, THEY DON'T COME BACK.**

CHIN



KENNY YAP/THE EDGE

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## EMPOWERING WOMEN



She stresses that it is important that the CEOs realise this, and get involved. “They must not close their minds... The best CEOs in the world, whether men or women, value one thing — the people who work for them.”

Teh Ija says that CEOs must not see people as a cost, but rather as an investment. “Policy discussions must take place at the top because that’s where decisions are made. CEOs must be convinced before the HR managers can implement those policies.”

Like it or not, the “top” is still the domain of males. PwC’s Chin agrees. “If we look at the leadership DNA, and from the perspective of society and business, the tendency is to favour the men. The leadership traits are male, yet women have these too, and more than that, they have softer skills like a nurturing nature.”

According to a Harvard Business Review survey, only 15% of highly qualified women aspire to positions of power, against an average of 27% for men.

Yet, looking at the workforce of the future, Chin believes that people are increasingly valuing softer skills. “We have clients telling us this. On a personal level, I would like to see the narrative change, where leadership

skills should cover softer skills.”

But if women are as capable as the men, why aren’t more of them in the top positions? Apart from dropping out of the workforce to care for the family, another reason is that women do not plan their career “strategically”.

Teh Ija has found this to be true. “In job interviews, we ask the applicants where they saw themselves in five years in terms of career development. The men were very specific about their goals of wanting to be CEOs and making their first million, but most of the women did not have a plan. They wanted to be successful but had no milestones. But the men did. So, I think that for women to be successful in climbing the corporate ladder, they must have a plan and work towards it. Spell it out, because the bosses will want to know what your plans are, so they will know whether or not to invest in you.”

According to Chin, some women are shy to admit they are ambitious because bold and aggressive women are often viewed in a negative light. “We also have self-doubts, and we are risk-averse. We have capabilities, but we don’t use that. In fact, in PwC, we have women who tend to operate be-

low the radar, we put our head down and do the work... that’s why we need good mentors and role models.”

Teh Ija agrees, noting that women CEOs in Malaysia have clearly demonstrated that the glass ceiling can be broken. “What I think we need are further enablers to advance more women to leadership positions... a critical enabler is having a good mentoring network and listening to women about what they need to help them stay in the company.”

#### IMPROVING BOARDROOM DIVERSITY

A reason for the few women on the boards of companies in Malaysia is that by the time women reach the middle-management level, many of them leave the workforce. Hence, the talent pool where directors come from is very small compared to the men’s.

It explains the government’s “30% board representation requirement by 2016 for Corporate Malaysia” policy announced in 2011. This actually generated a great deal of controversy at the time, mainly because women do not like to see themselves as part of a “quota”, which suggests quantity and not quality and that they did not make

it based on merit.

Teh Ija prefers to see the 30% quota as a target. “The 30% target helps focus minds.”

“Although we don’t like quotas, for now, it is a necessary and the fastest way to push women’s participation on boards,” says PwC’s Chin.

TalentCorp’s Johan concurs. “When your base is low, you need a goal or target. Business as usual will not get you results.”

Johan cites the views of Christine Laggard, head honcho of the International Monetary Fund. “Initially, she was against quotas, and believed that women should rise based on merit. But when she saw the low participation of women on boards when she was at MacKenzie’s [Baker & MacKenzie], she supported the introduction of targets.”

In this case, Teh Ija says, merit will not be compromised. “Since Independence, women in this country have been important contributors to the nation’s economic and social development. My mother’s generation sacrificed to raise men and women so that we can make a difference. Today, women are accepted for the knowledge, skills, competence and experience that

they bring to organisations... so indeed, men and women should be appointed to boards based on merit. There is no difference in their responsibilities.”

The accountability, she says, is placed on the nominating committee to search for qualified women candidates.

The focus, Teh Ija opines, should be on gender diversity as part of board diversity, and not on gender equality. “Viewing it as a matter of diversity instead of gender equality can influence the approach we adopt in addressing the issue. This means a mix of skills, backgrounds, age and experience, not only gender,” she says.

Setting targets for boards is not unique to Malaysia. Other countries like Norway and Australia do it.

While putting a quota in place is one way of addressing the issue, PwC’s Chin believes that by itself, quotas are nothing more than a band aid. “We have to go back and ask why there are so few women in leadership; we must look beyond the boardroom, and this goes back to the starting point — leaking talent pipeline. All initiatives to enable women participation in the workforce must be done in tandem.”

**FOR WOMEN TO BE SUCCESSFUL IN CLIMBING THE CORPORATE LADDER, THEY MUST HAVE A PLAN AND WORK TOWARDS IT. SPELL IT OUT, BECAUSE THE BOSSES WILL WANT TO KNOW**

**WHAT YOUR PLANS ARE, SO THEY WILL KNOW WHETHER OR NOT TO INVEST IN YOU.**

TEH IJA





**EMPOWERING WOMEN**

# CORPORATE INITIATIVES

Some Malaysian companies have spearheaded programmes to retain and add more women into their workforce. We look at their strategies.

## Returning them to the workforce

BY JENNIFER JACOBS

**A**lthough the government provides incentives for women to re-enter the workforce after having taken a career break, it's not a straightforward matter. Most companies would be glad to welcome their returnees, provided that these women stayed in touch and kept themselves current in terms of their domain knowledge.

Otherwise, especially in the more technical domains, it's a difficult thing to do. And, the longer you stay away from the workforce, the less marketable you become. There needs to be a few months of retraining to bring you up to speed. And most women have to be realistic in their expectations. Usually, they cannot come back in the same roles, or even if they do, be at the same level as their peers who joined the company with them, but did not take a career break.

Most of the HR directors interviewed say women on a career break should make an effort to stay current with a view to their eventual return. Unfortunately, as Mimos Bhd corporate human resources vice-president Jun Maria Tan Abdullah points out, many do not do so. And they get used to the freedom of not working and are reluctant to return to a more regimented regime.

"For those people who are already on a career break, instead of bringing them back, we should be setting up an environment where they can contribute from that flexibility they are enjoying. Part-time jobs are one thing. But being able to identify economic activities where women can participate without having to go to work and which are measured by deliv-

erables rather than man hours, would be ideal," she suggests.

Jun Maria says her friends who leave the corporate world to be full-time homemakers get bored when their children become teenagers, so they start looking for jobs. "So, maybe they do part-time accounting or sell curry puffs or cakes. Which means they still want to contribute but don't know how.

"And if they were previously the general managers of banks, I don't think selling curry puffs are the best use of their talents. We need these women to come back and do something," she stresses.

Surprisingly, most are unaware of the government's initiatives to entice them back into the workforce. "When I say, aren't you going back to work and tell them what Talent Corp [Talent Corp Malaysia Bhd] or the government is doing, they say, 'Really, how come we never heard about it?' So, I think more needs to be done to get the word out there."

Some companies, such as Dell Malaysia Sdn Bhd, take a proactive approach in the matter. When their female employees go on a career break, they keep a record of their competencies and aspirations on record and when there is a job opening, call them to see if they are interested.

Ng Ee Loon is one such case. She was leading the service programme managers across the Asia-Pacific and she decided to go on a career break to have a baby. "When we launched new services in Dell, I was the manager who handled 60 people across Asia-Pacific. So, I travelled very frequently back then and had to work end to end, handling everything from marketing all the way to the launch of the new services."

In 2006, she left to have the baby. She, along with all other Dell employees, had to update her Individual Development Plan, an online tool that allows employees to input their core competencies and career aspirations for the next two years.

"Any manager can actually go into the tool and see what my competencies and strengths are, as well as my development opportunities. And even after you leave Dell, the record is still there. So after a year, they had an open position in Dell and they went through this tool and found that I was fit for the role, so they called me back," she says.

Ng was surprised and pleased. "I knew I would have to come back to a corporate environment but I didn't expect Dell to call me after a one-year break. I was excited when they called me and a little uncertain about the currency of my skills."

Her new designation was sales support director. But she wasn't thrown into the deep end. "They held my hand for the first three months. They kept in touch with me to find out how I was progressing and how I was assimilating back into the environment after my break. It was quite a friendly environment and I think it's easier for us to come back to work than any other company.

"You may feel lost when you come back because your contacts are no longer there. But they have a programme where they follow up with you and give you the right tools for the job so you're able to pick things up more quickly and your learning curve is shorter compared with if you were to join a new company and you're not given any tools to do it," she says.

## Grooming the next generation

It's not enough to hire female employees to balance the numbers; companies need to make sure that they move through the ranks and make it to the top.

To do this, companies in Malaysia who have recognised the problem of women dropping off before they make it to the top, address it in their own individual ways.

For instance, Dell, which recognises that creating women leaders begins with empowerment through networks, has launched several initiatives to accelerate women's roles in driving growth.

Its CEO C STang talks about WISE (Women in Search of Excellence), a global initiative that champions the interests of female team members and represents the female leadership voice of Malaysia: "Through this initiative, women team leaders in Dell Malaysia will be coached and nurtured to be represented in decision-making positions, such as managers, directors and executives."

Recently, he says, Dell Malaysia sent one of its women leaders to the company's Asian Women's Leadership conference in Singapore. "Dell is an international company and as a leader in senior management, you will tend to have a scope of work that is global and we need our female leaders to be ready for that. So, we sponsor their growth and development.

"We even have things like a networking programme for women because networking and sponsorship are very important in a global company. The women are taught how to get the right sponsor for career growth," he says.

Worldwide, only one third of Dell's total population is female but in Ma-

**IF THE PERSON HAS SPECIFIC SKILLS, WE GIVE HER EXPOSURE TO PROJECTS DEALING WITH SENIOR MANAGEMENT, IN ADDITION TO SENDING HER FOR COURSES.**

KHALIS

**FOR THOSE PEOPLE WHO ARE ALREADY ON A CAREER BREAK, INSTEAD OF BRINGING THEM BACK, WE SHOULD BE SETTING UP AN ENVIRONMENT WHERE THEY CAN CONTRIBUTE FROM THAT FLEXIBILITY THEY ARE ENJOYING. PART-TIME JOBS ARE ONE THING.**

JUN MARIA



## EMPOWERING WOMEN



## Execute flexible working arrangements properly

BY SARAH VOON

Janet Yap, MD for Technology Solutions in Asean at Accenture, has been with the global management consulting, technology services and outsourcing company for 25 years. She says there has been little reason to look elsewhere all these years because Accenture has provided her with the flexibility that allows her to integrate her work and personal life.

Accenture's flexible working arrangements (FWA) allowed her to work in its offices in Hong Kong and Singapore when her husband's company relocated him to those places some years ago.

The FWA, she says, also enabled her to be around for her daughter at the most significant times of her life. When she was finally ready to return to the workforce, she was welcomed back into the team with open arms.

Despite taking several breaks to take care of her young family, Yap is one of the few women in Accenture who has made it to the top echelons of management. She believes that a woman should define her own success and not be afraid to seek recognition if she merits it. Women don't talk about their achievements enough, she says.

The problem surrounding work-life integration that most women face is that companies are not able to supplement their personal needs to give them what they need to optimise their productivity levels in both areas, she opines. "I hate using the word 'policy'; I think the flexi-work arrangement is what it is — an arrangement. It can be customised to different individuals. Everyone may have different criteria for what flexible is. What we have globally is an acceptance; an FWA is a fact of how we work. It's customisable, personal," she explains.

She feels that although many firms implement FWA policies, it is ultimately the way they are executed that matters. "It's about leaders who are sincere in trying to help you with your career and helping you understand that you have certain choices you can make in your life. So overall, I'd have to say it is not about the policies but about individual leaders caring [about their staff]." However, Yap feels that some women may feel insecure about returning to the workplace when their peers have already advanced during their period of absence. "Sometimes, it's about coming back and being able to say, okay, I need to step back a bit to catch up with co-workers who have already advanced while I've been away."

It has been easy to do this at Accenture. The company provides its female staff with mentorship and networking programmes that give them the support to excel in their careers. Through these programmes, Yap feels, women are more enabled by their peers and are able to build their self-confidence in the workplace.

"What we focus on is finding your key strengths as a woman and using that, instead of focusing on your weakness and overcoming it. It is about making sure your weakness doesn't wear you down but there is no need to try

making your weakness your strength," she says. Additionally, from her observation, Yap believes that these policies and programmes that companies have in place are not talked about widely enough. "There are many people who could benefit from these arrangements but I think some people don't realise that they exist, so they don't ask about them. We just need to broadcast more," she says.

Yap feels that the programmes and policies to empower women in the workforce should be implemented in companies simply because it is the right thing to do. "There is always talk about how having women's programmes is good for business. But it shouldn't be only about business; it is actually the right thing to do. Business is secondary."



**THERE IS ALWAYS TALK ABOUT HOW HAVING WOMEN'S PROGRAMMES IS GOOD FOR BUSINESS. BUT IT SHOULDN'T BE ONLY ABOUT BUSINESS, IT IS ACTUALLY THE RIGHT THING TO DO. BUSINESS IS SECONDARY.**

YAP



as much as men do. I think they perceive it as walking into a meeting and handing out business cards as opposed to developing relationships, helping people out along the way and being able to draw on those," she says.

The bank also runs what is known as the talent review process. "When we're looking at talent overall, we make sure that we're looking at the women we have in the organisation, what the numbers are looking like, where they are in the successor pipeline and what their performance is looking like," adds Grant-Cook.

Any development plan for talent would be tailored accordingly, be it man or woman. "But we do highlight and make sure that we're focusing on our women to make sure that we've got more coming through the pipeline."

At the moment, women make up 67% of the bank's total population in Malaysia, 50% of the senior rank and 30% of the Country Management Committee, which reports directly to the CEO. "So we can see it thin out as we get towards the top but I'm pretty happy with that number when you compare it to the local market."

In Telekom Malaysia Bhd, some 38% of its 27,000 employees are women. Some 32% of the management are women, 17% are in high-level management and 10% in the management committee that reports directly to the CEO.

While there are no specific programmes for women alone, they make up 45% of the elite group that have been identified as future leaders.

Telekom Malaysia Bhd chief human capital officer Mohd Khalis Abdul Rahim says this special group is given on-the-job training and exposure in different roles. "If the person has specific skills, we give her exposure to projects dealing with senior management, in addition to sending her for courses."

The company also provides individual coaching for people with specific needs, in addition to mass coaching. "We get our senior leaders to come down and talk to them about their experience. And we have teh tarik sessions, where our senior leaders address them in groups of 20 to 30. It's a free-flowing session." — *By Jennifer Jacobs*

JUN MARIA (PATRICK GOH/THEEDGE), KHALIS (SUHAIMI YUSUF/THEEDGE), NIKKI (LEE LAY KIN/THEEDGE), YAP (MOHD IZWAN MOHD NAZAM/THEEDGE)



**...WE'RE FOCUSING ON OUR WOMEN TO MAKE SURE THAT WE'VE GOT MORE COMING THROUGH THE PIPELINE**

GRANT-COOK



Malaysia, it's more than half. But there are only 15% at the director's level. Tang, however, says there are no plans to set a target for women in the higher echelons.

"We don't want to set a number because when we do that, it becomes a quota. So we do it through natural progression and development and it's very easy for anyone with talent and capability to progress; it's transparent," he says.

At Mimos Bhd, there are no formal programmes to develop women, but they are worked into the personal development plans. "For example, there are certain gaps in some of the next-generation female leaders. So, we appoint senior women to help them," says Jun Maria Tan Abdullah, its corporate human resources vice-president.

She gives the example of a senior manager who was supposed to be up for promotion but has been held back because of certain behavioural gaps. "She has other good leadership skills and is technically competent but is perceived as volatile by her team members.

"The executive team members for promotion point out that if we promote her to the next rank without getting her to reflect and change that particular behaviour, she could actually end up a team wrecker rather than a team player," she says.

Having identified the gap, Jun Maria indicated in the manager's personal development plan that she is supposed to get coaching from two female vice-presidents — herself and the financial controller. "Now, the responsibility is on us to coach her and give her specific examples of behaving differently to get what she wants. And we identified an external coach for her as well."

Citibank Malaysia country human resources director Nikki Grant-Cook says the bank has programmes designed specifically for women. "We have ones that run in the region and also globally that we put our women on, depending on which level they're at. The one that runs in New York is for more senior women than the one we run in the region."

These programmes are designed to enhance their skill-sets so they are able to compete more effectively for more senior roles going forward. What kind of skills? "Skills like networking because women don't network





**EMPOWERING WOMEN**

# Changing the mindset

It's not enough to provide the proper facilities and flexible work arrangements. If companies really hope to attract women back into the workforce, there will have to be a cultural shift in Malaysia so that the bulk of child and elderly care does not fall heavily on women's shoulders.

Mimos Bhd corporate human resources vice-president Jun Maria Tan Abdullah says while things like flexi hours and the ability to work from home are a positive step, they do not address the crux of the problem.

"So, instead of doing the 'what', I think we should be focusing on the 'how'; changing the mindset, the stigma, the cultural stereotypes. Talent Corp and many of us are trying to do things that are low-hanging fruits but I think there must be a concerted effort to look at the whole ecosystem, and change the mindset of the people.

"We're not just talking about the women here, we're talking about the whole of society," she says.

Jun Maria is understandably frustrated. She sees many good, technically competent female employees with potential resigning to take care of their children, despite the flexible work environment Mimos tries to provide, along with its childcare facilities in the form of an onsite kindergarten and transit centre for school-going children.

"I've got some of my female leaders who say they're resigning because they've got to go back and take care of their three kids while their husband works and has to be away all the time. These are people who are technically competent in the engineering and scientific fields. And women with technical competency are very valuable; when they fall out, it's such a waste!

"When I talk to them and ask them to come back, they say, maybe in another four years, but by that time their competency has decreased and it's difficult for them to return. It's tough if they don't continue to be hands on, so I normally suggest certain software development work they can do based on deliverables. But they'd rather not," she adds.

Jun Maria says Mimos has even come up with part-time jobs for women, and participated in the Jobstreet microsite for women to come back into the workforce. "However, I believe there is much more to be done because I believe that the women themselves are not motivated to answer those callings."

But for the women who do stay, Mimos tries to be as accommodating as possible. "We allow flexible work options, especially to support them when they have certain challenges but it's not like a fixed thing throughout, meaning we don't give them a year of flexibility where they come to work from noon onwards. But we do provide a lot of web-based tools to allow them to communicate when they are working away from the office."

And, of course, there's the famous kindergarten and transit centre, the only such facility in the whole of Technology Park Malaysia. It accepts children from ages four to 12 and the kindergarten, which follows the national kindergarten syllabus, caters for children of seven and below.

School-going children are put in the transit centre, which acts as part-daycare, part-transit house. For instance, the "afternoon session" children will

be dropped off by their parents in the morning and they can take part in the various activities or tuition classes — be it language or IT — provided. At 11 o'clock, they shower, change into their school uniforms, have their lunch and are transported to school. The "morning session" children come over after school and they too, can participate in classes and special activities until their parents pick them up in the evening.

At the moment, it does not accommodate babies, but there are plans for a nursery once the space issue is sorted out. "We are supposed to be putting up another building although that has not been approved yet. But once it is up, we will be able to extend the kindergarten and put in a nursery as well," says Jun Maria.

She points out that the flexibility and facilities are for all its employees and not just the women. "We have single fathers who send their children over as well. When the agenda is all about women and they say, 'We're going to come and take a look at your place to see how you have provided flexibility for women', I say, 'It's not just for women, it's actually for parents'. So, the tone needs to be changed. We are always putting the responsibility on the mothers, but what about the fathers?"

Citibank Bhd country human resources director Nikki Grant-Cook echoes this sentiment. She is quick to point out that Citibank offers its employees flexible work practices, and this can apply to either the father or the mother.

"It's not gender-specific or family-specific in that sense. People have been coming forward with flexible work requests and one of the things I want to do is actually promote those and use them as case studies so they create momentum.

Citibank was the first bank in Malaysia to give its employees three months' maternity leave. The other banks followed suit soon after: "We were comparing internal maternity-leave policies in cities across the globe and I think at the time, if I remember right, we (Malaysia) were one of the shortest. So, apart from the market, we just thought that having that extra month to spend with the child was an important thing to do."

Citibank also provides a crèche for employees who have children. At the

moment, there are some 60 children in the crèche. Closing time is at 6pm, with no exceptions, to encourage its employees to stop work and go home.

"I do know people who've brought their children back into the building, which we don't encourage because it's the end of the day, it's been a long day for both, so go home if you can," Grant-Cook says.

But having children on the floor is not necessarily a bad thing as it is a signal to the others that the workday is over and it's time to leave. "I know we've got a lot of positive feedback from that too, because as soon as people start hearing kids on the floor, it's like, pencils down. Some of them will start chatting to the kids and it creates a more relaxed sort of environment."

Telekom Malaysia Bhd chief human capital officer Mohd Khalis Abdul Rahim says the company does not seem to face the issue of female staff leaving to care for the family. "Our turnover rate in Telekom Malaysia is very, very low compared with that of the industry and market. People who work in Telekom Malaysia like to stay and contribute as much as they can. So, we don't have much of an issue in that way."

He adds, however, that Telekom Malaysia does allow for a work-life balance. "We would like to promote a work-life balance where possible. But you must understand that the present business situation is very challenging. People tend to work longer hours so we provide flexible working arrangements, more so for women, because we understand that they do have obligations at home.

"That's the reality. Yet, we understand that women can and do contribute. They do have skills and experience and it's a pity if we create an environment where they are not able to contribute."

So, if they work late, they can come in late the next day. And if they work weekends, they can talk to their managers about replacing their off days. This kind of flexibility applies to all staff and not just women.

"In addition, we also promote teleworking. If your job allows you to do teleworking, why not? What you need is a laptop and Internet connection," he says.

Sometimes, employees want to take time off to take care of their kids or elderly parents. "They can come to us with their issues and we will consider them on a case-by-case basis."

The multinationals are a lot more structured in their approach to retaining women. Most of them have special programmes to engage and retain female employees, supporting their development.

For instance, Intel Malaysia has no less than four programmes targeted specifically at women — the Women at Intel Network, Intel Global Women's Initiative Portal, Manufacturing Technical Women's League and work-life effectiveness programmes.

Human resources director Suresh Chandra says in general, 50% of Intel Malaysia's employees are women, with 31% of them in the exempt technical workforce. "While it is true that women gradually leave their employment for various reasons, Intel takes attrition of its top talent seriously."

The Women at Intel Network is an employee group with 16 chapters worldwide. It hosts six development conferences a year. The Intel Global Women's Initiative Portal is an interactive portal for all female employees to connect with women around the world and interact with female leaders at Intel through blogs and discussion forums. The Manufacturing Technical Women's League looks at the needs of technical women including both soft and hard skills as well as crafting jobs to enable part-time employment.

Suresh says Intel has a range of work-life effectiveness programmes to serve as a long-term strategy to retaining skilled employees in the workforce, especially working mothers. They include Alternate Start Time, Broadband Reimbursement, Compensatory Time Off and Part-Time Employment.

"In addition to these programmes, we have also increased the monetary reward for referees of a successfully-hired technical female. The initiatives have been successful as we are seeing an increase in women representation in higher-management levels within Intel Malaysia."

At the moment, it does not provide childcare facilities. "That being said, our facilities in Penang and Kulim are located fairly close to large townships with an abundance of childcare centres," says Suresh.

Dell Malaysia does not provide a childcare centre either. CEO CS Tang says rather than providing a crèche or childcare facilities, Dell embraces other means of providing flexibility and convenience for working mothers such as the Connected Workplace.

Under the Connected Workplace initiative, the company encourages its staff to work from home, says Tang. "We go all out for this, to the extent where we sponsor their WiFi and office set-up, down to buying them an ergonomic chair. And so you can imagine, the parent [or the mother] can work around the kid's schedule."

He says Dell has always had these work-from-home arrangements, informally. "Our employees could work with their superior to decide whether they would work from home. This merely formalises the initiative and we sponsor the broadband and office set-up."

The laptops are equipped with special software to allow employees to communicate for free with each other all over the world, in a secure manner.

"By allowing our team members to decide how they work, Dell believes it can foster a happier workforce that is more engaged and better able to serve our customers and stakeholders. It also helps us to attract and retain the best global talent.

"The Dell's Connected Workplace is not about visibility — it is about results," adds Tang. — *By Jennifer Jacobs*

**BY ALLOWING OUR TEAM MEMBERS TO DECIDE HOW THEY WORK, DELL BELIEVES IT CAN FOSTER A HAPPIER WORKFORCE THAT IS MORE ENGAGED AND BETTER ABLE TO SERVE OUR CUSTOMERS AND STAKEHOLDERS. IT ALSO HELPS US TO ATTRACT AND RETAIN THE BEST GLOBAL TALENT**

**TANG**

**THE INITIATIVES HAVE BEEN SUCCESSFUL AS WE ARE SEEING AN INCREASE IN WOMEN REPRESENTATION IN HIGHER-MANAGEMENT LEVELS WITHIN INTEL MALAYSIA.**

**SURESH**



## ADVERTORIAL

## Defining IT Success. Your Way

How do you achieve success in the fast-paced and constantly evolving world of IT? Lynda, an SAP manager shows us how this feat is done at a leading global management consulting, technology services, and outsourcing company – Accenture.

When you think about a career in IT, a constantly evolving job scope – one that also takes you around the world – probably isn't the first thing that comes to mind. But Lynda, a Manager with the Technology workforce of Accenture Malaysia, has proven that working at Accenture does not limit you to performing the same role and similar tasks day after day. Neither does it limit you to working in front of the computer within the confines of your cubicle all day. "Working on SAP projects at Accenture, I take on new challenges and learn something new everyday. This is a place where there's no such thing as routine."

Lynda has been enjoying diverse roles in Accenture since she joined as an Analyst back in 2003, and she is relishing every moment of her ever-changing career.

**Vast opportunities to excel**

From day one, Lynda took on great challenges at Accenture. "I was assigned to work on a SAP project right at the beginning of my career, and it was daunting because I didn't have prior experience in SAP."

Aided by a great network of experts, she successfully completed her project and has been assigned to SAP projects ever since. But because SAP is so huge, she gets to work on its various functional modules. This is what made her an expert in the field of SAP. Today, Lynda is a project manager for a global financial initiative. "Thinking about it, I've never handled the same role twice since I joined 8 years ago!"

**Creating high performance**

Working on different roles, Lynda has acquired valuable skills that are critical to helping her clients become high-performance organizations. She has learned how to adapt quickly and make the most out of her resources as she moved from one role to the next.

"Accenture offers us a variety of tools which help us prepare for our projects and let us hit the ground running when we're assigned to a new project." Lynda says.

To help women reach the next level, Accenture develops customized, innovative trainings designed to meet specific needs – an internal and external collective networking environment, confidence-building activities, and a roadmap that positions them for the right roles.

"We also undergo training and have tools readily available online to help us develop our skills. On top of that, we're given the chance to work in different locations and with people from different parts of the world. In my case, I've worked on long-term projects in Brunei, Australia, London and the Philippines. Early this year, I traveled to Dubai for a business trip. I've loved every bit of these experiences," she adds.

From these experiences, it is clear how Accenture's commitment to diversity provides women with a high-energy environment and culture where they can thrive and define their personal approaches to success.

**Where work is a pleasure**

Occasionally, a good dose of play comes into the mix at work too. While working in Brunei, Lynda had the surprising opportunity to take her casual interest in singing further. She shares, "My project team held monthly birthday celebrations. Once, I was invited to perform with the band, which was made up of my client's employees. It went well and we enjoyed playing together, so I became one of the regular performers. That was a great exposure and now, I sing for the Accenture band and we perform during business unit meetings. It's great to know that everyone enjoys the music we play at these functions." she adds. Lynda believes that these experiences make her career at Accenture more fulfilling and worthwhile. "This is why I love it here, because Accenture offers me countless avenues to achieve possibilities greater than I imagined, in every way."

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Lynda,  
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## EMPOWERING WOMEN

# AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT

## Emphasising professional development

BY EMILY CHOW

Priya Terumalay believes that the key focus of CPA Australia — on professional development — complements existing practices that aid their female members at work. She believes the quality of its designation will contribute towards women's professional development in the Malaysia.

"That is their passport and strong foundation to move up the board," says the accounting body's general manager, Malaysia. "With strong skill sets and leadership qualities as strategic business leaders, the designation will allow them to move on to higher decision-making positions."

A highlight of CPA Australia, one of the largest accounting bodies in the world, is its continuing professional development (CPD) component. This allows members to enhance professional development in four core areas: technical, leadership, personal effectiveness and business. According to Priya, soft skills are required as much as technical skills in achieving career advancement.

These initiatives are crucial for the body; it is approximately 9,000 members strong, with women comprising over 60% of membership. About 30% of them hold managerial-level positions across various professions and industries.

"Our women hold top posts in regulatory capacities. They are partners in accounting firms, chief finance officers in banks or multinational corporations, they are entrepreneurs in the small- and medium-enterprise spaces and hold high academic positions," says Priya. "We have an added advantage because it [skills that we impart to them] is not just purely technical."

CPD programmes include training sessions, master classes, talks and updated publications. There are also courses that run throughout the year, where topics range from soft skills and leadership talks to technical subjects such as updated accounting standards and tax.

Tools are also available for members who want to keep abreast from home. CPA Australia's library and online database includes podcasts, webinars, papers, journals and books to provide members with access to knowledge through different avenues.

This allows for members to get updated information around the world from home, explains Priya, and women are encouraged to use these tools before re-entering the workforce.

"As a result, CPA Australia members will go into the workforce highly skilled and are able to contribute in a much more effective manner because they have a balanced view in both senses of technical and soft skills," she says. "In a lot of instances that we see, many of our female members rise up the [corporate] ladder and move on to achieve higher things."

"The contributions they give are also not limited to accounting and finance," she adds. "We've got members in any area that requires accounting to be present."

CPA Australia offers various benefits to ease the financial burden of working mothers, such as a 50% reduction in subscription rates for members on parenting leave.

"While it is not gender-biased, female members form the majority of members who enjoy the benefit," says Priya. She also notes an increasing number of women taking up CPA Australia's programme these days, with the female-to-male gender ratio standing at 60:40.

"[In Malaysia], the number of women at entry-level positions who come on board to take the CPA Australia programme is very high," she

comments. "We're very reflective of the female-to-male gender ratio at universities."

Another recent trend that Priya observes among their members is that more women have now ventured into entrepreneurship. "Another thing I increasingly see in the last few years is the innovative capacity of women. There are a lot of women entrepreneurs now and a lot of our members are paving the way for that," she says. "Previously, our members were sole practitioners, but now we see entrepreneurs starting up their own businesses in various industries."

As a bridge spanning the gap between universities and employers for talent supply and demand, CPA Australia has taken measures to empower women at the college and university levels. *Women on Top: Celebrating Successful Women*, a programme initiated last year, addresses undergraduates through a series of talks encouraging female students to remain in the workforce.

"A lot of women are in universities, but upon graduating, they may decide to have families and drop out of the workforce," elaborates Priya. "So, we're working with TalentCorp [Talent Corp Malaysia Bhd] in motivating students to stay on in the workforce by having our successful women members speak to them."

CPA Australia has visited the Universiti Sains Malaysia campus in Penang and plans to visit three more universities, including Swinburne University of Technology in Kuching. The talks address the issues of remaining relevant in the workforce, how employers are changing to value diversity in the work place and the existing support systems that make work more conducive to accommodate working mothers. Target audiences are third- and fourth-year business students who are about to graduate, and male students are encouraged to attend as well.

All these measures, she concludes, are CPA Australia's contribution to retaining talent in the country. "Brain drain isn't just about people leaving the country. It's also about women dropping out of the workforce due to a lack of support," Priya says. "We have strong relationships with our employer partners and universities, so we're the perfect bridge to bring this message across." ■

Priya

## Creating awareness with awards

The Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA) Malaysia country head Jennifer Lopez believes in the efficacy of having an award for diversity and inclusion to help companies take stock of the effectiveness of the related human resource policies or facilities provided. "I know people are sceptical of awards in general and there will always be companies trying to greenwash their activities, but our ACCA Malaysia Sustainability Reporting Award (MaSRA) has shown us that it has created awareness of how to link sustainability to business strategy and bottom line, rather than just viewing it as a PR [public relations] exercise."

"Similarly, that's what we want to do with this award on diversity, which is a part of the overall sustainability award. We want to educate companies on how putting in place policies such as flexible work hours to retain women in the workforce can actually give business benefits and help employees be more effective and efficient," she points out.

To gain insights into this issue, TalentCorp and ACCA mooted a joint survey on the state of female employment and retention in Malaysia in mid-2012 entitled *Retaining Women in the Workforce*. Lopez says the findings were simply to assess the present status. As expected, multinational corporations (MNCs) led the way because of the global awareness of the importance of women in the workforce, but Malaysian companies still have a long way to go. "There are some CEOs who say if I take women into the workplace, especially those around 30, I have to think about maternity leave. I think

it's a lack of awareness of the business benefits of retaining women and the importance of gender diversity," she points out. The awards have come a long way since the ACCA launched it in 2002. "First, we talked about the environment. Then, we brought in the social element. When you talk about environmental reporting, we're not just looking at things like recycling but how you do your business, your usage of resources and how your product itself impacts the environment."

This year, the ACCA has included a new category — gender diversity and inclusion. "We want companies who are practising these policies to come forward and say how they are doing it and how they are publicising it to their stakeholders," says Lopez.

Reporting on the social side of things would include how a company develops its people and the opportunities it gives them. "So, gender diversity and inclusion is one category. It would include questions such as whether you are an equal opportunity employer and whether you provide opportunities for your people to remain in your company."

She says many of the local companies claim to already have programmes in place as well as facilities to allow women to remain in the workforce but, unlike the MNCs, they don't like to blow their trumpets. "But when you have to write it down, you are forced to start thinking about what you provide and whether it is effective."

For instance, the company may have a childcare centre but are the employees really using it? "I prefer a flexible working environment where I don't need to clock in at nine and clock out at five."

Participating in an award like this also helps with the benchmarking of best practices. "If corporate Malaysia wants to move forward, there must be best practices, and not just with MNCs. So, if you claim you have these policies but refrain from reporting on them because you're too modest, think of it as a way to give back to society." — By Jennifer Jacobs ■

Lopez

SUBHAMI YUSUF/THEEDGE







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**EMPOWERING WOMEN**

# Policies to ensure equality

BY EMILY CHOW AND SARAH VOON

The National Council of Women's Organisations Malaysia (NCWO) has achieved several milestones since it was started in 1963. As the organisation celebrates its 50th anniversary this year, president Professor Tan Sri Dr Sharifah Hapsah Syed Hasan Shahabudin hopes to further balance gender inequality through policy reformation and implementation.

"Our reach is very far and extensive, and we try to help the voiceless be heard," says Sharifah. "Currently, NCWO is going to every state to discuss the National Transformation Programme (NTP) with women, how it affects them and the obstacles they face in reaching their goal."

As a main umbrella representing over 120 affiliates from welfare to professional bodies, NCWO's role is mainly in advocacy and policy-making. It deals primarily with laws, policies, procedures and practices, and ensures that non-governmental organisations' work is in line with government policies through efforts at the grassroots level.

"The organisation started by looking at working women, so in the late 1960s, women were granted equal pay for work of equal value [on par with their male counterparts in the government sector] through advocacy and persistent calling on the government," says Sharifah. Soon after, NCWO also called for women to have separate tax assessments instead of having to file joint income taxes upon getting married.

"When you have separate tax assessments, it's recognising a woman in her own individual right. That's important because you're not an appendage to your husband," she says. NCWO successfully achieved this legal change, along with other demands, including rights to job permanency and pension, equal guardianship rights for mothers and amending the Federal Constitution to prohibit discrimination based on gender.

Other major landmark achievements include the formulation of the National Policy on Women, and establishing a secretariat to serve the National Council for the Integration of Women in Development (NACI-WID), which culminated in the Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development.

"In the old days, the idea was that a woman was not a permanent worker because she would lose her permanent status when she got married," Sharifah recalls. "A lot of this is in the way we conceptualise the role of the woman, though that is being broken down very slowly and gradually."

"This takes time. For us it took 50 years but what we've achieved has gotten more modern and progressive."

Today, NCWO is advocating for policies such as a minimum 30% representation of women in high decision-making levels in the public and private sectors. It is also focusing on ensuring that women actively participate and equally benefit from the NTP.

"We conducted a road show for the NGOs and grassroots women to gauge their understanding of the NTP," elaborates Sharifah. "This is also to identify issues and obstacles faced by women and receive suggestions on how to enhance their partici-

pation in the transformation programme. The feedback will then be used to improve the NCWO Transformation Programme for Women and will serve as our input into government policies."

In considering future economic opportunities for women, Sharifah prefers to push for entrepreneurship compared to just being employed or be employable. "There is more flexibility [in this]," she says. "Women have passion, and can be good at producing and marketing products."

To encourage women in entrepreneurship, NCWO participates in the Teman 1 Azam programme with Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia to educate women on establishing businesses. "We teach them how to register a company, and if they are manufacturing food, for example, we get the Food Technology department to help with packaging," Sharifah explains. "We also find networks for them in marketing [their products]. It's a whole process that we help them with and we have graduated 70 entrepreneurs so far."

On the whole, Sharifah is optimistic about the future of women in Malaysia, emphasising the importance of harnessing the talents they bring. "Otherwise, it's a loss to the country. But I see the future as bright because there are going to be a lot of forceful women in the work place," she says. "Things will move, and at a very fast pace. Women should not be latent talent, but must rise to the challenge confidently because they have the knowledge and skills to move the nation forward." ■

**“ WOMEN SHOULD NOT BE LATENT TALENT, BUT MUST RISE TO THE CHALLENGE CONFIDENTLY BECAUSE THEY HAVE THE KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS TO MOVE THE NATION FORWARD. ”**  
SHARIFAH



# Putting more women in the boardroom

Tan Sri Datuk Dr Rafiah Salim is confident about increasing the representation of women in boardrooms. As the director of NAM Institute for the Empowerment of Women (NIEW), she is concerned about plugging the leaking talent pipeline, which leads to a low supply of senior women leaders in the corporate sector. "That leaking pipeline is a reality; we lose a lot of women at ages 30 to 35," she says. "The result is that we have fewer women [in the workforce] at the higher levels."

Established in 2006, NIEW on a larger scope is an agency under Malaysia's Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development. While its main mandate is to empower women from NAM (non-aligned movement) countries through activities, NIEW has a major role to play in equalising the gender ratio on corporate boardrooms across the nation, an importance that is becoming increasingly recognised. In 2011, the government announced a policy for locally listed companies to have at least 30% sitting on in their boards of directors, a target to be achieved by 2016.

"We already have nearly 30% women in managerial level [positions]," says Rafiah. "So, as we move ahead, we shouldn't have problems in getting women onto the boards."

In light of this policy, NIEW is tasked with filling the gap. Its Women Directors' Programme was launched a year ago to provide capable female talent. "The basis is to have a pipeline of qualified women to sit on the board, so our role is to manage and train women to become competent directors, even though I think they already exist," says Rafiah. The programme attracted over 200 women last year; this year, 500 will attend.

To participate in this programme, applicants have to sit for an online assessment to ensure they meet the appropriate levels of qualification. One-on-one coaching is also given prior to the assessment. "If you don't meet the requirements, you cannot enter the registry," explains Rafiah, adding that this registry serves as a resource for companies seeking board members.

"We want qualified women with a certain amount of experience who are able to sit as non-executive directors," she clarifies. For that reason, only those aged 45 and above are eligible.

"We'd like to include those who are just retiring or about to retire in the next few years, because they will soon be available to sit on boards of directors. We may lower the age limit as we go along because these are the women who will rise up in the future."

The programme involves three modules that encompass technical knowledge and soft skills.

The first module instructs participants on technical aspects: Company acts, corporate governance and financial language. The second module comprises boardroom skills and the third gives participants a chance to practice what they have learnt in a simulated boardroom.

"We bring male directors in to have a [mock] board meeting; we give them a case study and at the end of the session, we tell them what they did right or wrong," says Rafiah.

After one has gone through the programme, networking and being proactive are highly encouraged. "You have to make sure people know you are available to be appointed; you can't just sit and wait to get on a board," stresses Rafiah. "Women don't ask enough about business opportunities, whereas men do. And really, the nomination of directors should be done professionally. Currently, nomination of directors is done on the golf course or through an old boys' network."

"So going ahead," she adds, "The nomination committees for the boards of Bursa Malaysia should adopt a more professional way of recruiting directors."

However, Rafiah emphasises that this policy implementation is not merely meant to be a quota for women to fill. "When you look at universities that go by merit, you get about 60% female participation rates. So, when we want 30% [women on boards], it is a minimum target that we strategise to achieve because women don't want quotas."

In the long run, NIEW targets to train 1,000 women and to have the Malaysian corporate world be pragmatic enough to adopt the policy. She observes that high-performing companies tend to have more female board members, compared with the bottom-ranked ones that are male dominated.

"We hope to avoid legislating this policy, I don't believe in forcing people because then women will get appointed only because they are women and companies don't want to get delisted," she opines. "I don't want to see that in Malaysia."

Yet the biggest challenge in achieving this, Rafiah concludes, is in changing the mindset of both men and women alike. "Some women feel it is their sole responsibility to raise their family when it is a joint effort... this is unfair for women and for the nation. The country invests so much on education and we educate women based on merit, but when a woman leaves the workforce, the government doesn't get its return on investment."

"How can we become a high-income nation if we are not harnessing 50% of our population at the right level?" — By Emily Chow ■

**“ HOW CAN WE BECOME A HIGH-INCOME NATION IF WE ARE NOT HARNESSING 50% OF OUR POPULATION AT THE RIGHT LEVEL? ”**

RAFIAH





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## HOUSEWIVES ENHANCEMENT AND REACTIVATE TALENT SCHEME (HEARTS) PROGRAMME

### 1 Malaysia Support for Housewives

#### PURPOSE

To increase the percentage of employable women in the labour market from 46% to 55% to achieve the status of developed nation 2020

#### OBJECTIVE

- To train educated housewives in the latent workforce in specialised fields that would enable them to actively participate in the economic growth of the country while maintaining their status quo as housewives
- To provide a platform for housewives to acquire new skills that would enable them to work from home and contribute to the increase of their household's income

#### TARGET GROUP

- Educated housewives or single mothers (Diploma and above) who have stopped working
- Aged between 30 to 50 years old
- Malaysian citizen

#### PROGRAMME

- Pre-Contract Examination (PCE) and Takaful Examination Basic (TEB)
- Translation
- Script Writing
- Website Development and Maintenance
- System Application Development
- Social Media Management
- Research
- Certified Project Management
- Consultancy / Train-the-Trainer

#### BENEFIT

- Upgrade in knowledge and skill of the housewives in specific value-added fields
- Increase in the number of employable women in the labour market



EMPOWERING WOMEN

# LEADING LADIES

What spurred these female CEOs to reach for the skies?

## A role model

BY JENNIFER JACOBS

**D**atuk Dr Norraesah Mohamad, the executive chairman of MyEG Services Bhd, is a formidable woman packed in a tiny frame. She takes no nonsense, brooks no sexism and when told that women would have to go for courses and take tests to be on the boards of companies (to fulfil Securities Commission Malaysia's requirement of 30% women on the said boards), she calmly suggested that men be required to do the same.

Norraesah started out as a simple village girl in Bayan Lepas, Penang, in the days before the free trade zone and semiconductor companies. The youngest of eight children, she witnessed how her mother, who could neither read nor write, struggled to bring up her eight children when her husband, a rubber smallholder, passed away suddenly. Norraesah was just 5½.

"I remember my mother kneeling on the prayer mat, weeping. She was so helpless and she had to look after the family without having the means, without fully understanding. All she knew to do was work hard. At that moment, I swore to myself that I would not only work hard, I would have the knowledge, I would be smart," she remembers.

At the time, some of the men in her village were starting to make a name for themselves. But there was no female role model, no woman the girls could look up to, whose path they could emulate. So, young Norraesah decided very matter-of-factly, that she would be one.

She worked hard at school, trying to be the best in everything. And when she was in Standard Six, a particularly beloved teacher, Mr Ang, encouraged her to apply for Malay Girls College (MGC) (now Tunjku Kurshiah College).

"As far as we were concerned, this was a very elite school and he told me that only two girls were picked from every state. When I heard that, I wanted to be special, I wanted to be one of the two," she says.

So, Norraesah tore a page from her exercise book and wrote her application in pencil. Then she posted it and waited confidently for a reply. "Surprise, surprise, surprise, I was accepted."

Her experience at MGC was the making of her: "There were children of district officers, girls from the royal family and poorer students like me from the village. But the environment was like an English boarding school and we never felt the difference. The friendships that we built have lasted a lifetime."

After college, she read economics at Universiti Malaya. And then she applied for a job with the government.

"I was one of the first 10 ladies to join the civil service in my batch. There was a tough selection process. You had to apply and they called you for an interview. I think I got in because I was outspoken," she remembers with a laugh.

It happened like this. Norraesah was outside waiting for her interview

when she suddenly realised that she had left all her certificates at home. She told the girl after her to go first as she rushed home. When she got back, the interviewers had already seen the following three candidates and as she entered the room, one of the interviewers told her she had been disqualified for failing to be present when her name was called.

She took the news calmly: "I said, 'Thank you very much for being so truthful. You don't waste my time and I don't waste yours.' And I walked out. They called me back. And I was selected."

She started out at the Ministry of Trade and Industry, doing international trade negotiations. "That gave me a lot of international exposure. I was doing bilateral and multilateral trade. So, I was exposed to the World Bank, the World Trade Organisation. I was interacting with people who were deemed to be experts in their fields and that built up my confidence even more." This was because she quickly realised that "expert" is a flexible term and those who were honoured with the title may not have been as good as everyone considered them. "You could be an expert too, if you chose to go work for the IMF (International Monetary Fund) or World Bank. But we were all of an equal standard. There was never any time when I felt inadequate. Sometimes, I didn't have enough knowledge, but that was not the same as feeling inferior. If I didn't know enough about something, I could always read up on it.

"I was always the first to admit that I didn't know enough about certain things. I think it's important to admit the fact that you don't know, but realise that you can do something about it. Not knowing doesn't make you inadequate. All you need to do is furnish yourself with more information," she says. It was in this ministry that she first encountered the glass ceiling. "There were three others with me — Hardev, Kalsom and Aminah — and we were deemed to be smart, hardworking lady officers. But when there was an exercise for promotion, they brought in people from other ministries to take up the positions above us."

The women in the ministry were outraged. But so were the men. In effect, all of them had been passed up for promotion. But it took the outspoken Norraesah to say something about it. "I said if these people were coming to take up the positions that we ought to have been considered for, it clearly showed that we were neither good nor efficient. If that was the case, when you took these new people in, clearly you should be transferring us out because if we remain, logically, we were being retained at the expense of the overall efficiency of the ministry."

It did the trick. Two weeks later, the new appointees were transferred back to their respective ministries and Norraesah and her colleagues were promoted from within.

But at the time, she says, they never

felt there was a difference between the men and women of the ministry. "The guys were our peers and we were just as smart as them, if not smarter. My fellow ladies were very vocal, articulate and hardworking. The men tended to take a step back when we were there. They were a bit wary and there was no way they could bully us."

Because Norraesah speaks her mind, men tend to tread very carefully around her; but not always. "I remember when the government announced that there should be 30% women on the boards of public companies and I was appointed to one board. As I was being introduced to the other members, one man piped up, saying this new regulation was ridiculous and one woman on board was one woman too many. I just looked at him and said, 'I feel sorry for you. It's not worth responding to that.'"

Sometimes, she says, the sexism is couched in an apparent compliment. "I remember on another occasion when I noticed I was the only woman on a particular board of a listed company and said we should have at least two more women. One board member said, 'One of you is equal to three women.' And I said, 'Am I supposed to feel flattered?'"

She points out that there's a big field of smart, talented and articulate women who take their jobs very seriously and read their papers before board meetings so they come in prepared and can argue certain points. "Some men call them fussy, but they are simply doing their job under good corporate governance."

Another thing she takes issue with is women who refuse to reach out and help other women. "I'm the executive chairman of MyEG but I am a woman and why should I deny the fact? You cannot feel that you've made it on your own, so you will leave other women to fight their own battles. Our society is such that you still need to reach out. And your success does not mean you belong to the male fraternity." ■



**I WAS ALWAYS THE FIRST TO ADMIT THAT I DIDN'T KNOW ENOUGH ABOUT CERTAIN THINGS. I THINK IT'S IMPORTANT TO ADMIT THE FACT THAT YOU DON'T KNOW, BUT REALISE THAT YOU CAN DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT.**

**NORRAESAH**



## It takes a woman

In 2008, Lynn Cheah, CEO of Eastspring Investments Bhd, took a career break to take care of her two-year-old son. "The Chinese believe that two to five [years of age] are critical years in a child's development and I was feeling guilty. I was working long hours and my son was always left with the maid. So, I quit."

Cheah, who had started Prudential's asset management arm as a greenfield project with Mark Toh, was used to working frenetically. "We started with nothing. We got the licence, the office, put everything together and launched the fund in 2003." She worked her way up to chief investment officer before she left.

Before that, she ran her own business, a little juice bar in Desa Sri Hartamas. Having been an auditor, investment analyst and fund manager previously, Cheah was intrigued by the notion of seeing how capital was actually employed in setting up a business. Cheah planned everything to a T but was thrown by a factor — which she found to be beyond her control — the people. She would train up managers, who then left. It was a monotonous regularity, like every time a new Coffee Bean outlet opened its doors.

Finally, when her former boss at BHLB Pacific Trust Management Bhd, Toh, came to see her and told her she shouldn't be running a juice bar but managing funds, she sold the business to a Japanese lady with bakery connections.

When she took her career break, Cheah hadn't planned to return to the workforce. But in 2010, her former CEO asked if she would. "I told him I was not interested in coming back as a fund manager. I knew how to manage funds and I didn't have to join an asset management company to do that. I could look for value stocks

and build up my own portfolio."

He asked if she was interested in coming back in a general management role. Cheah agreed. She returned in glory as deputy CEO. A month later, the-then CEO Suraj Mishra quit and Cheah was bumped up to CEO.

"I joined in November, he left in December, and I was thrown into the deep end. It was very tough for the first year but it was a very fulfilling and rewarding experience," she says.

Cheah was the fourth CEO in three years. When she took the position, people were wondering just how long she would last. "I had to really prove to them that I was no fly-by-night and that I was actually here to stay. It does help that I'm local and some of the staff were my ex-colleagues when I was chief investment officer. They knew me and that helped."

She managed to stabilise the company and lower the staff attrition rate. She did two things straight off; ensure that people had the right job fit and spruce up the office.

"Before I joined, there was a directive to reduce the headcount. What this meant was that there was a lot of disruption to some of the staff who had to assume roles they were not hired for. When you shrink the headcount, sometimes you just deploy people to positions to make the numbers look good but that's not right because sometimes people are not meant to do the job that they're not hired to do," she says.

Cheah had a heart-to-heart talk with the people who had been labelled "non-performers", the ones who were very unhappy and had already made up their minds to leave. "I sat down with each of them and asked them what they really wanted and what they were interested in. So, there was some reshuffling so people could have the right job fit. At the same time, I looked for staff whom I knew were capable. They had delivered but had never been given the opportunity to prove their leadership."

NORRAESAH (PATRICK GOH/THE EDGE), CHEAH (KENNY YAP/THE EDGE), SHIDAH (SUHAIMI YUSUF/THE EDGE)



## EMPOWERING WOMEN



# The four Cs of success

I knew with the right coaching and guidance, they would do well in leadership roles.”

Having identified the high potentials, she promoted them, which is one of the best things she could have done to raise morale. “The worst thing a company could do is to keep hiring from the outside to fill vacancies. I also started the succession-planning programme with HR [the human resources department].”

In a short time, she had stabilised the company and the resignations reduced substantially.

Being a woman, she was also sensitive to her surroundings. She knew that the mismatched carpets and the generally rundown ambience were not conducive to either productivity or even general employee happiness.

“I am very interested in interior design and I thought you don’t have to spend a lot of money to make your office look good. So, we just changed the carpets and the workstation panels to a more cheerful, coloured fabric. A few cosmetic touches here and there and the office felt brighter and more cheerful. I also created a pantry for them so they could get together there for meals instead of eating alone at their own cubicles. And I started the birthday gatherings, which has been discontinued,” she says.

It didn’t cost a lot of money, but it demonstrated sensitivity to the feelings of the staff. They felt seen and valued and it brought them together, working towards a common cause.

Cheah also examined the company’s HR policies and changed certain ones to make them more staff-friendly. For instance, she increased maternity leave from two to three months for the first child.

Why only the first child? “I need to

get the buy-in from managers who say they can’t afford to have their staff go off for three months at a time every time they give birth because some of them have babies every year.”

There is no place in the present office but if they ever move (as they probably will since the Prudential group of companies is growing so rapidly), she is pushing to have a nursery. “We don’t have a space at the moment but we’re expanding. And it’s not only us. We share the building with Prudential Life and also, Takaful.

“We’re expanding pretty rapidly and pretty soon, we will have to look for a bigger office. It is already in our project manager’s plans that if we ever shift, there will be a nursery in our new office,” says Cheah. The company will be looking to outsource the running of the nursery.

Has she ever encountered a glass ceiling in her rise to the top? Cheah shakes her head. “I realise that in many organisations like law firms or accounting firms, it’s very difficult for a woman to make partnership because you have to be in the organisation for a certain number of years.

“But investment is very different. It’s not about how many years you have served with the company or how much loyalty you have; it’s about results, it’s about performance. For instance, I did very well as a fund manager so I was given more funds and more responsibility. The culture in Prudential is that there is no discrimination between men and women. There are already two women CEOs in Asia for our local business units, myself and another lady in Taiwan,” she says. **E**

**“IN INVESTMENT, IT IS VERY DIFFERENT. IT’S NOT ABOUT HOW MANY YEARS YOU SERVED WITH THE COMPANY OR HOW MUCH LOYALTY YOU HAVE; IT’S ABOUT RESULTS, IT’S ABOUT PERFORMANCE.”**

CHEAH

Shidah Ahmad of Agilent Technologies is one of the top women in the largely male-dominated free trade zone in Penang but it is a position she wears lightly, refusing to focus on her gender.

Agilent, which chalked up revenues of US\$7 billion last year, is a US-based company that provides scientific solutions and equipment to researchers, scientists and engineers.

“What do I do for the company? I’m the vice-president and general manager for order fulfilment for a big part of the company. Basically, it covers all the way from when you take an order, making sure you can fulfill the order. So, it’s planning for it, making sure there’s enough capacity, buying the materials for it, building it, shaping it and ensuring the customers get to it.

“So, I run a global organisation and I have teams that report to me from the US, Europe, Singapore, Japan ... basically from all over the world,” she says.

How did Shidah get to where she is now? Through sheer hard work, ability and confidence.

She has a favourite story about when she was part of a team in the US that had to do a transformation project for the company. “I was not just the only woman on the team, but the only Asian as well. That was just a starting group but after two weeks, they told me they wanted me on the team for the whole two years.

“It’s not about gender, it’s about capability. And if you have the right level of confidence, you can go far,” she says.

Malaysia has the highest concentration of global vice-presidents for Agilent, which provides measurement outside the US, seven in all. Out of that, four are women. “This is a demonstration of Malaysian capabilities, but more importantly, the capabilities of the women here.”

While she didn’t start out in Agilent (it was then Hewlett-Packard), she considers this her first real

job, and she has moved through the company doing various things. “I’ve been in Agilent and Hewlett-Packard for 28 years now. Since the day I joined, I’ve done many different jobs, worked in different countries ... most of the time I was here in Malaysia. I worked for a couple of years in the US and a couple of years in Singapore. It allowed me a global perspective on things and helped me understand the business processes and technology in Agilent.”

But she admits that in the Penang free trade zone, at least, she is one of the few. “If you look at it traditionally, manufacturing leadership has always been held by men.

“Today, there’s no longer a problem. You know the statistics; more than 60% of the university graduates are women. So, we have plenty of women talent right now. I have manufacturing managers who report to me and one third of them are women,” she says.

One thing she had going for her at the time was the congenial environment at Agilent. “If you look at our leadership programmes, there’s no bias towards any particular gender. We have a culture of appreciating diversity, being very inclusive and providing equal opportunities.

“When people ask me what it took to get here, I think of my diamonds and the four Cs — cut, clarity, colour and carat. The four Cs for successful women are courage, continuous learning, commitment and the ability to embrace and love change,” she points out.

But in themselves, the Cs are not enough. “They hinge on passion. I am extremely passionate about what I do and I think that is really the centre of it all.”

Shidah thinks women have a natural advantage over men in some ways: “We are much more collaborative and we always think about how to get a consensus going. Decisions made through collaboration are much better because they are supported by everyone.”

She also thinks that women are naturally more persuasive and better at multitasking. “You’re a mother, a wife, a manager at work, a sister, a friend. Somehow, our culture and upbringing develops us women to be better multitaskers and when you have a global job, this plays to a big advantage.”

And finally, women are more meticulous. “We go into the details and find out where things are not right and where they need to be improved. These natural traits put women into a position of advantage,” adds Shidah.

So, if women are naturally fit for corporate life, why do they drop off along the way? Many times, she feels, it is not the men who hold women back but women themselves. They lack confidence in their own abilities and create their own glass ceiling.

It’s a question of culture. In Malaysia, she says, men are still seen as breadwinners and women, homemakers. “Because of this, the men can say

that career is number one and focus on that. For women, we have a lot more to balance and without a strong support system — be it the government, the family or the workplace — it would be very hard.”

The good news is that things are changing, in the workplace and in the family. But more needs to be done. Not just in terms of childcare but in elderly care as well. Shidah points out that people are living longer and it usually falls on the daughter to take care of elderly parents.

And if they quit their jobs to take care of their parents and look to come back, their course does not run smooth. “We need to make sure you can re-skill and re-tool these people who have gone and come back so they can fit back into the workplace.”

For Agilent, this is not a problem. “We had a person in HR who followed her husband to China for five years. Now, they’re back in Malaysia, we’ve rehired her. She knows a lot about China and how the networks operate there.”

Shidah points out that you need to have the right mentality to actually take a look at what they have been doing since they have been away and how they can contribute to the organisation.

But, she adds, people coming in should also be realistic about their expectations. “You could have left the company as a senior manager, but that does not mean you can come in as one.”

Shidah also thinks employers need to allow for more flexibility if they are to retain their female staff. “Sitting at a desk eight hours a day doesn’t mean someone is doing good work. You have to manage by objectives.”

At Agilent, staff are not expected to clock in and facilities for working at home are provided. “Today, I run a global organisation. If I were expected to be in the office, I would be working round the clock between handling Southeast Asia, Europe and the US. Nobody can do that. So, we have facilities so that I can work from home.” And it’s not just a phone and a laptop. It’s the same infrastructure at work. A computer is set up so the employee can log onto the system in a secured manner, and a phone with the capability to teleconference.

It doesn’t have childcare right now, because, situated in the middle of the Free Trade Zone with borders for tax and customs, this would be too complicated. “We find that flexi-hours work better for mothers.”

Her final piece of advice? “Stay in the game, girls, don’t quit. But set your expectations correctly. Don’t go in there and expect to be accepted straight away because it won’t be like that. You have to demonstrate your capabilities and people will respect you more, and all your natural talent as a woman will work in your favour. If some people can’t see it, it’s their loss.” — By Jennifer Jacobs **E**

**“STAY IN THE GAME, GIRLS, DON’T QUIT. BUT SET YOUR EXPECTATIONS CORRECTLY.”**  
SHIDAH



**EMPOWERING WOMEN**

# AGAINST ALL ODDS

The ratio of women to men falls when it comes to moving up the career ladder even though the former are as educated as the latter. This is because many women leave to take care of the family. However, here, we feature several women who have successfully climbed up the career ladder despite the odds.

**A**cross many professional trades in Malaysia, the percentage of women in entry-level jobs seems to be equal with or higher than that of men. In tracing the gender ratio of employees up the career ladder, however, it widens in favour of the masculine sex.

“The majority of employees at the entry level are women, even in terms of pupils,” legal practitioner and partner Faizah Jamaludin observes of her law firm, Skrine, one of the largest in the nation. “But once you go up the ranks to equity partners [firm shareholders], there aren’t many women.”

Based on the gender breakdown of The Malaysian Bar, which stands today at about 15,000 members, the same trend is seen in the legal profession at the macro level as well. “The gender ratio of the Bar, which all lawyers in Peninsula

Malaysia are members of, is almost equal, as the lawyers that come in are primarily female,” says Bar Council deputy CEO Chin Oy Sim. “But if you look at the older [age] group, it’s predominantly male. This means that women don’t face significant obstacles entering the profession, but rising up to positions of decision-making [is another thing].”

The bigger percentage of women in entry-level jobs reflects the higher number of female university graduates, which means that although women have come to equal measure with their male counterparts in tertiary education, they still face problems in rising up the ranks.

“Law in itself isn’t male-dominated because we are producing either equal or more law female graduates,” opines Faizah, who says it isn’t uncommon for her to be the lone female in a meeting room. “But I agree that it is male-dominated

in the upper echelons of the industry.”

Faizah is one who has successfully breached the male-dominated world, having been named as a leading competition lawyer in Malaysia by the International Who’s Who of Business Lawyers 2013, and as a leading oil and gas lawyer in Malaysia by the International Financial Law Review 2013. She currently heads Skrine’s oil and gas practice, which in itself is mostly male-dominated compared to the law industry as a whole.

“In this sector, I’ve had foreign reporters who interview me or people writing to me often assuming I’m male,” she shares. “They address me as ‘Mr Jamaludin’ and I’ve got articles quoting me as ‘he’. I’ve also had people call me Faizal, which is the male version of my given name.”

In the medical line, Dr Mary Cardosa has faced similar assumptions made against her gender. She currently serves at Hospital Selayang as a consultant anaesthesiologist and pain-management specialist, and was president of the Malaysian Medical Association (MMA) from 2011 to 2012.

“The MMA is historically predominantly male in leadership. I was its first female president,” says Cardosa, who remembers hearing unfavourable comments at her installation.

“I also recall being interested in obstetrics and gynaecology as a student, so I told my professor I was interested in this specialty,” she reminisces. “This was in the early 1980s, where most obstetricians were male. His first response to me was: ‘Do you want to get married and have children?’ I was really angry, because I knew that if a male colleague had asked my question, he would never have gotten that response.”

Cardosa believes times have changed since the low 30%-rate of female students in her medical school class. “In my generation, women weren’t as career-oriented but I believe there are more women than men in medical school now.”

Despite this shift towards career development though, women are still expected to effectively juggle work and family simultaneously, says Bar Council Chin.

“The reality is there is still that expectation



**WOMEN LEADERSHIP HAS A POSITIVE IMPACT ON THE COMPANY, BECAUSE IF YOU DON'T IMPLEMENT THESE CHANGES, YOU LOSE TALENT. YOU'VE GOT TO BE UNDERSTANDING AND TO BE IN A POSITION TO INFLUENCE COMPANY POLICIES FOR THE BETTER. FAIZAH**



**WE SHOULDN'T BE THERE [IN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS] JUST TO BRING DIVERSITY, WE SHOULD BE THERE BECAUSE WE FORM HALF THE POPULATION... [AS A WOMAN] YOU CAN'T EXPECT A FREE RIDE OR THINK YOU CAN'T DO SOMETHING EITHER JUST BECAUSE YOU'RE FEMALE. ULTIMATELY, YOU HAVE TO TAKE GENDER OUT OF THE EQUATION IN WHATEVER WORK YOU DO. CARDOSA**



**WE MUST BEAR IN MIND THAT WOMEN HAVE HISTORICALLY FACED A GREAT DEAL OF DISCRIMINATION... A TEMPORARY PREFERENTIAL TREATMENT IS NECESSARY TO LEVEL THE PLAYING FIELD, BUT ONCE EQUAL OPPORTUNITY IS ACHIEVED, THE QUOTAS SHOULD BE DISCONTINUED.**

CHIN



## EMPOWERING WOMEN



that women bear the brunt of childcare and running a household in addition to whatever job she may hold outside," she opines. "I'm definitely supportive of flexi hours and measures to help women stay in the workforce to achieve the careers they want, but a problem with this is that they don't exactly address the root cause."

"These initiatives do help, but it still doesn't change the balance of gender division of labour," Chin continues. "It's saying to the women, 'You're still responsible, we'll just make it easier for you,' but we're not tackling the root cause. We need to look at the bigger question of how we can change the gender division of labour in the domestic sphere."

These expectations have led women to pursue less demanding careers or take some time off for family commitments. Faizah has done both throughout her career; she switched from private practice at Skrine to become ExxonMobil's in-house counsel for eight years before taking a year or so off.

"The trend is that many female lawyers would choose to be in-house counsels, and from my experience it was more manageable as the hours were more 9 to 5, compared to the trials you'd have to attend and the odd hours and weekends you'd have to work as a litigation lawyer," she explains. "I'm not saying it's an easier option, but it's one that many people choose due to the demands of raising a family. When I came back to private practice, my children were older, so it was more manageable for me."

Likewise, Cardoso explains that there are also certain specialties in the medical line that are favoured more by either gender. "There is a perception is that [anaesthesiology] is less demanding and offers more flexibility than if you were a surgeon," she says, estimating that there are about three women for every man in her specialty.

"Anaesthesiology is seen more as a supportive role [where you work in the] background, behind the scenes, while surgeons get all the glamour," Cardoso reckons. "People think that being a surgeon demands more hours than anaesthesiologists, but that's not true. We have to be there before and after the surgery, so it's actually more demanding... as the patient's lifeline."

Apart from having to make alternative career choices, Chin laments how female progression in the legal profession is hindered by family obligations. "There are women who try to work part time but are then told they can't become partners; they can only become consultants because they can't commit to what is needed as a partner."

"Partners are expected to socialise and take clients out for dinner and drinks, or cultivate relationships with potential clients. So, if you aren't able to do that, it becomes an issue."

For Faizah, she attributes her integration of work and family life to the support she receives from home and her mentors at work. During her time off, it was her mentors who advocated for her return to Skrine as a salaried partner. "I was very lucky because I had two mentors who pushed for me to come back. They held the door open for me, and once I got in I had to prove myself but if it weren't for them I wouldn't be here today."

"It wasn't a conscious decision on my part, it was all these people in my life who encouraged me to come back, so that's what I did," Faizah continues. "So, as a woman, I think it's important to have a female mentor who understands the demands of being a mother and lawyer while leading a practice at the same time."

As over a third of Skrine's current partners are female, part-time work is now implemented for the firm's lawyers. "The implementation was pushed by a female partner, and I think we are very progressive in that," Faizah says. "Women leadership has a positive impact on the company, because if you don't implement these changes, you lose talent. You've got to be understanding and be in a position to influence company policies for the better."

While there are external constraints that keep women from reaching high-level positions in the workforce, there may also be internal reasons that are holding women back. Chin, for example, notes that the Bar Council committee members are predominantly male. "You have to put yourself forward as a candidate

and run for a position to be on the council, and the candidates who put themselves forward are predominantly male," she observes. "So what is stopping women from contesting?"

Based on Cardoso's opinion, women don't fight for leadership positions because they don't feel compelled to be thrust in the limelight. "Women push for their agendas by getting things done rather than by being in the forefront. It doesn't worry us that we don't get the recognition," she says. "But another question is, do women have to embody such [specific] characteristics to be perceived as successful? It's a bit of a double-edged sword, for if you are loud and authoritative, they

may call you derogatory names."

When it comes to including more women in leadership positions, both Chin and Cardoso opine that efforts shouldn't be in place as a permanent measure or solely for diversity and quota's sake.

"For me, these are only temporary affirmative action to address historical discrimination. When you set quotas, the criticism often levied is that the women who get into these positions are not as good as the men who would have succeeded in the absence of the quotas," says Chin.

"However, we must bear in mind that women have historically faced a great deal of discrimi-

nation, and as a result there is clear inequality between men and women," she continues. "A temporary preferential treatment is necessary to level the playing field, but once equal opportunity is achieved, the quotas should be discontinued," she says.

"We shouldn't be there [in leadership positions] just to bring diversity, we should be there because we form half the population," adds Cardoso. "[As a woman] you can't expect a free ride or think you can't do something either just because you're female. Ultimately, you have to take gender out of the equation in whatever work you do." — *By Emily Chow*



HERMÈS. PRECIOUS TIME



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## EMPOWERING WOMEN

# VIEWS FROM MARS

Corporate Malaysia's CEOs are predominantly men. Many don't give enough importance to the gender diversity agenda. But some do. We speak to three of them: Jason Crimson of Kimberly-Clark Regional Services (M), Rajeev Peshawaria of ICLIF Leadership and Governance Centre and Johan Mahmood Merican, CEO of Talent Corporation Malaysia Bhd.

## Pay more than lip service to being diverse and inclusive

Jason Crimson thinks that employers in Malaysia need to get on with the programme. While many spout popular policy buzzwords such as "inclusive" and "diverse", their decision-making process and what they take into account to arrive at these decisions show them to be anything but.

Crimson, Kimberly-Clark Regional Services (M) Sdn Bhd director of Asia-Pacific shared services, has two stories he likes to tell. The first is about how his wife — who was a senior audit manager of one of the large hotel chains in Malaysia — left her job to follow him on an assignment to the US. While there, she kept busy, working for a company in Manhattan before joining a global IT company.

But when she returned, Malaysian employers were reluctant to hire her. The issue was that she had left her job to follow her husband. Did this mean she was not committed? Or that her career was not important to her?

"They were pretty standard questions but the issue is the conclusions they drew from those answers. If you make an assessment that because this person left with her husband means she is not as focused or committed as someone who didn't go, it's pretty punitive on the person who made the call," he says.

She eventually got a job but decided to freelance instead of working for any one company. "So, it's worked out and she is keeping busy. But it was the whole experience. You assess someone based on his skills, his experience and the companies he has worked for. Why was this even an issue?"

Crimson is not sure if this was the silver bullet or if it was something else. "But the line of questioning needs to evolve, clearly."

How would Crimson handle a similar interview? "I would ask if the candidate chose to work while he was in the US and what experiences he picked up, what challenges he faced when he

moved there. It's an issue of how this person reacts to the new environment because that reflects an ability to bridge cultures and in my line of work, I need people who are adaptable and have the ability to bridge cultures."

But that's it. "It wouldn't be at the back of my head that the moment this person's husband goes somewhere else, she's going to go. It doesn't matter. In fact, I'll try to hook her up with a job in the company wherever they're going if they're willing. And that's not just for the women but also for all my staff."

"So, that's the process and that's what I would do during a similar interview. We make sure we do not ask questions that propagate any bias," he adds.

The second story has to do with a woman he interviewed for a job. "We were hiring team leaders for our shared services and this candidate was extremely qualified and had the relevant experience and right skill sets for the role."

"As we were going through the usual questions, she suddenly told me that she was three months' pregnant and asked if this would be a problem. I said, first of all, congratulations and second, why would it be a problem? And she mentioned that the company that had previously offered her a job rescinded the offer after the medical test showed that she was pregnant."

Crimson was taken aback. "Many companies have beautiful policies in place but it's not the policies but the decision-making that counts. It's what the representatives of the companies say, the questions they ask, the judgements they make. When you represent the company in selection, in hiring, what comes out?"

Anyway, Kimberly-Clark hired the candidate in question. "She gave birth six months later and went on maternity leave. We planned for it and managed some back-up arrangements for somebody to cover some elements of her job. She was very responsible, made sure that all her work was done and the handover was done properly."

"Then in two months, she came back, an active and very successful

team member of the organisation, contributing very well. So what's the issue?"

Discriminating against a female candidate because she is pregnant just doesn't make sense to Crimson. "The fact of the matter is that any of my other female employees can go on maternity

leave at any point in time. Do I then question myself about hiring them? No. It's just part and parcel of business and you just have to have a plan for it."

"But for a lot of people, they feel they will get into trouble if they hire women who will be going on maternity leave. Your operations, processes, in fact your business itself, should allow you to adjust accordingly when life happens. And maternity is life," he points out.

Crimson says if a company is supposed to have policies that are inclusive and diverse, this shouldn't happen. "That may be the policy but how do you make it come alive through everyday

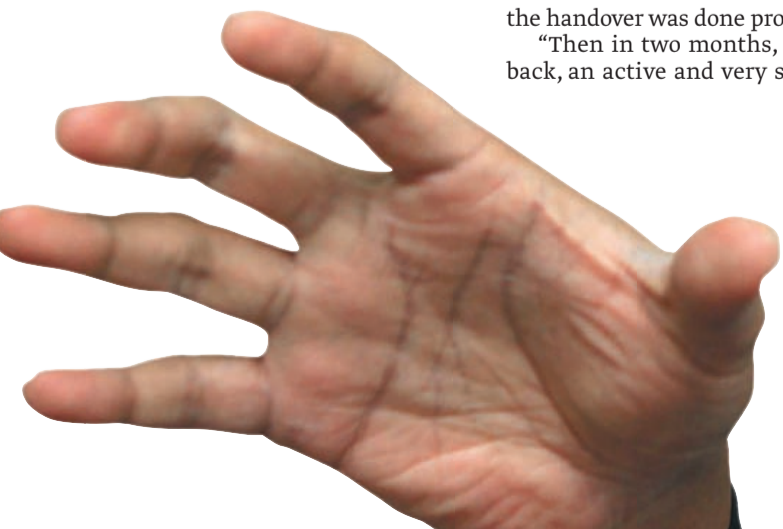
decisions? That's more important than having words on a paper or poster."

And even without a specific policy, you can exercise judgement. "If someone wants time off or if somebody needs to work from home, each team leader has the ability to judge what is reasonable and what can be done. These daily decisions are what give people flexibility."

Kimberly-Clarke has 85% female representation. And the policies apply to both men and women. "Men have the same flexibility but I think the women appreciate it a lot more." — By Jennifer Jacobs

**MANY COMPANIES HAVE BEAUTIFUL POLICIES IN PLACE BUT IT'S NOT THE POLICIES BUT THE DECISION-MAKING, WHICH COUNTS.**

CRIMSON





## EMPOWERING WOMEN



## Let them go but bring them back later

**Y**ou cannot fight nature and stop women from dropping out of the workforce for family reasons. But you can create a programme to help them re-enter it, a much more comprehensive one than what is available today.

Iclif Leadership and Governance Centre CEO and executive director Rajeev Peshawaria thinks this is such an obvious solution and he's a little surprised that no one seems to be doing it yet. Or at least, doing it properly.

"If you look at Catalyst Research, which is one of the largest research centres for women leadership and women in the workforce, it says there are so few women at the top because companies don't create the right conditions for women to progress and that there's a glass ceiling and an old boys' network and all that," he points out.

But Rajeev begs to differ: "My personal opinion is that while some of this is definitely true and every company can do better to make the environment more conducive for women, that is not the main reason.

"Contrary to what the data suggests, I have a view that it's not that we are not doing enough to create conditions for women to stay, it's that we have a natural leakage at a certain time in their lives when they opt out for family reasons and we don't do a good enough job to bring them back when they are ready to come back. And that's a big difference," he says.

"Very few companies in the world make it easy for a woman to come back after she's had a break of five to seven years. So, there is a huge talent pool of qualified women out there, well-educated women with over 10 years' experience we're not tapping into." Rajeev adds that if companies could find a meaningful way to reinstate them into the workforce, they would solve the problem of there being fewer women

at the top, once and for all.

"What I'm suggesting is some sort of re-MBA or a returnship for women who have been away from the workforce for five to seven years. Can companies sponsor a three-month re-MBA programme to help them catch up on all the things they have missed out on in the years they've been away? These women are brilliant and they have the experience. You just have to bring them back," he emphasises.

When he was in New York, Rajeev suggested this to the company he was working for. "And since we would be the main sponsors of the re-MBA programme, we would get the first right of refusal, after which we could open it up for other companies to hire from. I thought we could tie up with a university and do a joint programme. But the timing of the idea was bad, because the financial crisis hit us."

Since then, however, he's heard of other companies that have started a returnship programme. "To me, this is the largest source of untapped talent. There are people who want to come back but there has been a drop in the currency of their knowledge, or perhaps even their confidence, having been away for so long.

"Why can't we give them the opportunity to come back? They are now settled in life and much more stable. They can be superb assets to organisations that create the vehicle to bring them back. And once and for all, we would solve this problem of the lack of parity in numbers between men and women," he adds.

There is a clear business case for it. "It is proven without a doubt that companies that employ women at the top are more profitable, have more sustainable growth and are more sustainable in every way. There's enough research out there on this, so I don't need to reinvent the wheel by repeating it.

"It's also known that women are much better at multitasking than men and leadership is a multitasking ac-

tivity in the sense that it's not just about sitting in your high chair and giving commands and getting everybody to follow you blindly," Rajeev contends.

He adds that a leader is required to be both tough and compassionate and most men are not capable of doing both; but women are. "These are generalisations, I know, but generally speaking, women seem to have a more natural ability to practise tough love. They score higher on emotional intelligence tests and leadership is all about that."

It is also a proven fact that a more diverse workforce results in more innovation. "So, organisations with just men, and those too, from the same neighbourhood, are not going to be very innovative because they all think in the same way. You introduce gender diversity, you introduce cultural diversity, you're going to get differences of opinion and that's the birth of innovation. So, there's a whole host of reasons we should be looking at women," Rajeev says.

In Asia, particularly, he says, more women are graduating from the universities than men but we are losing them along the way. Which, he maintains, is fine. "It's going to take a long time where an equal number of men take a break in their careers to be home fathers. Hoping that this will happen and therefore the problem [of having women at the top] will go away will not solve the problem anytime soon.

"Nature has it that more women take breaks in their career for family reasons, so let's not challenge nature. But at the same time, let's not say, once you've gone, you can never come back. If TalentCorp [Talent Corp Malaysia Bhd] and other organisations can get together and create programmes to reinstate those women into the workforce, they will have solved the problem," he concludes.

— By Jennifer Jacobs

CRIMSON (MOHD IZWAN MOHD NAZAM/THE EDGE), RAJEEV (HARIS HASSAN/THE EDGE), JOHAN (ABDUL GHANI ISMAIL/THE EDGE)

## Women's participation is a business case

**I**f Malaysia can raise the participation of women in the workforce to around 60% (where Singapore is now), it means adding another 1.3 million people to the workforce.

Under the 10th Malaysia Plan, the target is to raise women's participation rate to 55% by 2015. A World Bank report showed that by increasing women in the Malaysian workforce to a more substantial level, it could help raise per capital income by some 23%. In 2007, a report by Goldman Sachs found that if the gender gap was closed, it could add 9% to the US' gross domestic product (GDP), 13% to Europe's and 16% to Japan's. These are very powerful numbers indeed, with huge implications for the countries' development of their talent pool and economic growth.

Yet, Corporate Malaysia has been slow to respond to the urgent need to boost women's participation in the workforce. Most still do not see this as a business case and more often than not, put it under corporate social responsibility (CSR).

"The business case is actually growing stronger, just like it is for Gen Y. There is a realisation that companies need to engage women [for their talent pool], yet not all are on board," laments Johan Mahmood Merican, CEO of Talent Corp Malaysia Bhd (TalentCorp).

He believes that while today's CEOs (many of whom are Baby Boomers) may be used to doing business a certain way, this mindset will have to change because of the shift in demographics. "In the 1980s, in Malaysian universities, the ratio was two guys to every female but today, this has reversed — it's two women to every guy. So, if this is the talent pipeline we have today, and if many

of the women leave because of family commitments midway in their career, companies will not have the talent to drive their business if they don't do something about it."

The fact that the ratio of women to men in the workforce falls as they climb up the career ladder also indicates a serious leakage problem that must be plugged urgently. By his reckoning, the severity of the leakage of women from the workforce is akin to the brain-drain problem of Malaysians leaving the country to work abroad. The magnitude of leakage of women from the workforce today, Johan opines, is almost equivalent to that of brain drain.

Given TalentCorp's mandate to address the talent issue in Malaysia under the Economic Transformation Programme, Johan has been tirelessly stepping up on efforts to address the gender issue in Malaysia's labour force. "We want to make a difference in this space," he says.

Some of the initiatives that will soon be rolled out include promoting flexible working arrangement policies, launching a nationwide programme for provision of crèche facilities (through tax incentives) and putting in place a cross-mentoring programme in Corporate Malaysia.

To put in place a cross-mentoring programme, Johan will be going on a recruitment drive for mentors. "It's like building Dumbledore's army [for the uninitiated, Dumbledore is the headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in the *Harry Potter* series]," he says with a chuckle.

These are areas in which Corporate Malaysia can do more, according to Johan. "Help us to help you, as I frequently say."

"It does not have to be complicated or costly, it just needs a mindset change in Corporate Malaysia," he stresses.

Companies, Johan says, will not have to start from ground zero simply because there are already existing best practices in this space. "There are organisations that are already doing this and successfully ... it is a solved problem. Of course, the implementation will not be easy, as you need to customise the programmes to suit the company," he adds.

Even so, TalentCorp finds the task involving greater corporate participation an uphill one. Hence, it is stepping up efforts to create greater awareness and develop a platform to share the best practices. "We engage the companies, offer carrots and at the same time apply tacit pressure to create a sense of urgency to get the results."

— By Anna Taing

**IT'S NOT THAT WE ARE NOT DOING ENOUGH TO CREATE CONDITIONS FOR WOMEN TO STAY, IT'S THAT WE HAVE A NATURAL LEAKAGE AT A CERTAIN TIME IN THEIR LIVES WHEN THEY OPT OUT FOR FAMILY REASONS AND WE DON'T DO A GOOD ENOUGH JOB TO BRING THEM BACK WHEN THEY ARE READY TO COME BACK. AND THAT'S A BIG DIFFERENCE.**  
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JOHAN



## EMPOWERING WOMEN

# ENTERPRISING WOMEN

Women are good in business. Tee May Yee and Lee Ee Vee, who set up The Last Polka, an independent ice cream making business in 2009, are enjoying the sweet taste of success. Juliana Chai brought in Red Army watches in 2008 and has three outlets today. They share their journeys.

## F&B is anyone's game

**W**hen it comes to the F&B industry, ice cream makers Tee May Yee and Lee Ee Vee of The Last Polka believe that the odds of making or breaking it are equal between the sexes.

Women, they say, will face the same barriers as men do in this line. "It's a mixed bag in this industry, unlike fashion or technology where gender roles are clearer cut," Tee opines. "I think it's a question of whether women in this industry have access to tangible things such as finances, or intangible things like support or confidence from investors."

Luckily, both Tee and Lee had sufficient support. Their independent ice-cream making business was initiated in late 2009 after the duo decided to break away from the corporate world.

Three years and 13 flavours later, they now distribute their ice cream throughout the Klang Valley via 13 restaurants and café outlets, including WHISK Espresso Bar + Bake Shop, Marmalade and Artisan Roast.

Tee credits part of their success to the great degree of understanding they've received from their experienced mentors. "When you're a newbie, you could go in [the industry] and people could just rip you off, but we've met some good people in our community as well as mentors in the industry," she says. "This has contributed to how we've grown, for there are no books you can read on the F&B business."

Lee chimes in: "It's important to surround yourself with people who know more than you, because they can give invaluable advice. It's also much easier when you have support from your family and friends rather than working on your own."

Despite equal barriers in the industry, the 30-year-olds still see more male than female ownership of restaurants or businesses. Lee opines that the cottage industry, however, has provided more opportunities for women to start their own establishments. These businesses are home-based ventures that produce artisanal products on a smaller scale, not unlike The Last Polka itself. "In this line, you tend to find women who are either self-taught or who have done a short course, rather than in big restaurants where you need more capital and energy," she says. "There are so many small home bakers out there, for example. With things like baking or dessert making, it's more of a passion project."

Hence, an increasing number of women are beginning to run their own

businesses these days, which could be a catalyst for others to follow suit, Lee thinks. "I think more and more women are going into businesses because it's about knowing that if someone else can do it, you can too," she says. "It inspires and motivates other women to get into it."

While cottage-industry ventures might not seem like a huge risk or investment to entrepreneurs running businesses on a larger scale, Lee thinks it's still risky because you have to be responsible for your products and in catering for your customers. "It's also a sacrifice of time, especially if you have a family," she says. "There really isn't any work-life balance during the first two years [of your business] when you have to put a lot of time into it. We were working seven days a week before we forced ourselves to rest for one day."

"As an entrepreneur, however," Lee continues, "your work-life balance really depends on what you want to achieve, and you have to ask yourself what is it that you want: Do you want to achieve a [work-life] balance, or are you a workaholic by nature? Once you attain financial [stability], it depends on how much [business] growth you want to achieve at the expense of your own time and family."

While women aren't at a disadvantage when it comes to achieving success in the F&B industry, Tee says there aren't necessarily many structures and policies in place to facilitate a work-life balance for them. "Support

systems exist in different degrees, depending on where you work and the country you're in," she says. "It's a [combination of a] community and the state that provides this support system. Community support exists in Malaysia; in Asia, it's fairly acceptable for your parents to help out with your kids, for example, but with regards to institutionalised support, we still have some way to go."

When it comes to The Last Polka, Lee and Tee intend to reciprocate the support they have received by giving back to the community through their products and monetary support. So far, The Last Polka has sponsored ice-cream for various children's events and have made donations to charity homes in Sentul and Chow Kit.

"When we started out, we had a simple goal: We were going to make stuff that we ourselves would eat. Whatever we put in people's mouths had better be something we'd put in ours!" Tee laughs, adding that creating quality products from natural ingredients has always been their priority.

"We don't [want to] compromise, so people get what they pay for, but in widening that a bit further, our customers are a community of people who believe in our product although they are strangers [to us]," she says. "That's an incredible amount of trust they place in us. Now that we've received from people who continue to buy and help produce our ice cream, we want to give back," says Tee. — By Emily Chow

**“ WHEN YOU'RE A NEWBIE, YOU COULD GO IN [THE INDUSTRY] AND PEOPLE COULD JUST RIP YOU OFF, BUT WE'VE MET SOME GOOD PEOPLE IN OUR COMMUNITY AS WELL AS MENTORS IN THE INDUSTRY. TEE**

TEE & LEE (ABDUL GHANI ISMAIL/THE EDGE), CHAI (MOHD IZWAN MOHD NAZAM/THE EDGE)



**“**

**I THINK MORE AND MORE WOMEN ARE GOING INTO BUSINESSES BECAUSE IT'S ABOUT KNOWING THAT IF SOMEONE ELSE CAN DO IT, YOU CAN TOO. IT INSPIRES AND MOTIVATES OTHER WOMEN TO GET INTO IT. LEE**

**”**



# Breaking the male dominance

Juliana Chai helped to bring Red Army Watches to Malaysia in 2008 with her business partner through a joint venture with their Singaporean counterparts. With three outlets in Malaysia today, she heads the local operations as managing director.

"Just like any newcomer, there were some concerns that I was a woman and did not have sufficient knowledge of the industry," she recalls. "Someone asked me why I was here, maybe he felt threatened but I had to prove that I was serious about this and that I was here to stay."

She oversees everything from sales and purchasing to marketing and after-sales. Her job scope entails dealing with men on many levels, ranging from her senior man-

agement co-workers to the customers who frequent their stores.

"In the watch industry you have to be tough, because you're dealing with a lot of men, almost too many!" she jokes. "The usual perception towards women in the industry is they don't have enough technical knowledge [about watches]."

The watch industry as a whole is male-dominated. There are few female watchmakers to begin with, as products are catered primarily for a male customer base. Hence, women seldom hold managerial positions in its retail line as well.

"Men don't really have any other accessories, so there aren't that many female watches," Chai explains. "Even with manufacturers, new designs are often catered for the gents. The field is also dominated by males because how watch mechanisms function is very technical."

Watch designs have been gender-based for the most part; men's watches tend to have large faces, and generally come in various series types based on function, including diving, racing and aviator. Designs of women's watches are largely based on aesthetics alone, where form typically overrides function.

Yet, according to Chai, the watch industry is now coming up with unisex designs. The faces may be smaller, she says, but this is also to cater for Asian men who are smaller in size. "It's actually to capture a larger market

in terms of purchasing, but it's also the acceptance of ladies in wearing bigger dial watches nowadays," she says. "This trend has been going on for a few years."

Since women are included in the customer pool today, will this help to balance out the gender ratio in this male-dominated industry?

"Not really," Chai opines. "Not in the short term, anyway. There's a glass ceiling that women still have to break through, and you'll still have men asking why you as a woman are collecting watches."

Chai herself collects watches. Her interest in timepieces was sparked when she inherited a vintage Rolex from her grandfather and escalated when she became an air stewardess with Emirates Airlines. She amassed her collection through her career, journeying through as many as 13 different countries a month.

"I'm not into clothes or jewellery, and I fancy going to antique shops instead of the department stores," Chai explains. "I like beautiful things, and it's the hand-crafted aspect of a watch I appreciate. It's like art, and each watch also tells you a story, from its mechanism to design. You learn about the history and style of watches as you collect them."

Chai has had up to 20 watches, but currently has 11. Yet, even from this aspect, she observes that there aren't many female watch collectors out there. Of the customers at Red Army Watches Malaysia, most of them are male. She estimates a 70:30 ratio. "It used to be 90:10 when we first started; now I see many ladies who choose to wear men's watches these days because it's trendy. Brands are now starting to get on board as they realise that women want the same quality and consideration that is given to men's watches," she says. "Brands are producing watches that are more beautiful, with quality in-house movements and multiple complications

[for women], so now there are more options to choose from."

Another change Chai hopes to see is the active participation of more women in watchmaking and the retail line. Few women enter the industry due to a lack of interest in timepieces and/or technical knowledge and the long hours it demands. "I'd like to see more women at the managerial level, and in the years to come, there will hopefully be a shift in the mindset of 'fashion is for women and watches are for men'," she says. "You can progress quite quickly, [as long as you] equip yourself with knowledge about this large industry, as it's fast-paced and moves non-stop."

Likewise, when it comes to watchmaking, Chai feels the need for more women to contribute through creative input. "Watchmaking is a profession pursued mostly by our male counterparts, and what attracts them to this is their love of highly skilled work to produce quality timepieces," she says. "The same thing is true of women, and they perceive things differently, so having them in the industry will enhance creativity."

"Carole Forestier-Kasapi, for example, is a prominent watchmaker from Cartier, and is one of my favourite people," she continues. "There aren't many female master watchmakers, so, many critics had doubts that she would be able to sell her designs at her six-digit pricing. But she proved them wrong."

With women like Forestier-Kasapi in a field that traditionally belonged to men, especially in the upper ranks of luxury watch companies, Chai is optimistic about the future of women in the industry. "There are more female students in watchmaking schools nowadays, so I'm sure that men's domination over this will not last forever," she smiles. "I can't wait to see this. I bet women could do things with watches that men could never dream of." — By Emily Chow



**THERE ARE MORE FEMALE STUDENTS IN WATCHMAKING SCHOOLS NOWADAYS, SO I'M SURE THAT MEN'S DOMINATION OVER THIS WILL NOT LAST FOREVER. I CAN'T WAIT TO SEE THIS. I BET WOMEN COULD DO THINGS WITH WATCHES THAT MEN COULD NEVER DREAM OF.**

**CHAI**



## ADVERTORIAL

# MALAYSIA, OFFERING ENDLESS POSSIBILITIES FOR TALENT

Malaysia is getting ready for the future by transforming itself with 12 focused National Key Economic Areas (NKEA) aimed at catalysing the overall economy. From the NKEAs are 149 Entry Point Projects (EPP) with a total committed investment of RM212 billion offering endless possibilities for the right talent. TalentCorp presents many ways for you to take an active part in this exciting transformation. For Malaysians abroad, we have the Returning Expert Programme (REP) which facilitates returning talent to contribute towards the nation's development. The Residence Pass-Talent (RP-T), an immigration instrument, enables top foreign talent to stay and contribute in the longer term to the nation's transformation programme. Working in collaboration with the Public Service Department (JPA), we enable selected JPA scholars to serve their scholarship bond in the private sector through the Scholarship Talent Attraction and Retention (STAR) programme.

**“WHAT REALLY MOTIVATED ME TO RETURN WAS THE THOUGHT OF BEING ABLE TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF THIS NATION BY SHARING EXPERTISE, SKILLS AND EXPERIENCE I GAINED DURING MY TIME ABROAD.”**



**Toi See Jong**  
Chief Executive Officer  
Tokio Marine Life Insurance Malaysia Berhad  
Returning Expert Programme (REP)

After spending 8 years abroad, Toi See Jong returned to Malaysia as the Chief Executive Officer at Tokio Marine Life Insurance Malaysia Berhad. But what really motivated him to come back was the thought of contributing to the country's development by sharing the expertise, skills and experience gained during his time abroad.

Toi feels the Returning Expert Programme (REP) provides returnees with that *'balik kampung'* (going home) experience alongside several incentives to ensure the transition back home is a smooth one. He added that the experience of applying for the programme was straightforward and this reflects Malaysia's seriousness in welcoming back experienced Malaysian professionals based abroad.

Toi says he is adjusting well to life back in Malaysia and is happy to enjoy *'roti canai'* again, even as he is slowly getting used to the traffic conditions here. "Malaysia has always been my home, and nothing beats being able to spend more time with my parents and siblings."



**John Miller**  
Chief Executive Officer  
iPerintis Sdn Bhd  
Residence Pass-Talent Programme (RP-T)

**“THE RESIDENCE PASS PROVIDES OPTIONS, FLEXIBILITY AND STABILITY THAT DID NOT EXIST BEFORE.”**

John Miller is the Chief Executive Officer at iPerintis Sdn Bhd. Moving to Malaysia with his family from United Kingdom in 2008, he finds Malaysia an exciting place to live and work, and the country looks set to continue on a strong growth path in the coming years.

"The Government has a vision and set some tough goals through the Economic Transformation Programme (ETP). I personally look forward to contributing to Malaysia's development and future success," says Miller.

Miller, who holds a Residence Pass-Talent (RP-T), feels that it's a positive step in the right direction, especially for expatriates. "It allows us as a family to plan for the longer term on important things such as education for the children. It also has a significant influence on whether or not we should invest in a home or continue to rent."

All in all, Miller believes the Residence Pass-Talent is a great immigration initiative with "options, flexibility and stability that did not exist before."

**“I BELIEVE THAT MALAYSIA HAS THE POTENTIAL FOR GREATER GROWTH, MAKING IT AN ATTRACTIVE PLACE FOR WORKING PROFESSIONALS. I'M PROUD TO CALL MALAYSIA HOME.”**



**Lee Eileen**  
Contracts Engineer  
SHELL Malaysia  
Scholarship Talent Attraction and Retention (STAR) Programme

Lee Eileen holds a degree in Environmental Policy from the London School of Economics (LSE), and is currently working in the Oil & Gas sector. She finds the work exciting as it uses her knowledge and skills to enhance sustainability in the sector.

In the O&G industry, her role is known as a Contracts Engineer. She deals with work related to major constructions and provides consultancy for contracting in Asia. This is in line with the economic transformation where more and more opportunities are opening up at multinationals, like Shell, to work on Asia from Malaysia.

As one of the JPA scholars involved in the STAR programme, Eileen has great reviews for it. "It's great that through the programme, JPA allows scholars like myself to use our expertise in the private sector and still contribute to Malaysia's transformation."

**TalentCorp**  
MALAYSIA

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[www.talentcorp.com.my](http://www.talentcorp.com.my)