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Gauging the performance of our Japan graduates

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IT'S a story Zulkifli A. Malek, president of the Alumni Look East Policy Society, likes to tell to demonstrate the Japanese work ethic.

Last March, the senior managing director of Yasuda Trust and Banking Co Ltd visited Malaysia to launch its Labuan branch and among the more important items on his agenda was a meeting with the Finance Minister.

Exactly one week before the scheduled meeting, the Japanese organisers in Kuala Lumpur drove the planned route at the planned time.

"There was no guessing. They wanted to know exactly how long the journey would take," said Zulkifli, who is assistant general manager of Yasuda Trust.

Furthermore, the organisers had an extra car trailing the official vehicle, "just in case". This bit of kiasu-ism turned out to be wise. On leaving the ministry, the official car met with a minor accident.

"Wasn't it wonderful, we had a back-up car!" said Zulkifli.

This attention to detail, precision and thorough planning are very much qualities associated with the Japanese work culture, along with loyalty and hardworkingness.

To learn the Japanese ways, Malaysia launched a Look East Policy in 1982 and has since sent about 6,500 to Japan under academic, technical training and friendship programmes. At any one time, there are some 2,000 Malaysian students in Japan.

Fourteen years have passed since the first batch left and many have returned to face heavy expectations. How have they measured up?

"Actually, everyone wants to know this," said Zulkifli but there isn't, of course, any very definite yardstick.

"I can't point out any Datuk or super-worker or anything like that," he said.

As a general pointer, the alumni is planning a survey of its members which it hopes to complete by year-end. The survey will obtain details of salaries and the managerial level of its members (which comprise all Look East Policy degree and diploma holders, now numbering 940) in order to gauge their performance.

A very cursory check, said Zulkifli, has shown that a significant number have reached middle managerial level after five years and drawing high salaries. While in a market of inflated salaries this may not be the best of yardsticks but as it goes, it is about the only existing measure of success.

"I really don't know," said another graduate of a Japanese university who declined to be named due to a very strict company policy. He is something of a high-flyer, having reached a high post in a short time.

"I work late most nights," he offered hesitantly, immediately countering this by saying that hardworkingness was a family trait. Besides, long working hours is hardly as Japanese as it used to be.

As Koetsu Harima, general manager of Association for Overseas Technical Scholarship which handles in-plant training programmes, joked, workaholicism has lost its allure since the advent of the "Narita Divorce".

This is the phenomenon of short-lived marriages, the result of mismatched well-travelled young wives and katak di bawah tempurung husbands.

Apparently, these young women demand immediate divorce on return from the honeymoon, repulsed by the boorish behaviour of their husbands whose

working life does not permit holidays abroad.

Seriously, though, Harima who has been in Malaysia since 1988 is impressed with the trainees.

In the beginning, the quality of some trainees was "terrible" but results began to show when a better system of selection and match with Japanese trainers was implemented.

"The purpose of the policy is to study not only the technology but also the working people's - from top management to bottom - attitude.

"When we talk to those who have returned, they emphasise the very different Japanese working style," he said.

The trainees, he said, observe how Japanese managing directors regularly walk down to the factory floor for discussions or to do the job themselves and who think it normal to pick up rubbish off the floor.

Harima has seen many trainees implement new work methods, for instance, reordering the factory machinery layout for greater efficiency.

"They often tell me: 'Harima san, you must come and have a look'."

Isis' Centre for Japan Studies director Stephen Leong said hands-on management, loyalty, courtesy, teamwork and a corporate philosophy are some of the tangible evidence of a Japanese training.

In-plant training is perhaps one area where the impact and benefit of a Japanese experience is immediately noticeable.

At the level of academic programmes, however, the impact or benefit may not yet be evident except, perhaps, at a personal level.

Nearly all undergraduates are hired by their third year, pursued by Japanese and Malaysian companies alike.

Zulkifli, who joined the Yasuda Trust in Tokyo upon graduation, said he has personally learnt much about the Japanese banking style.

"On our first day, all new employees handed over a copy of their degrees," he recalled, "which the manager threw into a big box."

Taken aback by this casual treatment, he said they were told to forget their university education. His training began with counting money and answering telephones: in other words, right at the bottom.

"We first learnt how to bow to greet guests and how to answer the telephone," he said, adding that the training was aided by a ruler to tap unbending backs.

It was this training, he said, which enabled him to set up the bank's Labuan branch a few years later.

For his part, Adila Hamdu Isha Ahadi, who studied at the Keiogijuku University and now working with trading house Itochu Corporation, learnt to be conscientious about details.

Associate Professor Dr Mohd Sahar Yahya, who heads Universiti Malaya's Ambang Asuhan Jepun which prepares Malaysian undergraduates for Japanese universities, thinks loyalty is another noticeable trait of the Look East Policy beneficiaries.

But on the whole, Zulkifli thinks it's too early to judge the degree and diploma holders of Japanese universities.

He explains why by way of a chart outlining the stages of the Look East Policy programme.

The first stage is the training of participants (ages 20 to 26), then implementing the knowledge gained (from 26 to 36), then evaluation (36 to 46) and results (46 to 56).

"I am the oldest (of the undergraduate students sent under the Look East Policy) and I'm still in the second stage," said Zulkifli, 34.

He thinks it's too early to see any real impact as none of them have reached senior managerial level yet.

Generally, Leong of Isis thinks the results have been satisfactory given the small number of students trained in Japan. "My impression of the

students I have met is positive, on the whole," he said.

Mohd Sahar thinks the real benefit will necessarily be intangible.

"But the person trained in Japan will have an edge when dealing with Japan," he said.

The Look East Policy has also given a boost to the Malaysia-Japan relationship, with Malaysia having gained the respect of Japan, Leong said.

On the technology transfer front, however, the response is mixed and somewhat lukewarm. Many feel the results are less than satisfactory. The reasons?

Zulkifli: "We may not be ready yet."

Mohd Sahar: "I think it can only happen effectively at the upper echelons of study, the Masters or PhD level, and we don't have many students at that level."

A diplomatic Leong: "Compared with the Western experience, the process is not as satisfactory but it's an ongoing process."

Harima: "The transfer of `spirit' and technology has been successful, I think. But I don't think that the transfer of high technology has started yet.

"So far, it has been basic technology like home appliances. Maybe in the future, training will be hi-tech like information technology."

It does appear that the Policy will continue beyond the year 2000. At a recent dinner in honour of Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto during his visit, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said Malaysia intends to continue the Look East Policy.

Said Leong: "Japan continues to be a model, even with its economic downturn."

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