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Local employees sometimes feel handicapped and frustrated when they see top jobs go to foreigners but there are important lessons to be drawn, says one observer from the Singapore Management University.



File photo of a man walking with a suitcase. (File Photo: REUTERS/Eddie Keogh)

SINGAPORE: Michael, a successful Singaporean senior executive at a global investment bank, got passed over for a promotion for which he believed he was more than qualified.

That dream job went to an Australian expatriate from the bank's headquarters.

Leong, a young local manager at a global resort and hotel chain, couldn't break into the inner circles of his Western expatriate bosses. He felt that without good personal relationships with these bosses, it would be hard for him to make much headway at the company.

Local professionals and managers working for foreign multinational companies complain about this sort of thing all the time. Each hiring and promotion decision is of course unique and involves idiosyncratic considerations. Nevertheless, many people believe foreigners often have an edge over locals in the hiring and promotion process.

Recent observations suggest that many global companies promote through internal transfers – it is not so much that these companies prefer expatriates over locals, but that foreign firms expanding in Singapore are simply bringing in staff from elsewhere.

But why do multinational corporations do this? There are several reasons.

INTERNAL STAFFERS ARE MORE EXPERIENCED

First, internal staffers tend to have a good grasp of the company's DNA – its culture and how it operates. For a global firm, such internal staffers also have extensive experiences working for the company around the world.

Second, experienced internal staffers, especially those from headquarters, probably have an extensive social network throughout the worldwide operations that helps them to get things done. That is an advantage that a Singaporean manager who rose through the ranks locally is unlikely to be able to match.

Third, global companies often systematically develop the international experiences of their high-potential employees by posting them overseas. Hence, it is totally legitimate and reasonable for a US company to post an American executive to Singapore to get experience in Asia.

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Global companies in Singapore bring in high-potential employees from overseas likely so that they could get experience in Asia. (File photo: AFP/Roslan Rahman)

Executives such as Michael often overlook these considerations and presume they are passed over because of bias against locals. In reality, companies simply make personnel decisions that managers see as being best for the organisation.

If foreign companies transfer staff from headquarters and elsewhere to Singapore for the sake of effectiveness, how should we put this practice in perspective?

Importantly, what can local executives do to increase their chances of being hired or promoted by foreign employers?

BRINGING IN EXPATS CAN BE ADVANTAGEOUS FOR LOCALS

The practice of bringing expatriate employees into Singapore, while often seen as increasing competition for locals, has the frequently overlooked advantage of developing locals themselves. Research shows that a multicultural workplace and exposure to foreign cultures make people more creative. Foreign values, practices, and norms in viewing the world and problem-solving can help locals develop a more complex and sophisticated view of the issues they confront.

Ideas and perspectives from around the world can also be harnessed to formulate new ideas and solutions locally.



File photo of workers in Singapore's Central Business District. (Photo: TODAY)

In one of my research works, I found that professionals whose networks comprise people from diverse cultures are more creative at solving global business problems than those whose networks are culturally homogeneous.

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As businesses become increasingly globalised, a global perspective and multicultural social network developed through interactions with expatriates can help local executives become more competitive in the job market.

More broadly speaking, the influx of foreigners into local society can make Singaporeans who work with them more creative, a prized asset in today's workplace.

LOCALS LACK SOFT SKILLS

Besides embracing and harnessing the cultural diversity that expatriates bring to the local workforce, Singaporean executives should also consider developing their own soft skills such as communication, negotiation, leadership and network-building.

Employers often observe that Singaporean graduates are strong in technical competence but less adept in people skills. In a 2016 speech, Education Minister Ong Ye Kung shared some feedback he received frequently from industry leaders:

Singapore graduates know a lot of stuff, but those can be learnt on the job. What's more important are the practical and soft skills that can help them excel at the workplace.

Such skills are especially important in a global workplace where one must interact with colleagues with viewpoints and values that can be vastly different from one's own. To thrive in a global firm, employees need to be able to communicate across cultures, make persuasive arguments, and perhaps even engage in self-promotion.



Education Minister (Higher Education and Skills) Ong Ye Kung.

Young managers such as Leong might be equipped with the hard skills that our education system nurtured in our youths – but success in the practical world demands more than that.

The further one goes in one's career, the more important soft skills become. When managing a group of people, one is no longer doing the technical work, but getting work done through others.

The ability to motivate, influence and persuade others becomes critical.

TECHNICAL SKILLS ARE NOT ENOUGH

Moreover, in a competitive global environment with many foreign talents vying for the same job, the ability to promote one's self helps.

Western expatriates may be more effective than locals because of cultural differences and exposure to education systems that emphasise soft skills and self-promotion.

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Thus, it is little wonder that in a business world where soft skills are prized and competition is stiff, local employees sometimes feel handicapped and frustrated that top jobs go to foreigners – who, in their eyes may not be as technically capable as themselves.

They may be disappointed, but they are learning an important lesson: In the modern corporate world, technical skills are not enough.

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