



Tech firms hiring varsity students to beat talent

Promising undergrads secure full-time jobs while finishing up their university studies

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Techies are in such demand these days that students like undergraduate Ken Low can command a full-time job while still grinding it out at university.

Mr Low, 25, arranged to have most of his classes on a single day during his last two semesters at Singapore Management University so he could meet work commitments as a financial crime analyst as well.

His experience is still out of the ordinary but becoming more common as talent-starved tech companies, including start-ups, target undergraduates before they finish school, say human-resource experts.

"The moves are reflective of a skills-short market," said Ms Sandrine Karlsson, managing consul-

tant at organisational consulting firm Korn Ferry. She noted it is not hard to find undergraduates keen to take on such arrangements. This hiring practice is also less common among non-tech firms, she added.

A Korn Ferry study out in May estimated that technological advancements in the Asia-Pacific region could be hit by an "acute talent shortage" of two million technology, media and telecommunications workers.

"Companies specialising in areas such as robotics, automation, the Internet of Things and data analytics find it harder to fill open IT roles as they require individuals with expertise in new technology," said Ms Linda Teo, country manager of ManpowerGroup Singapore.

"These companies are more open to hiring undergraduates... and equipping them with the required skills and knowledge."

The manpower crunch is "exacerbated by foreign manpower restrictions and a small pool of local tech talents to recruit from", she added.

Mr Low, who completed his studies this month for a Bachelor of Busi-

ness Management degree, said he applied for a full-time gig with global fintech company TransferWise as he believed he could handle both work and his five remaining modules at school.

He has been working as a financial crime analyst with the money-transfer service since June, the company's first full-time undergraduate hire in Singapore.

Mr Ross Seychell, vice-president of the firm's people team, said TransferWise has had similar cases around the world: "In Europe, hiring somebody full time while they are still in university is not uncommon."

"Our pay decisions aren't based on someone having or not having a degree or other qualification... If someone has the skills and experience to do a role, his pay will reflect that," he added.

Working part-time while at school is not uncommon, but Mr Low noted difficulties in starting a full-time job.

"For full-time opportunities, TransferWise was the only company that was amenable to this ar-



Singapore Management University undergraduate Ken Low has been working full time as a financial crime analyst at global fintech company TransferWise since June, while waiting to complete his final semester in university.
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crunch

SKILLS, NOT DEGREE

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MR ROSSEYCHELL, vice-president of TransferWise's people team.

agement," he said, adding that he applied to five other firms but his lack of a degree at the time deterred them from taking him on.

A more common way tech companies retain talent is to offer "full-time employment on a part-time basis" to undergraduates, said Mr David Leong, managing director at PeopleWorldwide Consulting.

Mr Kenneth Low, co-founder of e-commerce start-up Arcadier, said about half of his 12-man team in Sin-

gapore comprises former interns.

The company keeps its interns in the loop via e-mail even when they go back to school, allowing them to work part-time and keeping them involved and engaged, he added.

"Our user-experience designer is also completing a part-time degree at the Singapore University of Social Sciences and leaves early when he has classes. He's been doing this for three years," said Mr Low.

"A lot of big tech firms such as Facebook and Airbnb have their Asia-Pacific offices in Singapore, so it is hard to just hire someone good with an advertisement."

Apart from hiring ahead of graduation, firms offer other perks to retain talent.

TransferWise lets employees of at least four years take a six-week paid sabbatical, with a £1,000 (\$\$1,735) allowance to pursue their interests, while software firm Pivotal offers medical insurance benefits to same-gender partners of employees.

It also has flexible work arrangements for non-client-facing roles and "pay transparency" - establishing pay ranges for each role and sharing with employees.

Senior director Iris Loke said Pivotal has stopped asking candidates for current and previous compensations: "By doing this, we eliminate existing biases that may have occurred to under-represented groups such as females and minorities who have received lower pay in their previous workplaces."

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