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Headline: Rewards await those who venture, as firms seek hires to break into overseas markets

## Rewards await those who venture, as firms seek hires to break into overseas markets



Raduga's general manager Cheong Jin Hao and head of marketing and business development April Lim. Photo: Ooi Boon Keong

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*Amid the slowing economy and uncertain job market, many Singaporeans have said they are unsure of where to start looking for opportunities in several growth industries. To that end, TODAY has launched an eight-part weekly series that looks at the openings available, the prospects and how workers can equip themselves with the skills for these positions. In the previous instalments, we looked at the logistics, food manufacturing, hotel, early childhood, information and communications technology, and healthcare industries.*

*This week, in the seventh part of the series, we focus on the international trading sector, which is not only key to Singapore's economic success but also offers*

*immense opportunities for those willing to venture abroad, and pave the way for homegrown companies to break into new markets and make their mark.*

## ADVERTISING

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SINGAPORE — Homegrown mobile-phone distributor Raduga has bold plans to push into new frontiers overseas, but it faces a potential bump in the road: An aversion among some workers to travel to developing countries.

“It may not be as attractive to ... people who are comfortable in Singapore (and) do not want to leave their comfort zone,” said Raduga general manager Cheong Jin Hao, who noted that roles which require travelling were the hardest to staff.

Raduga’s experience is not unique among companies looking to spread their wings abroad. Indeed, for a country where international trade has been the bedrock of its success - and one that has historically attracted scores of workers in search of fortunes - Singapore is now facing a shortage of people willing to head in the opposite direction, amid the Government’s push for homegrown companies to make overseas forays.

But for those who are willing to take the plunge, the opportunities in the emerging markets are enormous.

Intermittent Internet connectivity and the hot weather are among the downsides for some of these markets, said Mr Cheong. To sweeten the deal, his firm puts employees up at no less than four-star hotels or condominiums. They also receive an allowance of between S\$30 and S\$100 a day, depending on the length of stay, said Mr Cheong.

Apart from the travelling perks, employers noted that with the proliferation of low-cost carriers, staff based overseas can return home more often. “Flying home is not a problem anymore. We’re willing to spend a bit more on airfares for them to come back a bit more often,” said Madam Nichol Ng, managing director of food-distribution firm FoodServices Inc.

Noting that expanding into new markets is fundamental to Raduga’s business, Mr Cheong said that travelling to other countries opens the eyes of its employees to business potential overseas and how people from these places work.

## LEADING THE FORAYS

Those who have gone on overseas stints said the first-hand insights have served them well.

Ms April Lim, 27, joined Raduga in 2012 as a procurement executive. Just a year later, an opportunity to try her hand at market expansion and business development came knocking.

She jumped at it. The first market her team was assigned? Myanmar, just as it was starting to open up after decades of military subjugation.

“The conditions were harsh,” said Ms Lim, now Raduga’s marketing and business development head. “But ... the company did what it could, like putting us up in the best hotel available.”

In the first year, Ms Lim stayed in Myanmar for up to two months at a time, returning home for about a fortnight between her trips.

The lessons were invaluable. Her team had to navigate cultural differences, and study and grasp the country’s rules and regulations, such as labour laws.

While it was no stroll in the park, she said: “When we invest ourselves in (a) country ... and understand the consumers’ buying behaviours ... it becomes very easy for us to craft marketing strategies.”

From its modest beginnings as a trading port, Singapore has evolved into a vibrant trading hub. International trading is the country’s second-largest services sector, making up 15.7 per cent of gross domestic product.

Cutting across various industries, the sector employs 320,000 workers — or one-tenth of Singapore’s total workforce — spread over more than 34,000 companies. More than six in 10 of these workers (63 per cent) are professionals, managers, executives and technicians.

The Government estimates that by 2020, 15,000 new jobs will be added to the sector, which has seen operating revenues triple to nearly S\$3 trillion between 2005 and 2014.

The importance of building economic links abroad is underscored by the Government’s efforts to help Singapore companies internationalise, including through the S\$4.5 billion Industry Transformation Programme announced in last year’s Budget.

For Singapore, trade with the outside world remains critical. Despite concerns over rising protectionism in the West, trade linkages in Asia are deepening. For instance, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) Economic Community was set up in 2015 to pave the way for greater regional economic connectivity. At the World Economic Forum last week, Chinese President Xi Jinping also vowed to keep China’s door “wide open and not close it”, as he stressed that the world must stay committed to promoting free trade and investment.

But the success of Singapore’s homegrown companies — particularly small and medium enterprises (SMEs) — in breaking into new markets hinges on their ability to hire Singaporean employees with the right skills.

Mdm Ng said the inability to find staff would be a “roadblock” to its expansion plans. “We need Singaporeans who have some kind of training or exposure ... (to) plant the seed (overseas).”

While the firm requires up to five employees to explore overseas markets — such as Cambodia and Myanmar — in the immediate term, it is getting an insufficient number of applicants.

For overseas postings, Raduga's Mr Cheong said that the firm may have to hire "three or four" foreigners in place of every Singaporean it fails to hire. "That's not very ideal because (their) mentality and thinking are different."

For Singaporean employees, an overseas posting gives them "power and control" over smaller decisions, Mr Cheong pointed out. Candidates must be "responsible, driven and willing to learn" but they need not have wide industry experience, he added.

For Asean regional customer experience head Wee Kar Yong of BarterXchange (Singapore), travelling at short notice is a pre-requisite.

The 41-year-old former financial-services executive has already travelled to Kuala Lumpur twice since joining the online trading platform earlier this month. "I learn a lot from my other country officers," he said.

## **DIVERSE RANGE OF JOBS**

The international trading sector comprises seven key segments, including fuels and chemicals, household goods, and machinery and equipment. The range of jobs is equally diverse, cutting across different disciplines but each playing a part in driving the business of buying and selling goods between firms across borders.

Positions in demand are supply-chain professionals, market and trade analysts, as well as those dealing with risk and compliance, and trade operations, Workforce Singapore said.

Raduga plans to hire 25 professionals this year — mostly in supply chain — to cope with an increase in business volumes. They will work in areas such as procurement and marketing, Mr Cheong said.

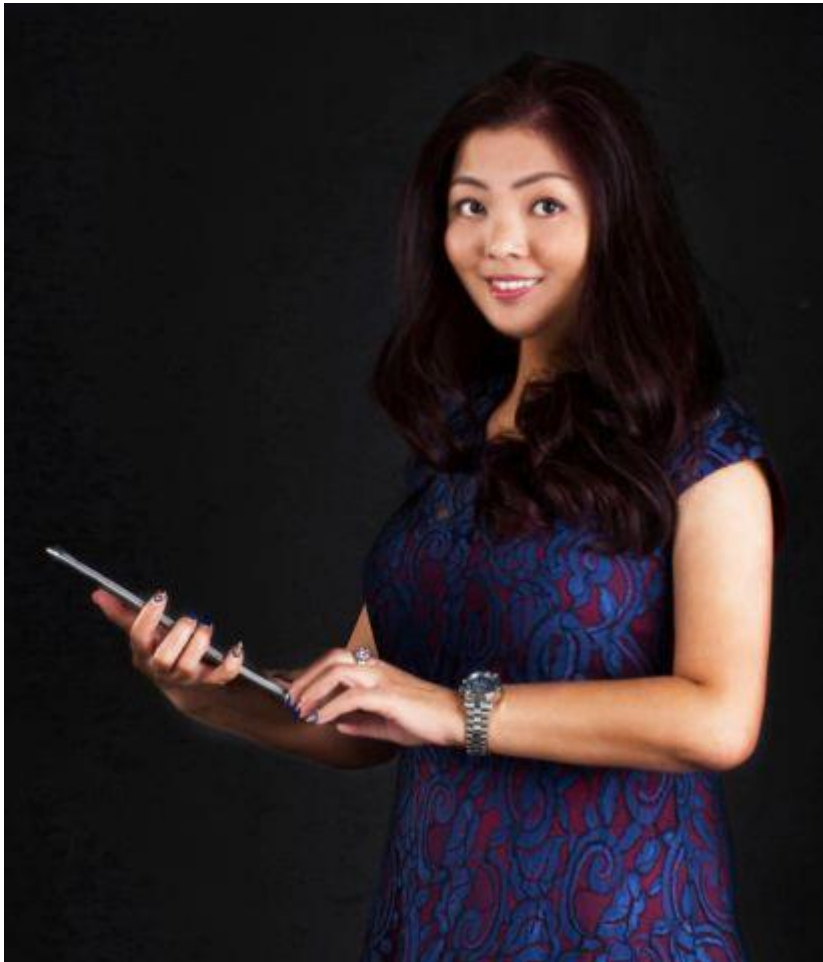
"If we want to aggressively grow ... the whole supply chain has to (keep) up." Its sales, procurement, business development and marketing executives earn between S\$2,000 and \$5,000 a month.

Meanwhile, FoodXervices Inc has two openings for management associates, or sales and business development executives, who work on projects including regional expansion plans, said Mdm Ng. The firm prefers applicants from outside the industry so that "they bring with them fresh mindsets", she added.

Ms Xuan Ng, 38, was one such employee which FoodXervices hired under the Professional Conversion Programme (PCP) for the sector's executives. A former sales manager, she leapt at the chance to gain "global and regional exposure".

While she took a 20-per-cent pay cut, the senior sales and business development executive is excited about the prospect of handling projects for clients looking to

expand overseas, which may allow her to travel. “I just want to gain as much experience as I can,” she said.



*FoodServices Inc's senior sales and business development executive Xuan Ng. Photo: FoodServices Inc*

Another mid-career entrant is senior transformation and operations executive Chew Kok Soon. The 32-year-old landed his current job at fragrance and cosmetics distributor Luxasia last November after being retrenched from a finance job eight months earlier.

His role includes regional warehouse budgeting and supporting supply-chain operations. He learns the ropes from experienced colleagues as well as through the PCP course at the Singapore Management University's International Trading Institute ([ITI@SMU](mailto:ITI@SMU)).

“Knowledge of the activities ... in the warehouses and the services (of) third-party logistics providers ... allows me to better understand the budgeting and costing models,” he said.





*Luxasia's senior transformation and operations executive Chew Kok Soon. Photo: Chew Kok Soon*

Even firms without a direct hand in trading are seeking to ride the wave, and these companies are looking to hire as well.

Global payments company Mastercard leverages payments technology to ease trade processes, lower cost and raise transparency and security for traders, said Mr Gerald Sun, Asia-Pacific vice-president for business development in its trade and industry unit.

While its focus is on digital payments, it has a team of experts in areas including supply chain and trade finance. "We also need to understand ... about moving something physical ... from one port to another or a buyer to a seller," he said.



*Mastercard's Gerald Sun, Asia-Pacific vice-president for business development in its trade and industry unit. Photo: Jason Quah*

## **TRAINING FOR MID-CAREER ENTRANTS**

Mid-career professionals keen to start afresh in the sector can enrol in the PCP for international trading executives.

[ITI@SMU](#) matches applicants to jobs and conducts training under the one-year part-time programme, which covers topics from export planning and risk management to trade finance.

Professor Annie Koh, the institute's academic director, said the programme was meant to not only prepare trainees for present trading roles but also "how trade can and will be disrupted in future".

To this end, the institute has added content and topics on e-commerce, data analytics and cybersecurity. It also invites firms such as Mastercard and Accenture to give talks and classes on topics such as trade digitisation and electronic payments.

Such knowledge can help transform the wholesale trade for many participating firms, she said.

The programme's first cohort of 23 started the programme last November, and more than 300 are asking to be matched to firms right now, said Prof Koh.

The next run — targeted at positions in commodities firms — will begin in the second quarter of this year to support physical commodity trading across borders.

