



WORKING LIFE

ST ILLUSTRATION: ADAM LEE

A career switch to law

The legal profession is attracting some mid-career workers

BY DHEVARAJAN DEVADAS

AFTER 13 years in the television industry as a news producer, Mr Darren King felt his career had stagnated.

He sensed he did not have much opportunity to climb the ladder and that the financial rewards were also not getting better.

So in 2009, he decided to take the plunge and make a mid-career switch - to practise law.

The Briton, based in Singapore since 2006, is now studying for a postgraduate degree in law at the Singapore Management University (SMU) under its Juris Doctor (JD) programme.

Introduced by SMU last year, it lets mid-career professionals and fresh graduates in other disciplines pursue a law degree, allowing them to become lawyers qualified to practise in Singapore. It is the first programme in a local university to adopt the American system of graduate legal education.

"The launch of the JD programme at SMU came about just as I was thinking about making a change," said Mr King, 38, married with an 11-month old daughter. "I had looked at doing distance courses or other programmes but the JD programme meant that at the end of it I could go on to practise here in Singapore."

According to Ms Ca-Mie De Souza, SMU's assistant corporate communications director, applications for its JD programme from mid-career switchers have been fairly consistent, with about 45 applicants out of 135 in each cohort. There have been two cohorts since

the programme started. She declined to disclose how many of the mid-career applicants have been accepted into the programme.

But Ms De Souza said that in the second year, SMU saw more inquiries about its programme, with a rise in the number of people turning up for its information sessions.

Professor Michael Furmston, dean of SMU's School of Law, said that a key strength of the JD programme was that it catered to the needs of mid-career professionals.

"The needs of modern legal practice require a multi-faceted, interdisciplinary approach to problem-solving. Lawyers who are drawn from a different profession and background, such as banking and finance, consulting, science and technology, and engineering, are in a unique position to apply their experience and domain knowledge in legal practice," he said.

Ms Suja Susan Thomas, 42, has had a varied career as a non-lawyer manager in a law firm, a polytechnic lecturer and a television producer.

"I was working as a practice manager at a local law firm. I was mostly doing management work but I also assisted where I could with legal work," said the Singaporean mother of three.

"I realised that I quite enjoyed legal work and so when I saw the article in the Straits Times on SMU's JD, I decided to apply."

The National University of Singapore also conducts a graduate law course for university graduates who already have a degree. This full-time course grants a Bachelor of Laws (LLB) and spans three years, compared to SMU's two-year JD programme.

Several law firms contacted said that they have not seen any increase in the number of mid-career professionals from other industries joining as rookie lawyers.

Ms Theresa Pang from human resource consultancy Robert Walters said that the low number of mid-career switchers to the legal sector is due to two main reasons.

"The postgraduate law courses are full-time programmes that need them to leave the workforce and forfeit their steady incomes to become full-time students. Also, while their peers would be fairly established in their careers, these switchers have to rebuild theirs and play catch-up," she said.

However, Mr Yap Wai Ming, a veteran lawyer at Stamford Law Corporation, said he welcomed such new entrants as long as they are fully committed to law.

Mr King and Ms Suja both agree that making the decision to switch to law was not easy. Sacrifices had to be made in family life and finances.

"It's very important to have the backing of your family as it's a big commitment to go back to studying full time. I'm fortunate that my wife was 100 per cent behind me and she has a successful career of her own, which meant that we could afford to live without my salary for two years," said Mr King.

Said Ms Suja: "I think it is always harder for women in our society, especially those of us who are wives and mothers, to go back to school. I made the decision to do this after a lot of prayer and discussion with my whole family and even my maid."

Mr Yap said that once mid-career switchers join the legal sector, they must be mentally prepared to work with much younger, fresh graduates.

"They must also not feel demoralised if a younger but more experienced lawyer gets promoted ahead of them," he added.

ddheva@sph.com.sg