Meaningful Employment

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MEANINGFUL EMPLOYMENT

Gamuda hires individuals with autism, aiming to provide them with opportunities to contribute to society.

By SHEELA CHANDRAN
star2@thestar.com.my

HOW many employers include differently-abled or those with disabilities in their workforce?

Article 27 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities states that people with disabilities have a right to work on an equal basis with others.

However, a 2015 report found that only 3,741 persons with disabilities had jobs in the public sector out of the country's over one million civil servants.

Unemployment for adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is notably high.

There is a need for transition opportunities to enable school leavers and those who are in vocational programmes to progress into employment. Youth with ASD may make it to university but securing a job after graduation is a challenge even with proper qualifications.

Because of its belief in embracing diversity and inclusiveness in the workplace, Gamuda has embarked on its "Project Differently-Abled (DA)", a programme aimed at creating employment for individuals with autism.

Initiated by its group managing director Datuk Lin Yun Ling, the project aims to harness differently-abled peoples' skills and competences.

Gamuda Engineering general manager (contracts & commercial) Hong Kok Siong explained that Project DA hopes to contribute towards each differently-abled individual's continuous learning process, while improving their quality of life.

As an extension of the company's Diversity & Inclusiveness agenda, the project's objective is to cultivate an open-minded and diversified work culture within Gamuda.

"The idea came about after Datuk Lin noticed that unemployment among individuals with autism was high. To bridge the employment divide, Gamuda stepped in to provide jobs," said Hong during an interview in Petaling Jaya, Selangor recently.

ASD is a lifelong neuro-developmental condition that affects the brain. The Centre for Disease Control in the United States reports that the incidence of autism affects one in every 68 children.

Approximately 9,000 children in Malaysia are born with autism every year, reports the National Autism Society of Malaysia (Nasom).

This group of individuals may face challenges with communication skills and have restricted or repetitive patterns of behaviours which could result in them facing hurdles when it comes to traditional employment opportunities.

(From left) Gamuda Berhad's Project Differently-Abled's support team members Tan Ming Mei, Looi Hsiao Hooi and Yeo Swee Lan, and Gamuda Engineering Sdn Bhd's human resource senior manager Jamilatul Shahmiah Jamaluddin and general manager (contracts and commercial) Hong Kok Siong. — SAMUEL ONG/The Star

A brighter future

Since Project DA's inception in 2013, Gamuda has successfully hired 16 differently-abled staff with different levels of autism. These special employees – between the ages of 21 and 39 years – do clerical work in different departments including group human resources, trading, contracts and commercials, and group finance. Their tasks range from clerical work to environmental research.

The company also welcomes interns; there are currently two trainees from learning centres undergoing internship at the engineering, property and infrastructure company.

Datuk Lin and Hong lead Project DA with a specially commissioned support team comprising Yeo Swee Lan, Tan Ming Mei and Looi Hsiao Hooi.

The team overseas the overall planning, execution and operations of the project.

Hong said that the team's core function is to help raise autism awareness among the general public while helping individuals with autism to progress in their careers and further development/education.

"Some young adults with Asperger syndrome (a form of autism) may have made it to university but find it a challenge to gain employment after graduation. With the programme, we give employment opportunities to adults with autism," said Hong, adding Gamuda is the first corporate organisation in Malaysia with 18 ASD employees.

For DA referrals, the team approached NGOs such as United Voice Malaysia, Malaysian Care and

A relaxing moment with fellow colleagues. — Photos: Gamuda

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Gamuda Engineering Sdn Bhd human resource senior manager Jamilatul Shahmiah Jamaluddin (right) having a discussion with Haqim, a differently-abled colleague in her department.

Nasom. Yeo said selected candidates were subsequently interviewed (together with their parents) and offered jobs based on their strengths.

"We identify suitable jobs for them based on their skills and match roles to suit individuals. To enable each differently-abled employee to fit in better at work, he or she is paired up with a buddy (volunteer) and supervisor who plays the role of job coach," said Yeo, a former Japan International Cooperation Agency programme development consultant and job coach trainer.

To keep track of their progress, periodical get-together sessions are organised to provide a platform for them to share their views and challenges, as well as gain peer encouragement.

"The team meets up with the employees to check on their work performance, social behaviour and needs. Brainstorming sessions are held with the buddies to better equip all parties working with DA colleagues," said Yeo.

DA employees often face challenges in planning, organisational skills and time management. The team discovered that adopting a structured teaching approach promotes effective learning.

Jamilatul Shahmiah, one of the supervisors, shared her success in coaching the DA employee in her department.

"Providing step-by-step instructions has helped my colleague to gradually develop competencies in tasks that were initially challenging to him."

To help DA colleagues to be more organised, templates are created to assist them in carrying out their duties efficiently.

Shahmiah says she finds joy in seeing how her DA colleague has progressed. Her passion and involvement in this project has also encouraged her fellow colleagues to participate in creating an inclusive environment within their departments.

Going the extra mile

To further build on this web of support among staff, a handbook has been created to assist Gamudians and show them how to work together to support their special needs colleagues.

ASD awareness workshops and job coach training sessions are also provided to supervisors to enable effective communication when working with DA employees.

To date, about 60 volunteers from various departments have been trained. Awareness seminars about autism and employment support strategies for employees with autism have been conducted by local experts as well as those from Britain and the United States.

External job coaches from NGOs such as Malaysian Care and United Voice were engaged at the initial stages to provide on-the-job support for the DA staff.

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With the necessary steps in place, Tan has noticed promising progress in each DA employee; many are adapting well to their respective departments and jobs.

"We have received positive feedback from several departments. Although they needed support at the initial stages, most of them have learned the skills to carry out the jobs that have been assigned to them.

"Several DA employees came in without relevant work experience, but with guidance and on-the-job training, they are beginning to develop competencies in their jobs," said Tan, who holds a degree in psychology.

To ensure team members have a deeper understanding of ASD and how to aid DA colleagues, the company sent Tan and Looi to Taiwan and Australia to attend the Relationship Development Intervention Training, a behavioural treatment programme that addresses core symptoms of autism.

Everyone has strengths and weaknesses, and it is just a matter of tapping into one's interests and nurturing his or her positive skills, Tan opined.

Overcoming hurdles

"We have had a DA employee who has risen up the ranks from junior clerk to assistant data controller. We've seen positive progress in his work. He's dedicated, disciplined and diligent. We're hoping to groom him into a data controller," said Tan with a warm smile.

Today Project DA is a success story, but the team had to go through a fair number of hurdles to get to where it is now.

Looi and her team faced challenges in assimilating DA employees in the workplace.

"Sometimes, our DA colleagues would talk continuously and interrupt others, resulting in them being labelled as rude and insensitive.

"To create harmony, we had to teach DA colleagues social rules and, at the same time, educate other employees to better understand them."

Despite the minor hiccups, Looi has seen positive development in these individuals. She notices they have strengthened their social etiquette skills and confidence.

"They have learnt the do's and don'ts of social communication. They seem much more aware of certain norms and are able to blend in well in social situations," said Looi, adding DA employees are the most honest, caring and loving individuals she's worked with.

Looi hopes more organisations will step forward to give them a chance at working life.

"DA employees are trained in skills based on their abilities. We believe that with the right support, people with ASD can work and contribute meaningfully to society and we hope to provide them with an opportunity to live a normal life."

Look out for Part Two in Star2 in the coming weeks.

Thanks to Gamuda's Project Differently-Abled, people with autism are given opportunities for gainful and sustainable employment. Qistina (right) and her buddy Kala at work.

Caryn (right) and her colleague Nurul during their lunch break.

David Foo has developed competency in the duties assigned to him over the last two years.