Workers must be ready to acquire soft skills, says professor

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— UniRazak Adjunct Professor Tan Sri Dr Sulaiman Mahbob

HUMAN resource managers know that workers must be imbued not only with technical skills but also with leadership and organisational talents. However, academic institutions may tend to emphasise more on academic skills, leaving the need for soft skills to employers. Many organisations often prefer to source talented people from the market by offering them good salary terms. According to Universiti Tun Abdul Razak (UniRazak) Adjunct Professor Tan Sri Dr Sulaiman Mahbob, a World Bank study undertaken jointly with the EPU and the Department of Statistics in 2002/03, covering Malaysian private sector workforce, at various levels of occupations, produced interesting findings for human resource trainers.

He said the study, which was published in 2005, discovered that about 47.2 per cent of the workers interviewed displayed low proficiency in the English Language, the language of commerce and business. Another 13.9 per cent had low communication skills. Further, about eight per cent were found to lack social skills while another 6.6 per cent were not good team players.

In addition, another 4.4 per cent of the respondents were found to have low leadership skills. Thus, over 78 per cent of the workers surveyed lack one or a few of these five skills necessary for good work culture, adaptability, infusion of technology, and a good disposition towards teamwork.

No doubt the study was done about eight years ago and therefore, the data was dated. Nevertheless, the finding was still quite relevant. It is also quite alarming as almost half of the interviewed workers had low command of English.

Further, about 14 per cent of them had low communication skill. These two skills are very important in assisting activities to promote businesses.

“Is the study reflective of our workforce? The study covered...
workers from about 1,151 firms in the country. It was based on a representative, random and stratified sampling survey. Hence, the findings may reflect the reality of our workforce then. “I am sure, by now, some changes have been made to our training programmes to reflect these concerns. After all, the study was initiated and endorsed by the government. Public sector training institutions must have been advised to do so accordingly,” said Sulaiman.

In this context, the National Economic Action Council decided in 2008 to instruct public universities to retain graduates for a few additional months so as to train them in these soft skills before they venture into the workforce. “Let us reflect on this matter as it is important that we create highly adaptable workforce. Our workers must display their readiness to acquire these soft skills which can enable them to work more effectively and command a prime salary.”

In a way herein lies the issue of mindset or attitude. Sulaiman said: “Does our school system nurture a right mindset among our children and youth to be always thirsty for knowledge, skills, and a readiness to improve oneself at all times.

“Are we developing a culture that is lacking in interest for competition and continuous improvements. At a higher level of manpower, we are supposed to create Malaysians with enquiring mind and a culture that put high value to knowledge, skills and intellectual capital. “In this regard, the New Economic Model has called for greater creativity and innovation.”

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