

Ready for your next leadership post in Asean?



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Singapore-based senior executives stand to gain from robust growth in demand for Managing Directors, Country Managers, Chief Operating Officers, Chief Financial Officers, Chief Human Resources Officers and Chief Marketing Officers in neighbouring Asean countries. As experience in these areas is often in short supply elsewhere. Experienced and proven leadership is needed to lead multinational companies with Asean operations to their next stage of expansion and development.

The good news for high potential executives in Singapore is that such demand presents opportunities to move up the corporate ladder and gain higher recognition of one's talents. This includes Singaporeans as well as foreign talent based in Singapore.

Indeed, with its advanced workforce and first-rate talent pool, Singapore is expected to be the hunting ground for C-level executive talent as international companies increase their investments in South East Asian markets.

Several factors point to a movement of senior talent beyond Singapore's borders.

Firstly, the balance of foreign direct investment flows is expected to shift from China towards Asean and the rest of Asia, according to a recent research note from Macquarie Securities. Companies from Japan and South Korea especially, have begun to diversify from China and towards South-east Asia and elsewhere, possibly as a result of higher labour costs and reduced tax incentives.

We have also witnessed this trend at CTPartners where requests by the firm's global clients to fill senior level positions in places like Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines and Thailand, have indeed tripled in the last 12 months, as compared to the previous five years combined altogether. While China was, and continues to be a key location, more and more companies are turning to South East Asia in search of fresh opportunities after they have set up and stabilized their China operations. After entering the greater China market for example, Google has just now recruited a head for Malaysia and is recruiting a head for Thailand and a head for Indonesia. After all, countries in South East Asia

promise growth rates that are triple or quadruple that of mature markets in terms of real GDP over the long term. (See table below)

This shift towards building leadership benches in Asean countries is further supported by a global study of 700 chief human resource officers (CHROs) and senior executives by IBM that states that 63% of Asean companies surveyed intend to increase investment in leadership development (compared to 33 per cent for mature markets). Conducted between November 2009 and April 2010, the study also goes on to say that companies will be focusing on growth over improving operational efficiency over the next three years, with 44% of Asean companies saying that 'expanding into new markets or geographies' is an important priority in the short term.

Before one makes the leap however, executives who are used to how things work in Singapore should remember that they will only succeed if they are adept at functioning within a developing marketplace. Markets in Asean countries are similar yet different in many ways from Singapore.

So if a leadership position in Thailand, Malaysia or Indonesia piques your interest, make it a point to understand and respect the important local business traditions that often vary along national borders, beyond what you may have understood from just visiting as a tourist from Singapore.

Regulatory statutes, too, can be complex and vary tremendously from Asean country to Asean country. And in situations where there is government involvement in business matters, executives from Singapore should demonstrate a respectful and successful working relationship with government officials.

Among the other basic leadership attributes to be expected from Singapore-based candidates are broad-based market intelligence, expertise in corporate governance and organizational structure and the inspirational leadership skills that are necessary to drive expansion and change. Business leaders need to possess the strategic vision to address a global marketplace and bring their organizations to their next phase of growth, whether based out of Singapore or another Asean country.

Senior executives in Singapore who demonstrate such qualities are ready for their next leadership role in a neighbouring Asean country.

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