Lack of technically skilled staff may impede German firms here

LEE YEN NEE
leeyenne@mediacorp.com.sg

SINGAPORE – German firms based in Singapore are finding it increasingly difficult to find technically qualified staff regardless of educational qualifications, presenting potential challenges for companies planning to expand their operations here, a survey by the Singaporean-German Chamber of Industry and Commerce (SGC) showed yesterday.

This shortage is a reason many welcomed the Government’s announcement this week of a new push for strong skills and acquired learning.

The Applied Study in Polytechnics and ITE Review (ASPIRE) Committee released on Monday 10 recommendations to improve job prospects and academic progress of polytechnic and Institute of Technical Education (ITE) graduates, all of which were accepted by the Government.

The recommendations fall under three main areas: Applied learning and skills, lifelong learning, as well as the pursuit of excellence in diverse fields.

Electronics firm Rohde and Schwarz Asia managing director Lim Boon Huat said ASPIRE is a “game changer” that would help Singapore society better appreciate technical skills, adding that he hopes more students would choose this path and help fill the current shortage in companies.

“For me, it’s really a turning point for stakeholders to appreciate the value of deep skills as a starting point ... For us at Rohde and Schwarz, grades are not the most important; we’re always very excited to have candidates who are passionate about the work.”

The SGC’s annual ASEAN Business Climate report released yesterday showed that 67 per cent of participating companies had found it difficult to find technically skilled staff at the university and vocational levels.

This is on the back of an improved business outlook, with close to 90 per cent of firms surveyed saying they believed the overall economic situation is the same as or better than last year’s. A similar number of respondents also indicated that their company situation had improved or stayed the same from a year ago.

“The outlook for the next 12 months remains optimistic. However, results show a need for a technically trained workforce. Therefore, further enhancement in vocational training, based on the German model of dual studies, remains an option worth considering as firms are planning to increase the size of their workforce in Singapore,” said SGC president Wolfgang Huppenhauer.

The survey showed 46 per cent of the companies had increased their workforce since last year, while 58 per cent plan to expand staff size in the next 12 months. The poll, which gathered responses from seven South-east Asian nations, featured 63 firms in Singapore. Among the Singapore participants, about 95 per cent of them were German companies.

The chamber’s executive director and board member Tim Philipp said about 50 to 100 German companies — many of which are engineering firms — set up shop in Singapore annually, raising demand for employees with technical skills.

There are about 1,400 German firms in Singapore, including well-known names such as Bosch. Bilateral trade between the two countries amounted to S$220 billion at the end of last year, similar to that in 2012.

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