

HUMAN RESOURCES  
ROUNDTABLE  
TALENT  
MANAGEMENT

# THE ROLE OF TALENT MANAGEMENT IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

How are HR practitioners using the recession, if at all, to re-evaluate their strategies for retaining or securing the best talent available despite the times? Tony Kelly and Lisa Cheong, editor in chief and editor of *Human Resources* respectively, had lunch with some of Singapore's big names in HR to get some answers.

**SPONSOR ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

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**Tony Kelly, Human Resources:** Okay, guys. Once again, I apologise for interrupting. I know you need to network. So, it's great that you speak to each other, very important. But we do have to keep moving on. I want to get the conversation moving in a slightly structured way. So I guess the big, broad, straight-forward question is – What do we define as talent management? Who wants to start us off?

**Butch Clas, Dow Chemical:** I would say talent management is the combination of selecting the best people, developing their skills over time, doing an effective job of characterizing the organization, what they will look like in the future and trying to move people in the direction to make sure they get the right development opportunities and skills to lead the organization in the future.

**Tony Kelly, Human Resources:** Okay, so we are defining talent as top professionals. Not the talent as in the people in the company?

**Angeline Oh, IBM:** For us, no. Talent is people in the company. We do have the top layer that is called Top Talent. [Laughter] Talent applies to everybody. It's essentially about making sure that you deliver solutions to your clients in order to sustain the company.



**THE LUNCH BOX**

STARTERS  
CREAM OF MUSHROOM SOUP; OR  
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PAN FRIED BARRAMUNDI WITH SALSA  
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CHAR-GRILLED RIBEYE WITH CHIPS &  
SALAD

DESSERT  
APPLE CRUMBLE SERVED WITH  
VANILLA ICE CREAM

\*Selection of freshly brewed 'Lavazza' Coffee  
or 'Twinings' Tea

DATE  
26 February, 2009

VENUE  
Dallas Restaurant & Bar, 31 Boat Quay

**Tony Kelly, Human Resources:** This is a little bit more about what we're talking about later about this idea that not necessarily the brightest people at university make the best performers? Do you want to add anything?

**Lisa Cheong, Human Resources:** Definitely. I just want to raise a question: Can't competencies be trained? Shouldn't you be looking for guts or certain personal attributes, leadership attributes that would enable them to eventually become an agent for change? Wouldn't you be looking for

these attributes instead of technical skills, since technical skills can be trained over time?

**Timothy Cheong, Lend Lease:** It's a balance of looking at the role, the dynamics of the role changing, and the cultural aspects. Get the resources right in terms of people, and get the framing of the roles to meet the company's objectives. Then there's the cultural aspect. A person that works well in a factory in Singapore may have a hard time managing a plant in Thailand. It could be the same plant but the



## IN A YEAR OF UNCERTAINTY

Improving operational efficiencies  
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**IF YOU WEREN'T THERE,  
HERE'S WHAT YOU MISSED:**

"In challenging times like this, the focus really is to go out to as many staff as possible and maximize their leadership qualities. At all levels, you can be a leader."

**Goh Lee Kian, Wyeth**

"It's critical to keep your employees informed. If you leave a vacuum in terms of information, people will fill it with rumour."

**Anne Adam, Pacnet Internet**

**The  
Protagonists**



**Anderson Lim,**  
director of human resources,  
Republic Polytechnic



**Angeline Oh,**  
human resources director  
ASEAN, IBM



**Tim Darton,**  
general manager HCM solutions,  
Oracle



**Rebecca Tan,**  
vice president human resources,  
Singapore Airport Terminal  
Services



**Victor Chen,**  
director of human resources  
Singapore & Malaysia, Merck  
Sharp & Dohme



**Goh Lee Kian,**  
senior director human resources,  
Wyeth



**Hicham Moudhen,**  
president, HRMS Consulting



**K A Chang,**  
executive vice president & chief  
HR officer, Singapore Exchange  
Limited



**Cynthia Lee,**  
Director Human Resources,  
Sentosa Leisure Group



**Timothy Cheong,**  
head of HR – SE Asia, Lend Lease



**Tony Kelly,**  
editor in chief, *Human Resources*



**Lisa Cheong,**  
editor, *Human Resources*



**Linggawaty Alamsjah,**  
human resources director,  
Starbucks Coffee



**Butch Clas,**  
human resources director SEA/  
ANZ, Dow Chemical



**Billy Tan,**  
regional human resources director,  
Alliance One International



**Anne Adam,**  
global SVP of human resources,  
Pacnet Internet

culture is different.

**Tony Kelly, *Human Resources*:** All these definitions – I think this next question applies: How is that being dented? All your plans, all your talent management plans, how are they being dented by this overlay of a very constrictive financial situation in the mind? Everyone's worried, people are shedding staff. There is a lot of pressure on HR in those circumstances. How is talent management being impacted by the financial crisis?

**Butch Clas, Dow Chemical:** We've gone through a reduction program right now. But if I look at the talent pool that we've got, I still think we're focusing on who our future leaders are, what kind of experiences can we give them to prepare them for the next role and the risk you've got right now is you want to make sure your people still feel they are fully appreciated by the company, that you do not lose them.

**Tony Kelly, *Human Resources*:** If the budgets are tight, do you still have to make sure people are on that trajectory to get to where they think they would have gotten to in good times?

**Tim Darton, Oracle:** How do you find those to shed? Is that part of the talent management process?

**Butch Clas, Dow Chemical:** I think if you would look at it sometimes, I would say, it comes back to efficiencies in the organization. We've made certain decisions, maybe we've overdone some things that are not really necessary or maybe don't need the staff and requirements that we have before so some of them happens to be that way.

**Tony Kelly, *Human Resources*:** Can we get some other views in here now about how you are handling talent management when maybe you have to downsize some of the headcount? There's just a lot of pressure on you because of what's

going on.

**Billy Tan, Alliance One International:** We are very fortunate because this is an excellent opportunity for us to drive our succession planning and career development for people. In this regard we have set up assessment centers to look at the people we have.

**Tony Kelly, *Human Resources*:** Billy, can you tell us a bit more about your assessments and what exactly it's about?

**Billy Tan, Alliance One International:** We set up assessment centres in the US to identify high potentials around the world. We get management involved and work closely with consultants to evaluate their behavioral characteristics. As such, we are able to assess the capabilities of several individuals on how they will react to certain situations. The way they conduct themselves will give us an indication on how they are likely to react. We will then know by these behaviors



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## TOP 5 TIPS FOR TALENT MANAGEMENT IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

- 1** Understand the competencies and attributes you need to execute your business goals in these times
- 2** Devise strategies for retaining and engaging top performers within core functions, but also scout for talent that becomes available on the market
- 3** Take advantage of the downtime for training, development and implementation of technology to become more productive
- 4** Communicate with your employees. Set the record straight before the rumour mill starts up.
- 5** Look for leaders, not just doers, who will carry your organization through the uncertain times

if we want to have them on the forefront of our operations.

**Tony Kelly, Human Resources:** How important is communication internally to your talent management program to keep everyone, not necessarily comfortable, but in the know about why some decisions are being made? How well do you think you can do that?

**Anne Adam, Pacnet Internet:** I think it's critical to keep your employees informed. If you leave a vacuum in terms of information, people will fill it with rumour and that's much more damaging. The news may not be everything that people want to hear, but it's better if they understand what's going on so they won't come to the wrong conclusions and head for the door.

**Lisa Cheong, Human Resources:** I would say that companies would have to because employees are generally not stupid. You look at the front page of your newspaper everyday. People know which industries are being hit, which ones are being affected more than others. If you don't communicate about how your company is doing

at the moment, they are just going to fill it up with rumours.

**Tim Darton, Oracle:** You are right. Your employees aren't stupid. The problem is sometimes they get treated as if they are.

**Angeline Oh, IBM:** You are absolutely right. It is very critical. The challenge is how fast we get to our employees because sometimes decisions are made at the top and they go out to the press. At the same time you have to deliver it to your employees in companies globally, so which ones go first? We don't want them to hear about pay cuts or something over TV, so we need to time that very, very well.

**Timothy Cheong, Lend Lease:** That whole process of communication is a learning process as well because the people you are developing are watching you and how you communicate. They are being developed as leaders and if they see that kind of (negative) behaviour, they either copy it and become the same kind of (negative) leader that you are or they can be discouraged by it and do something different. So there goes your company's branding.

**Victor Chen, Director Merck Sharp & Dohme:** We run the risk if we try to hold back information. The more candid we are with the employees, the trust level is going to be higher in the organization. With technology that we have, it's very easy to get your CEO to do a webcast. This can assure that we probably deliver whatever messages that we need to.

**Tim Darton, HCM Solutions Oracle:** Sometimes they're not really sure what to communicate because it's changing so rapidly. Nobody is really sure where it's going to end, when it's going to end, how bad it will get, how soon it's going to get better. The difficulty is to know exactly what to say and what not to say. You don't want to instill any sort of panic. It's a very difficult balancing act.

**Tony Kelly, Human Resources:** Can I ask about the Starbucks experience? How does the economic situation impact your talent management training?

**Linggawaty Alamsjah, Starbucks Coffee:** We actually look at optimizing our training hours, rather than decreasing them. We have not lessened any because our business spirit is dynamic and we need the special skills to deliver the Starbucks Experience to our customers daily.

So we cannot cut back on our partners' training. 'Partners' is actually a term that we call our employees.

**Tim Darton, HCM Solutions Oracle:** I guess what everybody is saying is that it depends on your business model. Your employees are core to the way your entire business model works. Therefore you cannot overlook or cut that part of the budget area. It may be different for other people.

**Goh Lee Kian, Wyeth:** In challenging times like this, we don't focus as much as we did in previous years in terms of assessment centers. The focus really is to go out to as many staff as possible on a mass level. This is what we are concentrating on, in terms of trying to get them to maximize their leadership qualities. At all levels, you can be a leader regardless of whether you are at a junior level or a more senior level.

**Anderson Lim, Republic Polytechnic:** I think that talent development need not all be a costly affair. Some that need some money are things like executive business courses – those things can wait for a while. But there are many mentoring, and coaching courses – those things can go on. CEOs, Deputy CEOs, Division Heads may have some real life problems. Come up with some good suggestions and we can implement it.

**Tim Darton, HCM Solutions Oracle:** Actually he raised a point that I was going to ask. Do you think that the current economic climate has brought you closer, as HR people, to your line of managers?

**Linggawaty Alamsjah, Starbucks Coffee:** Yes.

**Tim Darton, HCM Solutions Oracle:** Are they coming to you, Butch?

**Butch Clas, Dow Chemical:** Yes, very much so. If you're seeing line managers asking for HR help, I think that is a very positive sign. It is an acknowledgement that HR is a key part of our business. They have ignored these people for too long. By getting HR involved in business decisions, we can deal with a profitable organization. I'm hearing more CEOs and more Senior VPs talking around HR now.

**Lisa Cheong, Human Resources:** Having an open dialogue about career future is lacking in companies right now. Basically, repatriation issues: I'm going to India or China for three years but what are my options when I come back to Singapore? Obviously, the company is going to



## ALL WORKING IN CONCERT

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have somebody taking over my current position. But where do I stand in the company when I come back?

**Butch Clas, Dow Chemical:** Sadly, it does happen sometimes. We had a few cases like this so far. We send somebody out for a joint venture. The person starts worrying what will happen 2 or 3 years down the line? Sometimes, again, HR has to bring up the discussion with the leaders.

**Tony Kelly, Human Resources:** K A, how do you retain the cream of the crop?

**K A Chang, Singapore Exchange:** We've learnt that when you hire highly talented people, your approach to retaining them has to be a little bit different. If we hire somebody with high potential and high calibre, you have to make sure that the scope is much broader than other people. The second thing you can do is to defer long term incentives, in terms of year-end bonuses and shares.

**Tony Kelly, Human Resources:** Is the talent management plan impacted by the economic situation for the tourism industry?

**Cynthia Lee, Sentosa Leisure Group:** Although visitorship arrivals to Singapore and Sentosa have seen a dip, the tourism sector is much more resilient in this particular downturn compared to other industries given the change in the tourism landscape and the presence of the two integrated resorts. There is still a strong demand for quality tourism talents; our plans for talent management have not been impacted but instead we have stepped up on various internal initiatives and Sentosa has continued to build bench strength not only for ourselves but the industry too.

**Tony Kelly, Human Resources:** I think we have come to a natural conclusion. Not many conclusions – it's especially more questions than answers – but it's been a very interesting conversation. It's great to hear from all the different sectors, what's on your minds, what your plans are to get through. I think it's great innovative thinking going on which is fantastic. I just, once again, want to thank everyone again for coming on. It is really top level people, it's a fantastic turn out. We do appreciate you giving us a couple of hours over your lunch break. Big thanks to our sponsors for making this happen for us. On behalf of *Human Resources* magazine, have a nice Wednesday afternoon!

## PHOTO ALBUM



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