

Future of Work Post COVID-19 in South East Asia Whitepaper

Executive Summary

Global economies have come to a halt in recent months due to the Coronavirus pandemic. The world's financial institutions are relaxing fiscal policies and governments are implementing monetary policies to keep their economies stimulated.

Due to the enforced lockdowns imposed, non-essential businesses have had to close their doors during the lockdown period and some of these organizations sadly may not open once the lockdown restrictions are eased. Employees have lost their jobs during this period and this has and will continue to impact upon families with the amount of money available to spend.

The economic and business conditions in South East Asia are no different. COVID-19 has severely disrupted many industries across South East Asia. The key industries that have felt the brunt of this crisis are tourism, travel, professional services, property and construction, supply chains, engineering, FMCG, and labour supply.

Economic recovery in 2020 will be challenging with many economies across the world will experience a recession and it is expected that 2021 will be the year before economies exit the recession. 89% companies find the pandemic impacted their businesses negatively from sales, operations, human capital and investment perspectives in the first half of 2020, while companies are exploring the journey to rebound, we believe that having the right professional talent will be crucial to the business and economic recovery post COVID-19.

We have conducted a survey named "Future of Work under the Impact of COVID-19" throughout Q2 targeted to business leaders for their valuable insight into how they believed the current economic crisis has impacted upon their organisation and the type of talent required post-COVID-19. This report summarises the results of the business leaders' insights and will be valuable to business leaders and employers to tackle the talent challenges in the new normal.



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Introduction

COVID-19 has caused most economies around the world to come to a standstill. Industries such as tourism, hospitality, supply chains, logistics, manufacturing, professional services, FMCG, retail, property and construction across the world have felt the brunt of this pandemic. The world's financial institutions are relaxing fiscal policies and governments are implementing monetary policies to keep their economies stimulated and the affected people with a form of income during this period.

Countries have enforced lockdowns and restricted travel in and out of their countries. Consequently, non-essential businesses have had to close their doors during the lockdown period and some of these organizations sadly may not open again once the lockdown restrictions are eased. Employees have lost their jobs during this period and this has impacted and will continue to impact upon families from financial perspective. Families have suffered enough from the human tragedy perspective of losing loved ones.

The organizations that have had the opportunity of staying open have faced many challenges particularly with their supply chain and the way they deliver their products or services to their customers. The organizations that have remained operational have had to change the way they work with employees working remotely or some employees going to the workplace with social distancing rules in place.

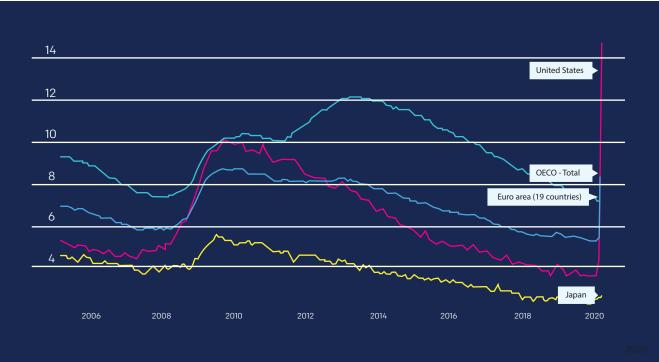


Figure 1 - Impact of Unemployment (OECD)

The economic and business conditions in South East Asia are no different. The countries in this region are experiencing the same conditions as other global countries. ILO estimates are that as many as 25 million people could become unemployed as the consequence of COVID-19 (International Labour Organization, 2020) on top of the existing 190 million that were already unemployed before COVID-19 (UN News, 2020). The major areas of unemployment are shown in Figure 1 (OECD, 2020).

Apart from unemployment being one of the major impacts of this pandemic, economies around the world will feel the effect on GDP. There could be further impact on the global economies if there are more waves of infections coming with renewed lockdowns that could potentially hit before the end of 2020, and one in which another major outbreak is avoided. We are already seeing the second wave of the virus in certain locations with lockdowns reinforced once again. Figure 2 highlights the impact upon GDP before any possible second wave (OECD, 2020).

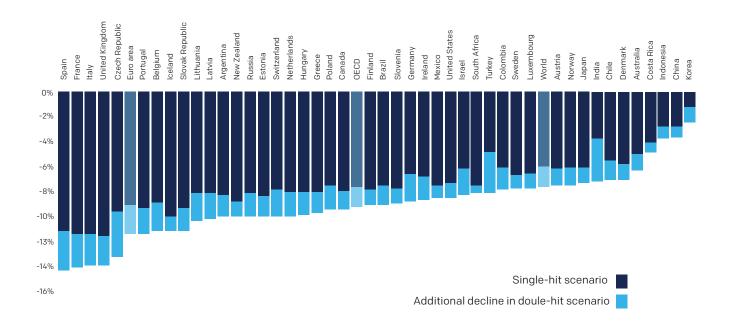


Figure 2 - Projected changes in GDP in 2020

COVID-19 has severely disrupted many industries across South East Asia. The pandemic poses great challenges for the economic integration of East and Southeast Asia. Much of the future of the integration depends on measures and coordination amongst countries in the region. The key industries that have felt the brunt of this crisis are tourism and travel, supply chains and labour supply (East Asia Forum, 2020). Uncertainty is driving negative sentiment across the region and this sentiment affects trade, investment and output, which in turn affects growth. Tourism and business travel, as well as related industries, especially airlines and hotels, were the first to be affected. The conditions may not recover so quickly with most countries in South East Asia just ended their lockdowns at the end of last month.



Overview of major impacts of COVID-19 on Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand.

MALAYSIA

The country responded to COVID-19 amid the sudden change in government, since March 18th. Malaysia has taken some aggressive steps, including border closures and a partial lockdown that has been enforced by the military (Diplomat Risk Intelligence, 2020). Since the beginning of March 2020, the government has responded with three economic stimulus packages to manage economic impacts.

SINGAPORE

Singapore was able to quickly contain the virus in the early stages after early detection of the virus. Singapore gave out support packages and imposed restrictions throughout the country (Diplomat Risk Intelligence, 2020). Despite its best efforts, it has been seen that new clusters of the virus have occurred which has led to another lockdown imposition to prevent a second wave of the virus.

THAILAND

The government did not ban foreign visitors due to concerns about harming its economy until March 26 (Diplomat Risk Intelligence, 2020). Eventually Thailand did close its borders, banned foreign visitors and imposed a partial curfew. The government has also passed three stimulus packages covering a range of areas, including loans, worker aid, and tax benefits.

The journey of economic recovery worldwide might be slow this year, as predicted by economic experts most countries' economies will experience a recession. Economic researchers and financial experts believe that most countries might exit their recession by 2021. We believe finding the right mid to senior level of professional talent will be crucial to business and economic recovery post COVID-19.

For organizations that have remained open and for those that will open after the lockdowns are lifted, this crisis is a timely wake-up call to think about (a) continuity planning, (b) redesigning your business model post COVID-19 based upon the future of work in respect to the supply chain, business operation, business development, customer relationship management, employees plus products and services delivery to your customers. and (c) surviving the recession.

Spring Professional has recently conducted a survey named "Future of Work under the Impact of COVID-19." The survey was targeted to business leaders for their valuable insight into how they believed the current economic crisis has impacted upon their organisation and the type of talent required post-COVID-19. This report summarises the results of the business leaders' insights.

We hope that the findings from this survey will help businesses across SEA in the recovery period post COVID-19 to understand and to connect talent to support business continuity or for transformation planning.

Key Findings



89% respondents identified that their businesses had been negatively impacted due to the COVID-19 outbreak especially in industries of Engineering and Supply Chain, Professional Services, FMCG & Retail, Tourism and Hospitality.

The respondents stated that their business operations have been negatively impacted in many ways. 53% of respondents told us that they have experienced a negative downturn in sales and revenue. There has been a partial or negative shift in human capital (64%) during this pandemic. 76% of the respondents reported that their investment decisions would be put partially or fully withheld during this pandemic until the uncertainty in the economy and marketplace is cleared.



Negative downturn in sales and revenue



Negative shift in human capital



Economy and marketplace is cleared

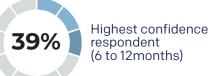
3.



Business continuity plan is important to operations but may not have direct impact business performance. 81% respondents replied that they did have a business continuity plan in place to help them survive during this pandemic. Insights from our country directors revealed a similar pattern with their clients having a business continuity plan in place. Minor changes to these plans have been undertaken to consider the new impacts arising from COVID-19.

47% are confident that their organizations will recover within the next 6 months with which industry has the highest confidence 39% of the respondents believed their organization will recover between 6 to 12 months and 14% beyond the 12-month period. There was a common agreement across our country managers that there are certain expected recovery times for the different industry sectors. The property / construction industry was expected to take the longest period of 12 months before recovery.







Highest confidence respondent (beyond 12-month)

The future for talent development was highly motivated towards upskilling their employees (49%) rather than replacing existing employees (4%). Organisations will upskill or reskill their employees (60%).







Reskill employees

Organizations will be on the lookout for a new form of talent in the future. The future employees are expected to be people who are commercially minded and have diversified experience and skillsets spread across a wider range of business functions.

Part I: COVID-19 Impact on Businesses in SEA

The first part of this survey aims to identify the COVID-19 impact in terms of significance that the present economic climate has had and will continue to impact upon their businesses from perspectives of Sales & Revenue, Human Capital, Business Investment and Business Operations throughout 2020.

Understanding the impact upon organizations due to the current economic uncertainty caused by the COVID-19 outbreak.

89% of the respondents identified that their business had been negatively impacted due to the COVID-19 outbreak. The main industry sectors are engineering / supply chain (36%), professional services (12%) and FMCG / Retail (11%).

3% of the respondents noted that they were not being impacted by the outbreak whilst 8% stated that the outbreak of COVID-19 played a positive impact upon their business. A possible cause for those respondents who are enjoying a positive impact upon their business would be those businesses who have remained open during the lockdowns or have been able to operate through changing their business to online platforms. These businesses have been able to accommodate the needs of customers during this time. These organizations are spread across most industry groups.

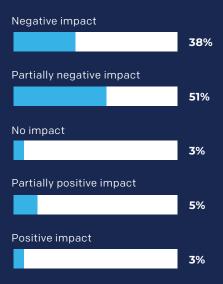


Figure 7 - COVID-19 Impact upon the Organization



85% respondents shared that sales and revenue has been impacted by this outbreak in a negative manner due to lockdowns, out of which nearly 32% of the respondents felt that they had experienced a partial negative impact. We have noticed that 6% respondents stated that there was a positive effect upon revenue.



The COVID-19 pandemic will have 64% partial or negative impact upon the human capital resources as most of the respondents have already felt the reduction in revenue for their organization (refer Figure 9). Once business are back into full operations post COVID-19, recruitment of new talent will continue but a new type of talent will be required as will be explained later.

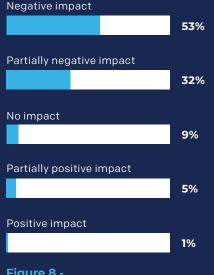


Figure 8 Estimated Impact upon Sales & Revenue



Figure 9 - Estimated Impact upon Human Capital



As expected, 76% of respondents reported that there would be a partial or negative impact upon their investment decisions. Planned investment decisions towards acquiring new technology or plant and equipment have been put on hold until post COVID-19. There were not many respondents who showed that they would continue with business investment decisions (2%) during this period (refer Figure 10).



Figure 10 Expected Impact upon Business Investment



Business operations would be intentionally interrupted as governments around the world enforced lockdowns. Many of these organizations across all industry sectors have closed their doors during the lockdown period and some of these forced closures may be permanent. 75% of respondents (refer Figure 11) identified that this pandemic had partially or completely disrupted their business operations through (a) closure, (b) disruption to the supply chain, and (c) a reduction in consumer spending. Surprisingly, 17% of the respondents reported that their business operations were neutral to the impact of COVID-19 impact.



Figure 11 -Estimated Impact upon Human Capital

Part II: Business Continuity and Confidence to Rebound

Business continuity planning is important for all organizations as it improves the chances of business survival during times of crisis. It details the steps needed to be taken before, during and after an event to maintain the financial viability of an organization

In this part, we will discuss the preparedness and confidence to rebound to navigate employers to mitigating risks, avoiding disasters when possible, and having the right plan in place to cope and recover when unavoidable setbacks occur.

The business continuity plan should be constantly reviewed and modified because new threats and risks occur regularly. The entire team should be made aware of the organization's business continuity plan.

Existence of a Business Continuity Plan (BCP) to continue the business operations during the outbreak of COVID-19.

81% participants replied that they did have a business continuity plan in place to guide them during this pandemic (refer Figure 12). Yet we noticed that 75% of the respondents still found that their business operations were challenging during COVID-19. Usability of practical BCP may be worth a revisit post COVID-19.

The surprising result was that 12% of respondents were not sure if the organization had a business continuity plan.

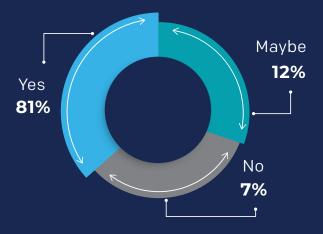


Figure 12 - Business Continuity Plan

Estimated time period for recovery from the COVID-19 outbreak

Figure 13 represents the expected timeline that organizations were expecting to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. 47% of the respondents believed that their organizations will recover within the next 6 months. The three major industry sectors that believe that they will recover within the six month time period are (a) engineering / supply chain (16%), (b) IT / Internet (9%) and (c) professional services (8%).

39% of the respondents believed their organization will recover between 6 to 12 months. The two industries that were affected were the engineering / supply chain (17%) and property / construction (4%).

14% of the respondents replied beyond 12-month period. The two industries that were affected were the engineering / supply chain (5%) and professional services (3%).



Expected Recovery Period

Expected Recovery Period in Different Industries in SEA





Part III: Future of Work in SEA Post Pandemic

Regardless of whether businesses will focus on restarting or rebounding as the next step, the future of work has already revealed some changes across different countries and industries. From employers in Supply Chain to Consumer Retail, discussions around on-line strategies and digitalisation is on the agenda. Other industries such as tourism, airlines and hospitality, there will be uncertainties to further observe before more actions. In the final part of this study, we would like to walk employers through how talent investment viewpoints and outlook will be post pandemic!

Investment into attracting new talent to your organization

Talent matters to business survival and transformation! In South East Asia, 49% respondents stated that they are and will continue to invest in attracting new talent in particular in (a) engineering / supply chain industry (18%), (b) professional services (6%) and (c) IT / Internet (8%).

5% of respondents have no interest at this stage to invest in new talent. 25% of respondents have not yet thought about their talent attraction strategy or requirements as it will depend upon the situation post COVID-19 as shown in Figure 14 below.

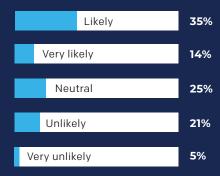


Figure 14 Forecast for Professional Talent Hiring

Investment into attracting new talent to your organization

Looking at the forecast of professional talent hiring in 2020, most respondents (83%) saw no reason to change their present headcount in particular with the engineering / supply and IT / Internet industries. Respondents saw that the immediate needs were to maintain the same level of headcount resources (36%) or to freeze headcounts (42%) as illustrated in Figure 15. Only a minor percentage of respondents saw a need to increase headcount (nearly 5%) whilst 17% of the respondents saw a need to immediately decrease headcount.

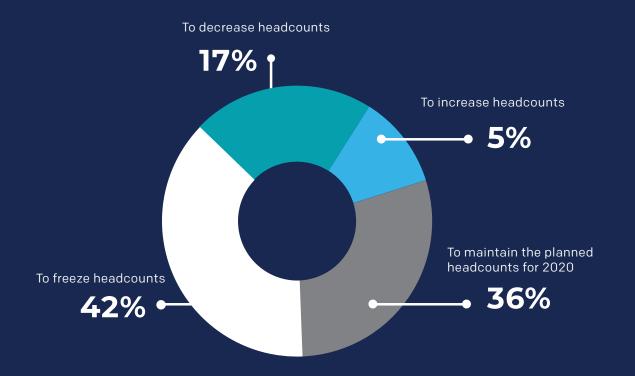


Figure 15 - Forecast for Professional Talent Hiring

Your future talent development plans after the COVID-19 crisis based upon your business model and operations.

The pandemic is a timely wake-up call to employers to relook into their future talent development strategies. Consider the business models and operations, the future for talent development was highly motivated towards upskilling employees by 49% employers rather than replacing the existing employees (only 4%). We can see that the engineering / supply and IT / Internet industries are leading on the choice to upskill current professional workforce.

Organizations are prepared to invest in talent development rather than replacing employees through providing further training that is relevant to the employee and to the organization. Organisations will upskill or reskill their employees (60%). 35% of respondent saw no need to change their talent development post COVID-19.

Employees that have been redundant during this period are expected to upskill themselves so that they gain a better opportunity to regain entry back into the workforce. Those employees who do not undertake additional may find it more difficult to re-enter the workforce

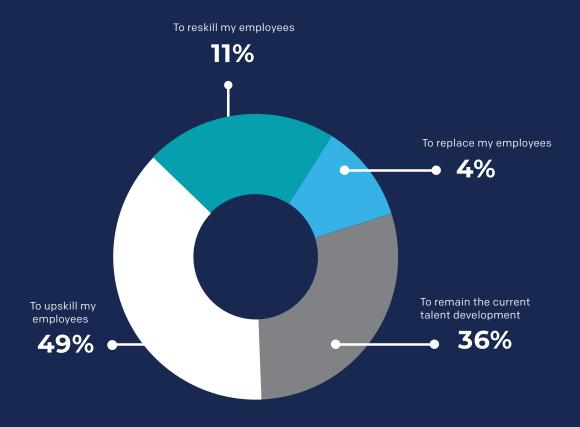


Figure 16 - Future Talent Development

Insights from SEA Country Directors

We have interviewed the country directors of Spring Professional in Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand to present their expert opinions on how the COVID-19 crisis impacted upon the local market and how the future of work will be in their country post pandemic.

Qualitative research with three telephone interviews with each country director with up to 12 questions to draw upon their insights into the impact of COVID-19 on their economies, the businesses from different industry sectors, and the future of the workforce in their views.

MALAYSIA



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The country went through 5 phases of Movement Control Order to implement strict actions recommended by WHO to contain the COVID-19 outbreak. Although many large organizations across different industry sectors do have business continuity plans in place, impact of COVID-19 amid the political situation in March still caused uncertainties to economy and businesses. Unemployment rate quickly spiked to 5% in April with the number of people out of jobs went up to 778,800. (FMT News, 2020). Meanwhile, the volatility of the oil price is not making economic situation better in Malaysia. The impact will be further expected throughout the second half of 2020.

Most negatively impacted employers and employees were those in manufacturing, supply chain, and off-line services sectors including tourism, accommodation, food & beverage, arts, sports, entertainment and recreation. With the commencement of restarting from 10th June, there is potential that the country will see the recovery starting end of this year. It is expected that businesses within most industry sectors in Malaysia will take between 4 to 6 months to recover from this economic shock providing that there is no second wave of the pandemic and that there is a vaccine that becomes available.

However, businesses in telecommunication and IT sectors did experienced positive impact with the increasing demands to support digital operations and remote working. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, work from home was optional with 10% to 15% of employees elected to work from home. Many MNCs adopted work-from-home arrangements with their employees. Companies such as Amazon, Facebook and Google have allowed their employees to work remotely actually found that productivity significantly increased by up to 60%. Some employers are looking at using this approach in countries they do not have offices in the new normal to open up opportunities to talented professionals providing virtual support and service.

COVID-19 impact on professional talent demands post pandemic alerted majority of employers to think about not only success but also survival. Employers get to see the importance and benefit to digitalizing their business operations with the right talent who have the skillsets and experience! Additionally, the global scale lockdown that paralysed the supply chains provided business leaders the best timing to revisit the future supply chains strategies to diversify suppliers to minimize disruptions. A new stage of mergers or acquisitions both upstream and downstream can be expected with the support from highly experienced supply chain talent.

Organizations will also seek for more talent particularly in the area of change management, which will be the rising demand specialised talent that focuses on minimizing negative impacts and disruptions with the organizational changes. The pandemic also provided the window for employers to see how skill mismatch will be a challenge for their future! It is also expected that employers should re-skill or up-skill employees to support them become more capable, adaptable and agile to the changing world of work!

SINGAPORE



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Singapore as an investment hub is relatively dependent upon global economies. The economy has fared marginally better than most the rest of South East Asian countries due to the government's proactive investment decisions at the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak. Industries that are feeling the full impact are retail, manufacturing, construction and hospitality with only IT & Internet showing slight growth. Supply chain & logistic industry has had mixed impacts despite the international supply chains suffered from lockdowns, yet local supply chains have developed alternate products. The domestic logistics sector has experienced growth due to the need of ensuring food, medical and essential supplies reach all areas of the country.

Overall unemployment rate crept up from 2.3% in Q2 to 2.4%. (Phua, 2020) Retrenchments rose from 2,670 to 3,220 in the first quarter of this year and 4,190 employees were placed on shorter work hours or furloughs. The food and beverage, arts and entertainment, and administrative sectors saw the largest decline in job vacancies, whereas job openings only appear in areas of infocom technology and healthcare increased.

Most businesses have business continuity plans in place as part of good corporate practice. Even for global companies that without business continuity plan, the local organizations would develope their own plans to minimize potential disruption to the business model.

Commercial property rents, corporate taxation and loan repayments have been deferred. Once the lockdown lifted, many organizations might struggle to make the deferred payments plus the normal monthly repayments. The impact might lead to business closure and further increase in unemployment. Experts believe that the economic shock will initially transform into a L shape lasting longer than expected before turning into a U shape with a fast recovery back to normal levels. The economy is still in the first part of the U shape moving downward. The length of the bottom will depend upon how the economy and businesses will cope with the deferment of payments. Property and construction industry will take longer to recover as it relies heavily upon government investment into projects.

Transformation of the local supply chain & logistics will be driven by consumer behaviour and cost-based capabilities to avoid disruptions such as COVID-19 in the future. Changes will need government and unions to collectively relook into the infrastructure and strategies that supports sustainability of local manufacturing organizations and the supply chain network to accommodate these changes.

Working from home was considered an employee benefit prior to the COVID-19 outbreak. Remote working arrangement occurred in most industry sectors with back office functions such as finance, IT and marketing. It is expected that the future of the workforce will have more of remote working except for manufacturing, construction and engineering sectors. It is expected that organizations will turn their business operations into a more sophisticated digital model which will allow them to seek for talent that will be available globally.

Organizations will be on the lookout for new type of talent who have multi-skillset. Employees must upskill them-selves or having employers to reskill or upskill them to improve operational productivity and efficiencies in the new world of work. Employees who upskill themselves will need to include IT skills (digitalization) and operational efficiencies.

THAILAND



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Unemployment rate of Thai in Bangkok and nearby provinces increased to 9.6 %. (The Nation Thailand, 2020) It would hit its highest point Q2 and is likely to decrease throughout 2020. Tourism represents nearly 40% of the country's GDP. Yet no tourists have been allowed into the country since March 2020 due to the imposed lockdown. Hotels and restaurants are all closed with many employees retrenched. Only some restaurants with digital capabilities remained opened and have been operating using delivery channels to survive. Other industries that have been impacted include the automotive (export market to China is critical), manufacturing and FMCG retail outlets.

Property and construction projects have been frozen, and it is not known the time period before construction will recommence. The general retail industry is likely to take 4 to 6 months before they recover from the outbreak. The luxury goods retail industry will take longer time before they recover – most likely between 7 to 9 months (maybe 12 months) as tourism industry is expected to commence in September 2020.

Global manufacturers believed that having multiple production plants across the world will improve their supply chain. COVID-19 outbreak has shown that due to global lockdowns, this has been a hindrance as no manufacturing or access to materials is available. Companies believed that they will return their manufacturing plants back home even though the manufacturing costs are higher but are not heavily reliant on importation of raw materials or parts. Retail industry might even look at using ecommerce platforms as an additional distribution channel in the future.

Most of businesses did not have business continuity plans but instituted their own continuity plans since the outbreak. One of the common problems that arose from existing business continuity plans was that there were no contact numbers or telephone diversions in place when organizations decided to allow employees to work remotely.

Businesses are evenly split between working remotely from home or rotation. Companies that allow employees to work remotely are mostly large size multi-national organizations and this pattern is seen across most industry sectors. The retail and FMCG industry sectors have been working on rotational shifts so that they remain operational during this time. Working from home during the outbreak showed that key performance indicators have increased, thus increase in productivity. There are many plausible reasons for the increase in the key performance indicators such as fear of losing their job and less interruption so that they can perform their job function.

Talent of the future must be versatile and possess multiple talents that cross different departments, not just the talent who fit their job responsibilities. The thinking is that employees must have commercial mindsets. It is may be expected that in the future many employees will not be employed on a full-time basis, but employers will start outsourcing their specific projects to people who have the capabilities of being commercially minded.

Report Summary

Based upon the survey and the valuable insights from our country directors, there has been a common understanding that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused massive global disruptions to businesses and economies. Apart from the economic impact, this outbreak has placed much pressure on medical resources across the world besides the emotional anguish suffered by people who have lost loved ones and have been affected by the virus.

Countries have closed their borders and imposed their own lockdowns thus disrupting many industries, supply chains and investment decisions. Governments have tried to keep their economies from falling into recession by stimulating their economy with monetary packages.

Many businesses have closed temporarily or in some cases permanent. Employees have lost their jobs or working shorter hours with less pay. Organizations have been forced to get their employees to work remotely. It has been seen that productivity levels have increased due to remote working but there are many reasons for this productivity increase such as the fear of losing a job and less disruption.

It is going to take some time before organizations start to recover after lockdowns have been lifted. Some industries will recover faster than other industries, but it is expected that the property/construction will be the worst affected industry that will take approximately 12 months to recover.

The largest concerns that governments and organizations have are (a) a second wave of the outbreak and (b) repaying the deferred payments (loans, rental and taxation). If any of these scenarios occur, it is expected that there will be further job losses and closure of more organizations.

Post COVID-19, organizations are likely to see new talent. The new talent will consist of employees who are multi-skilled and multi-talented who can perform a range of functions rather than the specific functions for their role.



Appendix

Survey Methodology

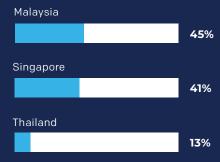
This survey has asked a selected group of business leaders a series of questions relating to the economic impact that COVID-19 is having on their businesses now and in the future. There were 200 respondents to the survey.

Selected Business Leaders

The group of business leaders selected for this survey came from a wide selection of industry groups across South East Asian countries. This selection enables us to see the present situation and the future outlook resulting from COVID-19. We asked the business leaders where they were positioned in the organization and the size of the organization. This latter information will enable us to examine the impact of COVID-19 upon small, medium and large size organisation.

Locations

The locations chosen for this survey were South East Asian countries comprising of Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and other countries. 45% of the respondents were from Malaysia followed by Singapore with 41% respondents.



Industry

It was found that the respondents came from a range of industry groups as shown. The leading industry group was Engineering and Supply Chain with 42%. The other respondents were spread across all other industry groups



Respondents by Industry Groups

Size of the Business

There are three industry sizes as shown (i) small size business, (ii) medium size business and (iii) large size businesses. The categorisation of these businesses is by the number of employees in the organization. Small and micro size businesses can be categorised into one group that comprises of organizations that have an employee base of less than fifty staff. The classification of these organizations are as follows:

Large (250 employees and above)

44%

Medium (50-249 employees)

32%

Small (1-49 employees)

24%

- 250+ employees Large size organizations.
- 50 249 employees Medium size organizations.
- 1 49 employees Small size organizations.

Size of the Business

Respondent's Role within the organization

The respondent's role within the organization was heavily weighted between (i) HR Managers, (ii) Hiring Managers, and (iii) C-suite Executives . These three roles represented 93%. There were 7% of directors that participated in the survey.



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