

STAYING ON

Mr Thong's (left) internship in CKE Manufacturing was so fruitful that he was asked to stay on; Mr Kwan (right) describes the internship programme as a mutually beneficial, two-way learning process.

Mr Kwan Lifeng, enterprise development manager of precision machinery firm CKE Manufacturing, says that internships are an integral part of developing human resource capacities, improving operational effectiveness and enhancing organisational capabilities to achieve organisational excellence.

In the end, Mr Kwan shares that CKE Manufacturing has been tapping the human resources offered by enterprise agency Spring Singapore to attach post-secondary and tertiary students to its medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). These include the Management Associate Partnership (MAP), the Enterprise Internship Programme (EIP) and the SME Internship Programme.

The aim is simple: To attract and identify qualified students to stay on as permanent staff. "Hopefully, after completing our structured internship, we'll be able to show them how an SME is run, thereby increasing our chances of retaining them after they graduate," says Mr Kwan. However, the firm does not accept just anyone to take on a permanent role. The students, he says, are assessed on their performance on the job, including their motivation and belief in the work they do.

Mr Thong, an intern who passed the test is Thong Yong Jun, who went on an attachment with the company as part of his project during his undergraduate studies at the Singapore Management University (SMU). Mr Thong's project involved shortening lead times for prepared materials. A fruitful partnership between Mr Thong and CKE Manufacturing that both decided to make it a permanent one. Mr Thong now works as an enterprise development executive at the company's enterprise development team. He is tasked with implementing strategies that uphold the company's commitment to realising organisational change and enhancing capabilities within the enterprise.

Mr Kwan explains that this involves designing and running structured programmes for students who meet the company's needs. This requires him to first identify organisational gaps in which students may potentially value-add, working with Institutes of Technical Education (ITEs), polytechnics, and universities to identify prospective students on relevant courses, and finally tapping the schemes offered by Spring to implement the internship programme. CKE Manufacturing's internship programme was launched in 2009 and takes in 60 interns every year. It is run as a consulting project where interns are involved in data collection, solving specific issues such as streamlining work processes, and assessing various overseas markets for the firm to expand into.

Mr Kwan describes it as a mutually beneficial, two-way learning process for both the company and its interns. He notes: "The programme has changed the way we think and we have learnt a lot from the students and they've learnt in school." This has helped the company to prove itself, he adds.

For instance, the company was able to reduce the lead time of a work order from 21 to 17 hours following the completion of projects in which the interns participated. Mr Kwan adds that the process of discussions between interns and permanent staff has enabled the company to better grasp the key challenges at hand, thus allowing them to break down project groups to zero in on specific problems. "If the problem itself is big and cannot be solved



PHOTO: ARTHUR LEE

INVESTING IN INTERNSHIPS

Such programmes are an integral part of developing human resource capacities, improving operational effectiveness and enhancing organisational capabilities

Mr Kwan believes that CKE Manufacturing's internship programme has helped the company to achieve annual revenue growth of 15-20 per cent.

The students have benefited by gaining technical knowledge and skills that are not taught in school through their use of the statistical tools required for data mining.

They also build tacit knowledge and training of soft skills, such as approaching others for help and framing questions appropriately.

In addition, opportunities are provided for interns to work in cross functional teams to enable them to better appreciate how various functions are related to each other and the company's operations as an integrated whole.

"Even if you're working on an engineering project, you need to see the project from the operations, IT (information technology), and HR (human resource) perspectives," says Mr Kwan. He adds that through the interaction and exchange of ideas with permanent staff as well as students from other schools, interns are also able to experience working in a dynamic environment.

The aim is to develop a culture of organisational

the injection of fresh perspectives by interns to overcome such resistance and make workers more receptive.

To ensure continuity amid such challenges, the programme is structured such that they are passed from one intern to another in a coherent manner.

To develop its full-time staff, the company works with various educational and professional institutions, such as the Singapore Institute of Manufacturing Technology (SIMTech) so that staff can acquire skills in various areas besides their own.

For instance, Mr Thong, who majored in operations management, underwent training by ITE to better comprehend the operations on the shop floor, while another worker with an engineering background was sent for a sales and marketing course.

Mr Kwan explains that such exposure allows a worker's area of expertise and enhances the overall efficiency of the company's operations as a whole.

Both Mr Kwan and Mr Thong have a strong focus on what comes to attracting, developing and retaining talent in the firm. "We hope to be the benchmark, and