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Tuesday November 17, 2009

Shortage of engineers in technology sector

By DAVID TAN

CEO: This will undermine nation's competitive edge

GEORGE TOWN: The country is not producing sufficient engineers to meet the needs of the technology sector, which will undermine the country's competitive edge as a destination for foreign direct investments, said Penang Skills Development Centre (PSDC) chief executive officer Datuk Boonler Somchit.

He told *StarBiz*, citing data from the Education Ministry, that both public and private universities in the country produced over 13,700 first-degree graduates in engineering last year, which "is not adequate to meet the needs of the technology sector in the country."

"Let us say if a multinational corporation (MNC) requires 50 engineers, 100 MNCs would need 5,000 engineers.

"The 13,700 fresh graduates that we produce is definitely not enough to go round to meet the needs of the MNCs and local technology companies," he said.

In Penang, there are 760 companies in the free industrial zone and industrial estates, of which 20 are multinational corporations involved in designing and development work, according to Boonler.



Datuk Boonler Somchit ... 'The 13,700 fresh graduates that we produce is definitely not enough'



Datuk Ng Chai Eng says engineers in Penang now earn more than their counterparts in Kuala Lumpur

"If their business were to pick up gradually over the next couple of years, each company would need to hire at least 50 engineers.

"This would mean that Penang needs some 1,000 engineers in the design and development field alone," Boonler said, referring to Penang Chief Minister Lim Guan Eng's recent statement that the state's inability to supply 1,000 engineers had resulted in Penang losing some US\$3bil in investments.

"When we realise the shortage problem last year, PSDC quickly used the RM50mil given by the Federal Government under the second stimulus package to implement a fast-track training programme for fresh graduates.

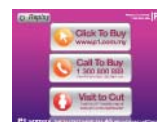
"About RM30mil was used to set up and buy equipment for measurement, radio frequency, and embedded technology laboratories.


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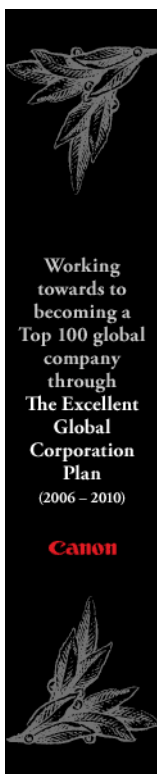


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track programme.

"The fast-track programme, implemented under the industrial skills enhancement programme (INSEP) programme, trains fresh graduates for six months and send them for attachment with factories for another six months.

"Upon completing INSEP, they would have acquired skill sets equivalent to an engineer with three years of experience.

"Since the implementation of INSEP in February 2009, PSDC has trained 638 fresh engineering graduates," he said.

PSDC has been approaching the Federal Government for allocations to retrain engineers who are currently working.

"The Government should quickly work with other states to implement similar programmes to train fresh engineering graduates," Boonler said, adding that the Government should continue supporting PSDC's efforts to train graduates.

Penang Foundry & Engineering Industries Association (Penfeia) president Datuk Ng Chai Eng noted that the shortage of engineers in Penang had resulted in their wages rising faster than their counterparts in Kuala Lumpur.

"Now engineers in Penang earn more than their counterparts in Kuala Lumpur.

"The monthly salaries of fresh engineers in Penang ranged between RM2,200 and RM2,500, compared to their counterparts who are getting paid between RM1,500 and RM2,000.

"The salaries for engineers in Penang are also higher because of their specialised technological skills," Ng said.

Ng has called on the Government to relax its ruling on the entry of foreign engineers into the country.

"The economy is starting to recover, but if there is a shortage of engineers, the ability of our plants to conduct on time delivery will definitely be affected.

"The recovery pace will definitely be slowed down," he said.

The Malaysian American Electronics Industry Association president Datuk S.H. Wong said MNCs had problems in sourcing for experienced design and development engineers.

"Other engineers can be found, but training must be given to them as they lack experience," he said.

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