

SEAAGE
SOUTH EAST ASIAN ASSOCIATION OF GRADUATE EMPLOYERS

12 Days of Early Talent: Celebrating Southeast Asia

Perspectives of Southeast Asia's Early Talent Community from the 2023 SEAAGE Conference

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Alvin Lim
Director, SEAAGE

Editor's Letter

This year, we celebrated a return to our in-person Conference following the COVID-19 years, and we trust that you all had a great time learning, brainstorming and being together. It was so lovely to see everyone gathered in Singapore at the CBRE APAC headquarters after what has felt to me like a really long break from in-person events due to the pandemic.

This e-book is the result of the World Café sessions sponsored by GradConnection at this year's Conference — the compilation of all your discussion points during the speed roundtables, as well as what was "overheard" throughout our one-day Conference. A big thank you to my co-driver, Anna Champion (The Talent Lighthouse), as well as all our contributors for helping to create what we hope will be a resource to cap off the year, and give you pause for reflection for your planning activities for 2024.

As HR professionals with a vested interest in Early Careers, it is our collective hope that our work will continue to impact and inspire young talent – recognising that we all have a big role to play in driving the development of the future leaders of the world.

In my Conference welcome address this year, I stressed that SEAAGE are not set up to be a well to drink from – we know that our purpose is not to build a paywall or monopoly on knowledge. Instead, we'd like to think of ourselves as an open bar – that facilitates conversation about the topics that interest us most, and to be able to be a community of practice over the challenges we face together.

There is no better place to do this than from within one of the most exciting, dynamic and youthful regions in the world today. Thank you for your gracious support as we look to continue serving and growing the Early Talent community in Southeast Asia and beyond, from our base here in Singapore.

On behalf of the SEAAGE team, here's wishing you a Blessed Christmas and a brilliant 2024 to look forward to. Enjoy the year-end break – and see you in the new year!

SEAAGE: Who we are

- Not-for-Profit organisation – run by the Early Talent community for the community
- Founded and based in Singapore
- An independent organisation run by graduate employers for graduate employers in Southeast Asia across a broad range of industries
- We aim to help organisations better understand how to recruit and retain “early-in-career” talent both locally and globally



Foreword



Michael Jenkins
Keynote Speaker, SEAAGE Conference 2023

Adjunct Associate Professor
Management and Organisation,
NUS Business School and CEO,
Expert Humans

Author of Expert Humans: Critical Leadership skills for a Disrupted World

I was delighted to be invited to speak at the SEAAGE Conference 2023 and I'm honoured to have been asked to write the foreword for this richly insightful SEAAGE publication, *12 Days of Early Talent: Celebrating Southeast Asia*.

As 2024 appears on the horizon, many of us, I'm sure, will be filled with a mixture of excitement and trepidation. I think we're excited at the prospect of all the new opportunities which a brand-new year brings – while at the same time we are all keenly aware of the persistent background music of uncertainty. I would like to think that that excitement around the new year and the adoption of an optimistic mindset might help us to put any anxiety to one side – as we allow ourselves a moment to consider the possibilities that present themselves.

This excellent publication provides just that kind of support and encouragement to think about those possibilities, thanks to its unique combination of valuable and insightful information and perspective-taking – and warmth, which permeates every page. I loved the stories and the sharing – and I know you will too!

In conclusion, it is fantastic and heart-warming to see how friends at SEAAGE are embracing the concepts of altruism, compassion and empathy: I truly believe that these human attributes are what will help us to live with the uncertainty of our times, as we support other people – and they support us. If we add courage and curiosity to the mix, I am certain that we will be able to enjoy – and maybe weather – all that 2024 brings as we seek not just to survive, but to thrive.

Here's wishing the SEAAGE team and the SEAAGE community a great 2024 and an enjoyable break over the holiday season.

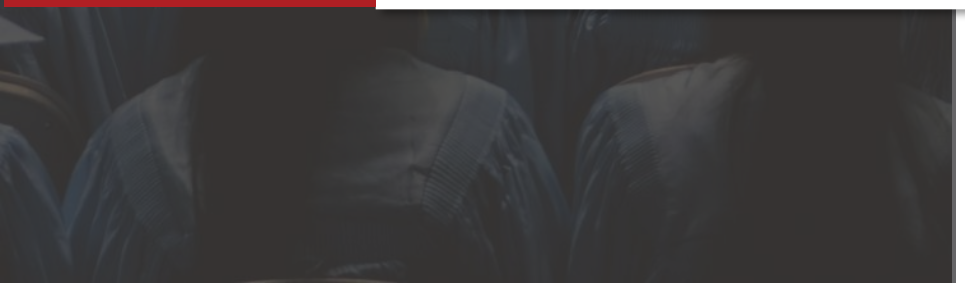
M. Jenkins



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Pictured: Tony Ye (GradConnection)

1. World Café Reflections

by Tony Ye, GradConnection

While "everything virtual" has emerged as a valuable tool, particularly in remote work, face-to-face interactions continue to hold immense value in the business world. Through our university and employer partners, I've seen an increasing number of in-person events this year.

For students and young professionals, the appeal of hybrid or flexible work arrangements is undeniable. The promise of flexibility, cost savings, and convenience is a powerful magnet. Employers have taken note and are actively listening to the needs of younger employees. As a result, mental health support, coaching programs, and other quality-of-life benefits are growing in prevalence.

Yet, while virtual interactions may have their merits, in-person interactions remain a crucial aspect of the hiring process. Striking a balance between virtual and in-person interactions ensures a comprehensive evaluation of candidates. Through these touchpoints, employers can evaluate a candidate's interpersonal skills, presence, and overall fit within the company culture.

Additionally, organisations must adopt recruitment strategies that align with the distinct characteristics, preferences, and expectations of Gen Z. To connect with this tech-savvy generation, social media platforms have become indispensable recruiting tools. This is often the only way of connecting personally with potential candidates to showcase their brand and company culture. Involving current Gen Z employees in the recruitment process can provide valuable insights and help attract like-minded individuals with in-demand skills.

And don't forget that Learning and Development (L&D) offerings are consistently prioritised by candidates who understand the importance of enhancing soft skills and effectively managing stress.

In summary: by leveraging social media, involving Gen Z employees, creating quality in-person interactions, and with a strong L&D program: companies can attract and retain the best talent.



Pictured: Leo Tan (ESSEC Asia-Pacific)

2: Slowdown. Pause. Cut?

Overheard at the Conference: Just six months after emerging from the Covid-19 pandemic, literally every company was hiring, but the trend now is that companies are slowing down, or in some cases pausing hiring.

The result is that we've seen significant restructuring in the region, most notably around the large tech companies, which has led to Early Careers being deprioritised. Early Careers teams have faced redundancies and budget cutbacks – in most cases, resulting in having to do more with less.

Every industry has its boons and banes – while there have been significant cutbacks experienced in the tech space as mentioned – others are doing well, such as those in the travel industry which is experiencing a resurgence post-Covid. Yet, recessionary concerns, ongoing conflicts and rapid inflation continue to put pressure on many organisations and correspondingly, their Early Careers programs.

These pressures have directly impacted members of our Early Careers community in Southeast Asia. Therefore, SEAAGE calls for more empathy, support and listening to everyone – especially those who have been affected by slowdowns, pauses or cuts.

Remember, any downturn is temporary, and your career is a long-term journey. By taking proactive steps to stay informed, enhance your skills, and maintain a positive mindset, you can navigate this period of uncertainty and emerge stronger than ever before.



3. Restructuring; Pivoting

Hear it from the ground from Jo and Neil, who both faced market challenges from restructuring and pivoted in both their Early Careers business and career, respectively. And recap the key points overheard at our Conference Career Masterclass with Nishilla.



Jo Marks, founder of GOJII, a Mentoring Tech start-up based in Australia

Our industry is now navigating heightened competition for roles amidst learning and development budget cutbacks. This dual challenge poses two key obstacles for my business, GOJII. Programme Managers are under increased time constraints, hindering our ability to effectively communicate our message, while budget constraints intensify our competitive landscape. Simultaneously, graduates are navigating mounting pressure and heightened expectations, resulting in a widening soft skills gap. As we confront these challenges head on, we continue to emphasise importance of learning, development, and retention initiatives. Our Keep Warm and Mentoring Programs, specifically tailored for emerging talent, focus on bridging this gap. Hopefully, our ability to manage these programs both remotely and in-person will help us expand into new Asian markets. As we tackle these challenges head on, our commitment remains unwavering to shape a workforce equipped with essential soft skills.



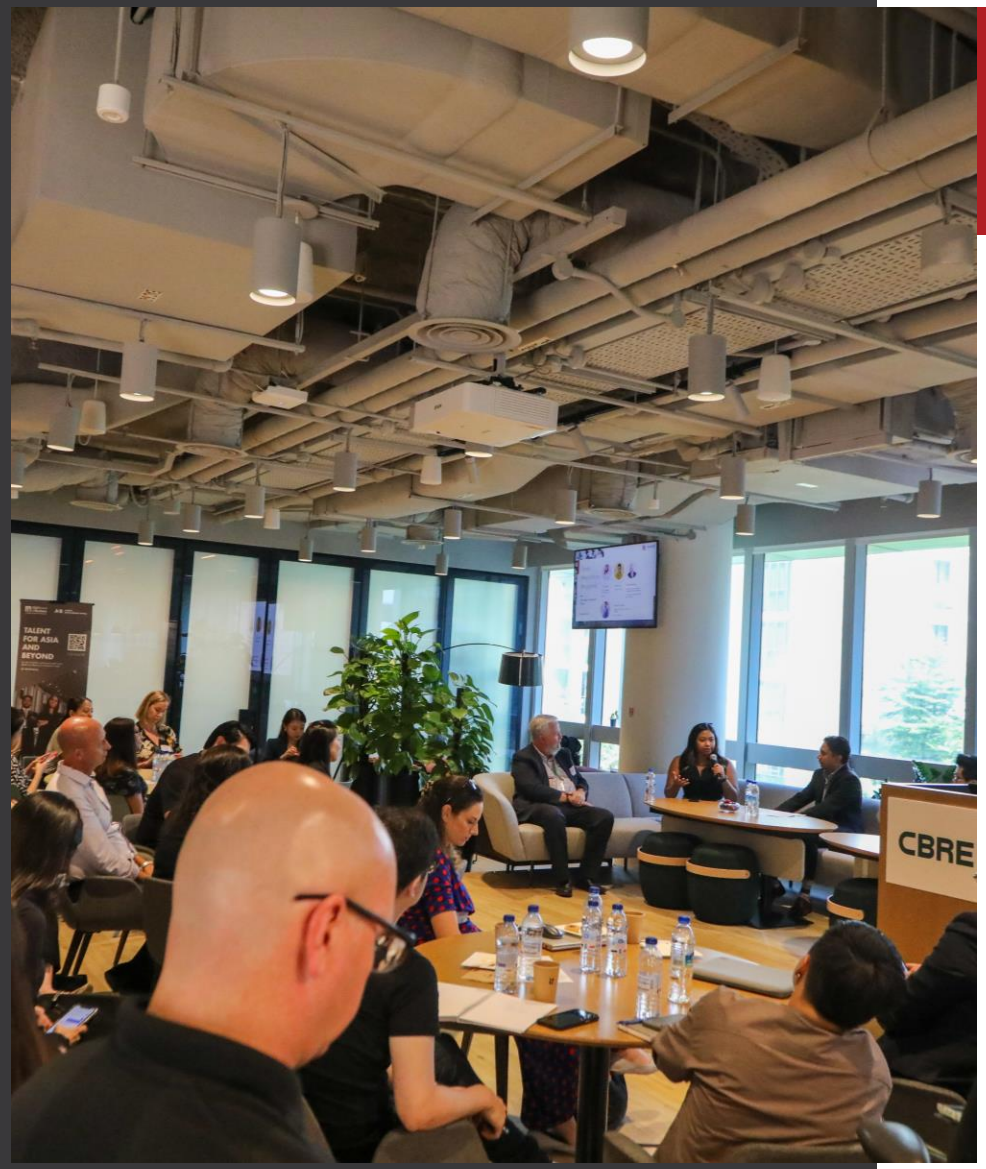
Neil Yang, General Manager at OnLoop, former Head of Campus Recruiting and Early Careers Programs at Grab

I was among 1,000 individuals affected by Grab's RIF (reduction in force) exercise this year, with my Early Careers team significantly impacted. Companies seeking to do more with less is nothing new. However, the growing adoption of generative AI (GenAI) is also fuelling the belief that tasks traditionally assigned to junior employees can be handled by GenAI in the future, thus requiring far fewer junior personnel than before. Keeping this in mind, Early Careers professionals must therefore question any potentially outdated assumptions that may have underpinned our programs and evolve, either working within the company or outside of it. For me, I chose to continue pursuing my personal aspiration of developing top talent when an opportunity emerged to join OnLoop, a WorkTech startup that empowers managers to cultivate their teams.



Nishilla McKeogh, panellist at our Conference Career Masterclass and APAC Head of Early Careers and Campus, Alexander Mann Solutions

Soft skills, resilience, ability to pivot and strategic thinking were some of the key themes overheard at our Career Masterclass. In my role at AMS, helping organisations to navigate the ever-changing early careers environment has shown me that as early careers professionals we need to be open minded, adapt and evolve to help deliver the best service. Most importantly, continue to have the candidate at the heart of everything we do. The early talent space is a richly rewarding career journey – offering roles in marketing, branding, recruitment, talent management, L&D and more, with opportunities to develop in different sectors and gain functional expertise. Talent shortages are being marked as future risk, so business leaders and companies are continuing to invest in hiring and nurturing early talent. This will give early careers professionals an even more strategic, creative and collaborative role in business planning.



Pictured: Main Plenary, SEAAGE Conference 2023

4: Virtual vs. Physical

Overheard at the GradConnection World Café: In the realm of early career recruitment in Asia, the shifting dynamics between in-person assessments and the rising demand for hybrid or flexible work structures among young professionals present both challenges and opportunities.

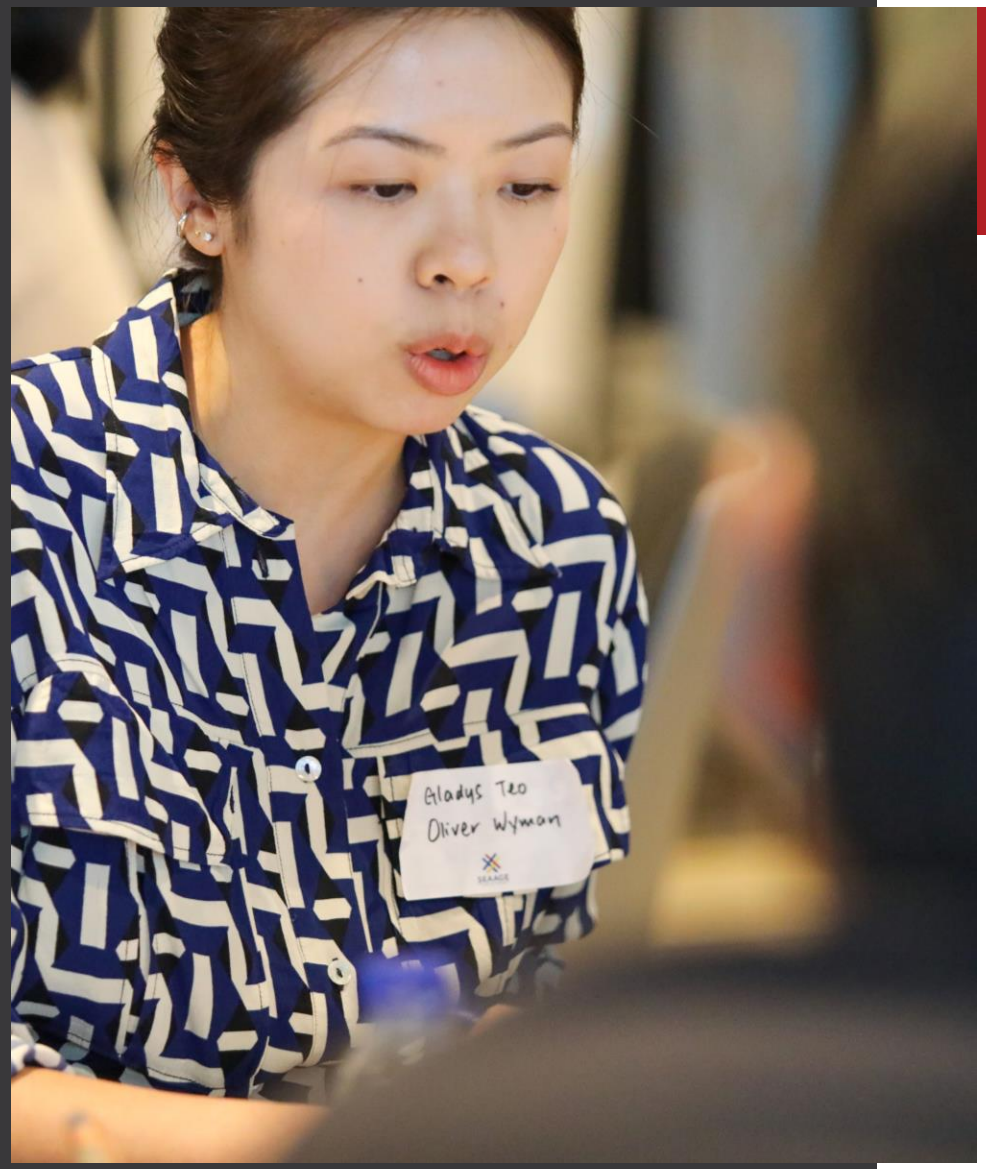
Organisations engaging in early career recruitment often lean towards in-person attraction events and assessments. This inclination aligns with the desire for direct engagement, the ability to ask direct questions and providing a robust platform for evaluating talent comprehensively that recruiters in the region believe virtual may not fully offer.

However, when it comes to post offer, the workforce's aspirations are evolving towards hybrid or flexible work arrangements. This shift underscores the changing priorities of young professionals, emphasising adaptability in work environments. In fact, several job boards are now reiterating that roles without the option for flexibility are no longer as attractive as those that put that first.

To effectively maximise this evolving workforce, employers must ensure transparent communication. Establishing a shared understanding of what hybrid or flexible working looks like at your organisation becomes crucial. This involves defining clear expectations and providing necessary support systems for a seamless transition. It is one thing to say you have flexible work practices but another to really define what that might look like for someone new to the workplace.

Embracing hybrid work structures offers benefits like increased productivity, expanded talent pool access, and heightened employee satisfaction.

Taking this approach not only attracts and retains top talent but also creates a workplace environment that resonates with the aspirations of today's workforce – leaving organisations positioned as adaptable and forward thinking.



Pictured: Gladys Teo (Oliver Wyman)

5: ACE-ing Early Careers

by Anna Champion, The Talent Lighthouse

Embracing the principles of Altruism, Compassion, and Empathy (ACE), Michael Jenkins illuminates a path toward a more cohesive and supportive environment, particularly evident in the nurturing of early career talent.

Altruism signifies more than mere kindness; it embodies a moral obligation to prioritise the happiness and well-being of others. Within professional ecosystems, this translates into a conscientious effort to consider the needs and aspirations of emerging talent.

Compassion compels us to not just acknowledge but actively alleviate the suffering of others. In the context of early career development, it prompts organisations to recognise the challenges and vulnerabilities of talent, catalysing actions that offer support and guidance.

Empathy is the ability to resonate with others' emotions, forms the bedrock of understanding in any community. Such as the significance of fostering curiosity about others to help build belonging.

These principles find tangible expression through nurturing early-in-career talent. Organisations are increasingly embracing curiosity, involving their early talent in co-designing benefits and programmes, recognising the importance of their perspectives in shaping culture. This inclusive approach not only instils a sense of belonging but also harnesses the collective intelligence of diverse perspectives.

Furthermore, the heightened focus on mental health support and coaching for early career professionals reflects a compassionate understanding of their holistic well-being. By acknowledging and addressing the challenges they face, organisations create an environment where individuals feel seen, valued, and supported in their journey.

Integrating ACE means a shift towards more empathetic, collaborative, and inclusive work cultures. By prioritising these principles, organisations can foster belonging and empower tomorrow's talent.



Pictured: Lynn Choo (UBS), Valerie Chua (SHL)

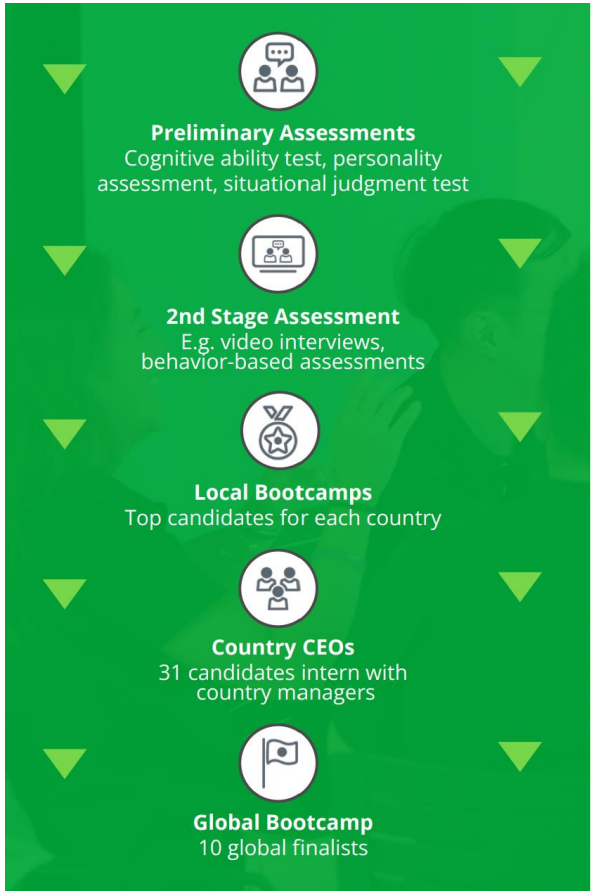
6: C-Level Engagement

by Joan Ong, SHL

Scan to read the research paper

Think you've got an engaging L&D initiative? Read on. Adecco Group's Global CEO for One Month programme promises early talent to work with and learn from the Group's CEO for a month, attending all activities, meetings, and travel – all while earning a CEO salary for the duration of the shadowing period. SHL, who powered the selection and research[1] phase, share learnings from this monumental programme which attracted 137,000 across 47 countries:

- CEO for One Month finalists possess a strong desire for meaningful work well aligned with their ethics and values
- The top six motivational drivers of the global finalists were Personal Growth, Achievement, Power, Affiliation, Progression and Personal Principles
- There were strong links between what participants desired from an employer (i.e. opportunities for challenge, growth and progression) – and what they described as an "energising" work environment
- SHL predicts an acceleration of the skills shortage already evident in the market, which necessitates "growing from within" through early talent. The CEO for One Month initiative disrupts both traditional attraction and development: the unique opportunity to work at the top level, and a standout and credible proof point for L&D



[1] SHL conducted interviews with 17 CEO for One Month participants from cohorts 2018 to 2022, supplemented by personality and motivation assessment data.



Pictured: Sihong Li (GlaxoSmithKline), Joyce Cuff (EDHEC Business School)

7: Money Matters

Overheard at the GradConnection World Café: It's been observed in the region that Gen Z students prioritise salary packages over job security, training opportunities, career growth prospects, and work-life balance.

This emphasis on financial compensation may reflect Gen Z's heightened awareness of financial realities due to rapidly rising inflation and overheated property markets in key financial hubs such as Singapore which increase cost of living pressures, as well as their scepticism towards overly promotional job descriptions or promises during the recruitment process. Gen Zs prioritise financial stability and seek tangible measures of value, such as salary, as a transparent value and reliable indicator of their worth.

This generation's prioritisation of salary doesn't imply a disregard for other aspects of the job offer, as they still value other drivers such as:

- Job security
- Training and development opportunities
- Career growth
- Work-life balance

Nevertheless, salary serves as a baseline against which all other factors are evaluated.

Addressing Gen Z's concerns requires companies to adopt transparent recruitment practices, deliver on promises regarding training, mobility, career advancement, and work-life balance, and provide clear pathways for career growth. By fostering trust and demonstrating transparency, companies can get ahead of the game to attract top talent from this generation and navigate their evolving priorities.



Pictured: Paul Monk (Alpha Development)

8: POP: A Two-Way Street

by Paul Monk, Alpha Development

Gen Z's biggest concerns are often reported as remarkably consistent – with economic uncertainty and mental health challenges top of the list. A McKinsey survey in 2022[1] on Americans aged 18-24 declared this generation as "less likely to expect… financial insecurity to end", with 55% of respondents reporting diagnosis and/or treatment for mental illness. Closer to home, Singapore's NTUC & SUTD[2] found "managing career opportunities, finances, and mental well-being" as the top 3 challenges for Singaporeans aged 18-35.

I am often asked to design or update an Early Careers programme to "suit the needs" of the incoming hires – answering their concerns on financial security, work-life balance, and other factors. But will these designs meet the needs of the hiring organisation, its people, and its clients? We believe there is a "POP" at the core of any well-designed and mutually beneficial EC program.

- **PURPOSE**: What do you want your EC program to achieve? Clearly define the benefits it will provide to the organisation, participants, and other relevant stakeholder groups. Fail to do this, and you've effectively limited your value proposition to salary and short-term benefits.
- **ONE PROGRAMME**: Align talent acquisition and programme delivery, with KPIs that reflect the overall success of the programme – not just hiring outcomes.
- **POTENTIAL**: All your EC hires are high-potential, right? But a few (10-15%) could be truly transformational, whom we often only begin to identify as "*high*-high potentials" after 12-24 months. Too late. Start early, nurture separately (e.g. mentoring or specific job placements).

Through POP, the urge to redesign a programme to meet the "needs" of a particular group falls away. We've increased the % of successful female hires into a tech EC programme from <10% to almost 50% and separately also achieved tangible reductions in EC hire attrition – meaning that hiring headcount for future programmes can be reduced. These are real, measurable outcomes.

[1] https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/sustainable-inclusive-growth/future-of-america/how-does-gen-z-see-its-place-in-the-working-world-with-trepidation
[2] https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/ntuc-forms-task-force-to-better-understand-work-life-aspirations-of-youth



Pictured: Andrew Lim (GIC), Evan Choi (Jardine Matheson)

9: Five things to do in 2024

Overheard at the GradConnection World Café: We are hearing that the graduate market is becoming more competitive. Here are the top five tips overheard at the Conference to ensure your organisation is part of the race in 2024:

- Create company content on social media platforms (Instagram, TikTok and LinkedIn are places to start!)
- Build a talent community to share information about your organisation prior to assessment. This generation want to feel connected and belong
- Involve Early Career Talent in the marketing activities – set up an advisory board with your own early-in-career employees and take them to campus
- Your campaign isn't just about recruitment marketing. Use your allies – universities, career services and alumni to really strengthen authenticity of your campaign
- Provide (early) transparency regarding the recruitment process – with assessment centres or psychometric testing for example – Early Career talent want to know what exactly you are testing and if possible, *why* you are testing.



Pictured: Justin Yeo (BIZCareers, NUS Business School)

10-1: Returnee the Favour

Overheard at the GradConnection World Café: Companies are more willing than ever to hire returnee students. International students are now more willing to return home compared to pre-Covid – they want to be closer to their families and face stiff competition in their host countries.

	Agree?	Observation
Linda Ong, Nanyang Business School, NTU (Singapore)	Yes	Given the opportunity, most international students still hope to secure jobs in Singapore upon graduation. However, given the stiff competition for graduate hires locally, and the high prevailing minimum employment pass salary requirements, these international grads have pragmatic and realistic expectations. Many of them give themselves a cut-off time to fall back on opportunities in their home countries. Many also cite being close to family as a reason to return to their home countries to work.
Ruby Lam, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HK)	No	Not really. Companies are willing to hire anyone who is a good fit (locally or overseas) and in this part of the world, especially Hong Kong is quite desperately short of young talent. However, we have observed difficulty in obtaining employment overseas due to economy and visa issues. The result is more companies in Hong Kong are indeed hiring more returnee students.
Derek Toh, Hiredly (Malaysia)	Yes	The majority of Hiredly's active users are Early Talent, and as Hiredly expands from Malaysia to Singapore, it's interesting to see that many of them would consider relocating to work abroad. Having said that, a significant proportion of Malaysians would also prefer staying in the country largely due to family reasons. For those who are already working abroad, they may be less keen to return to Malaysia as they have already acclimatised to the new environment and enjoy higher pay overseas.



Pictured: Esther de Perlaky (University of Warwick)

10-2: Returnee the Favour

Overheard at the GradConnection World Café: Companies are more willing than ever to hire returnee students. International students are now more willing to return home compared to pre-Covid – they want to be closer to their families and face stiff competition in their host countries.

	Agree?	Observation
Esther de Perlaky, Warwick University (UK)	Yes	The top destinations for Warwick Southeast Asian students to look for their first graduate job are: Southeast Asia – 40% UK – 30% Europe – 30% Key countries within Southeast Asia where students wish to work are Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong and Indonesia.
Viet Anh Vu, Singapore Management University (Vietnam)	Yes	Whether it's economic advancement, family obligations, or entrepreneurial ventures, their return hinges upon finding suitable opportunities locally. Returnee Vietnamese students are highly sought after, especially those fluent in English and with a global mindset. Companies must prioritise and foster inclusive cultures to retain this valuable talent pool. Techcombank stands out as a successful example, offering competitive compensation and a supportive environment for them to thrive.
Melvin Fernando, RMIT (Vietnam)	Yes	I am in Melbourne this week, and it's quiet. Student numbers are generally low compared to pre-covid. I believe financial constraints have hurt study abroad. Inflation also seems high, so going back to their home countries might make more sense. At least for a while.



Pictured: Dong-Wook Lee (Asia School of Business)

11: Business-Critical Skills

by Dong-Wook Lee, Asia School of Business

Despite the current challenges brought about by global economic conditions, recruiters in the Asia-Pacific region continue to favour post-experience candidates in the hiring market. Candidates with education or work experience abroad are more likely to outperform other employees in their respective organisations, especially when compared[1] to their counterparts at home – who may not have been exposed to overseas education and work experience.

Why are returnee students so highly sought after? Research tells us that such market demand can be reflected on employers' rising needs of business skills for the next five years, with a strong focus on communications, technology skills, and leadership.

Critical Skills	Focal Areas
Communications	Cross-Cultural Competence, Multi-Lingualism, Active Listening
Tech	Web3, Blockchain, VR, Cloud-Based Tech, Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning

These critical skills are acquired through a combination of international industry exposure, advanced training, and professional engagements.

Many employers also show a preference for candidates from international MBA or specialised master's degree programmes of business schools. Here's what the data tells us:

- 67% of recruiters in East and South Asia view business school graduates more favourably
- 65% point out that leaders in their organisation tend to be business school graduates

It appears that on top of skills, perception also plays a part. I've continued to observe that returnee talent with international experience gleaned from either professional or advanced academic training continue to be highly valued and sought after by employers in Asia – often notably with higher compensation.

[1] Hays Asia Overseas Returnees Report / GMAC Corporate Recruiter's Survey



Pictured: Josh Mackenzie (Development Beyond Learning)

12: Help them hear us!

by Katie Mahony, Development Beyond Learning

What's changed during 2023? The pace of change in the post pandemic world is not slowing down. Whilst this makes for huge opportunities, it means navigating and making sense of change becomes more critical. Although technological, socioeconomic and political changes across the globe are in turbo drive – our inherent neuroscience is unlikely to adapt at anything like a similar rate.

This evident paradox makes the case for investing in developing human skills across organisations something we should do for the good of humankind and not just for the organisational benefits it will reap. Here, we recap the critical skills of development in the Early Talent space – for both early talent, as well as managers and first-line leaders.

Graduates	Managers and First-Line Leaders
Personal brand, confidence and resilience	Teamwork, influencing and motivating others

Beyond skills, it's become even more critical to speak the language of the end user, especially when it comes to the learning and development of early-in-career talent. When the experience is immersive, the learning sticks. But what does speaking the language of Gen Z really mean in practice?

As an industry-leading training company, Development Beyond Learning (DBL) recognises the transformative power of embracing Gen Z's digital language. We understand that successful engagement goes beyond traditional methods and involves integrating the very fabric of internet culture into our training modules. Gen Z's lexicon is a vibrant mosaic of emojis, hashtags, and internet slang. To truly engage them, modules and communication must speak their language – literally. By tapping into the dynamic nature of memes, emojis, and trending phrases, DBL can create an immersive learning journey that resonates, engaging with and connecting a generation through the power of shared experiences.

Imagine communication punctuated with memes or incorporating trending phrases. The learning experience is intentionally transformed from mundane to memorable.

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Thank you for helping to make #SEAAGE2023 a success!



Josh Mackenzie Michael Jenkins Chloe Zhou Paul Monk Michael Lee Tony Ye Trish Lowe Jamie Lim Yatharth Srivastava Fiona O'Sullivan Andrea Loke Shyly Pillay Janice Tan Ying Suresh Tan Melvin Fernando Donna Titley Nishilla McKeogh Rosemary Zhou Angela Hands Bonnie Chan Emma Lang Amrish Nair Esther de Perlaky Evan Choi



Contact Details

If you liked what you read in this guide and are curious to learn more – or if you wish to offer words of thanks and support, why not reach out to chat to our amazing contributors?

	Author	Role	Organisation	Contact
Editor's Letter	Alvin Lim	Director	SEAAGE	info@seaage.org
Foreword	Michael Jenkins	Founder and CEO	Expert Humans	michaeljenkins@experthumans.org
World Café Reflections	Tony Ye	Founder and Managing Director	GradConnection	tonyy@gradconnection.com
Restructuring; Pivoting	Jo Marks	Founder	GOJII	jo.marks@gojii.co
	Neil Yang	General Manager	OnLoop	neil@onloop.io
	Nishilla McKeogh	APAC Head of Early Careers and Campus	Alexander Mann Solutions	nishilla.mckeogh@weareams.com
ACE-ing Early Careers	Anna Champion	Founder	The Talent Lighthouse	anna@thetalentlighthouse.com
C-Level Engagement	Joan Ong	Head of Southeast Asia	SHL	joan.ong@shl.com
POP: A Two-Way Street	Paul Monk	CEO	Alpha Development	paulmonk@alphadevelopment.com
Returnee the Favour	Linda Ong	Director, NBS Academy for Business Excellence	Nanyang Business School	lindaong@ntu.edu.sg
	Derek Toh	Founder	Hiredly	derek@hiredly.com
	Esther de Perlaky	International Employability Manager	University of Warwick	esther.de-perlaky@warwick.ac.uk
	Ruby Lam	Head (Career Center), Dean of Students' Office	Hong Kong University of Science and Technology	ruby@ust.hk
	Melvin Fernando	Manager, Employment & Industry Relations	RMIT Vietnam	melvin.fernando@rmit.edu.vn
	Viet Anh Vu	Centre Director, Overseas Centre HCMC	Singapore Management University	vietanhvu@smu.edu.sg
Business-Critical Skills	Dong-Wook Lee	Senior Director, Career Development Office	Asia School of Business	dw.lee@asb.edu.my
Help them hear us!	Katie Mahony	Global Product Lead	Development Beyond Learning	kmahony@developmentbeyondlearning.com

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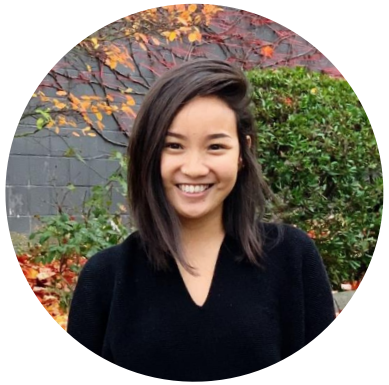
Alvin Lim
Good People Consulting
Former Global Talent Attraction Lead
Dyson



Esabella Yeung
Global Recruitment Marketing Lead
Philips



Sufiartie Sudyono
APAC CIB Campus Recruiter
J.P. Morgan Chase & Co.



Shaff Said
Early Careers Technology Recruiting Manager
Visa