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Grooming the successors at Ogilvy & Mather

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OGILVY & Mather Malaysia (Ogilvy) is investing in the future by training up current employees and future leaders.

Last month, the agency launched its Fellowship Programme to attract the country's best graduates. Under the two-year programme, a shortlist of 40-50 applicants go through a vigorous screening and interview process, out of which only the top two will be hired. Once in, they will be rotated through all departments of the company and fast-tracked to a long-term role.

The programme has had a long history of success in the company's London and New York offices, and is the first of its kind to be offered by a marketing communications agency in Malaysia. It is also offered in four other Asia-Pacific countries.

"They (the successful candidates) will be the future generation of Ogilvy leadership. The Fellowship Programme in the London office has, in the past, recruited many graduates from Oxford and Cambridge. Those

recruits now run the company," said Ogilvy's group managing director Zayn Khan in an interview last month.

Ogilvy University, the agency's internal training arm, has also just completed this year's round of the intensive, scenario-driven Hot House Training Programme. The three-month Hot House, started locally in 2005, aims to equip the company's top talent with a wider knowledge of the industry.

This year's graduation project pitted the four teams against one another in developing a campaign to promote either HIV awareness among youth or long-haul travel with AirAsia X among Malaysians.

"The programme gives them the opportunity to showcase themselves to people other than their immediate supervisors — creating opportunities for them," said Khan. "Hot House takes a lot of investment in terms of time and money, but investing in people is part of our culture."

This active training and recruitment drive by the agency is a direct but pleasant contrast to the WPP Group's plans to cut 7,200 jobs — mostly in the UK, US and Europe. Ogilvy is an agency under the WPP Group.

"We (Ogilvy) are still in a position to hire. At present, we are outperforming the adex, which shrank 3.8% in the first quarter. We didn't contract during that period and, in fact, we are still growing," Khan noted.

Khan, who is also a council member in the Association of Accredited Advertising Agents (4As), observed that even in the current downturn, Malaysia's talent shortage, particularly in the creative industries, was still a problem.

"It's always been quite bad. It's an industry problem. The nation's best and brightest are encouraged to go into professions like law, medicine

and accounting," he said.

Hence, the industry needs to work at being more attractive to top talent. "We are a people business. The quality of our work is dependent on the quality of our people. For us to grow and compete, we have to be focused on hiring key talent," he stressed.

The industry's talent shortage was evident at Malaysia's inaugural Portfolio Night, hosted by *Adoi* magazine and sponsored by radio station MixFM. In its seventh year internationally, Portfolio Night is an industry event held annually in 14 countries that allows students and junior creatives to showcase their portfolios to top creative directors for feedback.

The Malaysian event on June 11 at the Royal Selangor Club Kiara Sport Annexe in Kuala Lumpur drew only 21 students, much to the disappointment of the 21 creative directors — including Jimmy Geeraerts, Ogilvy's creative director; Jeff Orr, executive creative director for TBWA-TEQUILA\Malaysia; and Andy Soong, executive creative director for Publicis Malaysia — who attended.

"It shows a lack of initiative and passion among Malaysian students," said Orr.

With better attendance, Portfolio Night has the potential to be an active recruiting ground for creative agencies. Geeraerts, who saw the portfolios of three students, said: "I was impressed by two, and would consider hiring them when they are more experienced."

Orr also said that universities in Malaysia were turning out students who were under-exposed and ill-prepared to compete on a global platform.

"Some (students) have never heard of consumer insights! What are they being taught?" he said, adding that events like Portfolio Night must be encouraged to provide students with opportunities for industry exposure.



Even in the downturn, Malaysia's creative industries still face a talent shortage, says Khan