

# EMPLOYMENT TIMES

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MAKING OPPORTUNITIES KNOCK ON YOUR DOOR

## "Understanding where..."

Contd. from Page 1

Professionals and also teaches at the undergraduate and MBA programs at a leading university in Colombo. He has also successfully completed a Diploma in International Studies from the Bandaranaike Institute of International Studies, and attributes part of his success to his varied experience gained by working in several fields such as Human Resources, Operations and Sales. He discussed some issues facing young professionals today. Many students who leave university find it difficult to find employment and unemployed graduates are resorting to protest activities to win their rights. In your opinion, what are the reasons for this situation?

Many students who leave university find it difficult to find employment and unemployed graduates are resorting to protest activities to win their rights. In your opinion, what are the reasons for this situation?

The biggest problem is that the education system has not changed fast enough. Development that should have taken place has not happened. To a great extent it's not the fault of the students. The changes have been too slow. However students were also responsible to some extent due to the fact that they have often resisted change such as changes in the curriculum and changes to teaching in the English medium. We need a vision to understand what changes are needed in secondary and tertiary education. It's important that there should be a good dialogue between universities and the private sector bodies. For example there is the problem of Arts students. We have been discussing this for years but nothing has been done. The largest intake into universities today is for the Arts degree. The degree per se is not a bad degree. But there are issues such as inadequate levels of English language skills among Arts students, which have not been resolved.

Today the degree has become an extension of the A/L culture. Students think that they must memorize notes. As a result real learning does not happen. In my teaching, I have found that students are reluctant to ask questions. Even if you try to provoke a discussion, you can't. This system starts at the Ordinary Level stage and gets worse in the Advanced Level. Students continue these same habits at University. Many students are often absent from class because they are trying to complete multiple qualifications at the same time thinking that this will help them obtain employment. However this can lead to a student who is weak in both areas that he or she is trying to study. This happens because our student population is confused.

How can this system be changed at school level? What is your opinion about student participation in extracurricular activities?

Changes need to take place at school level. Students should be encouraged to take part in extracurricular activities. Extracurricular activities have a great bearing on character. What I have achieved today is due to what I learnt at school, by doing extracurricular activities. The benefits of taking part in these activities are immense, students learn interpersonal skills, leadership skills and how to get on with others. These are the qualities which are most needed when working professionally. These skills can't be acquired only by going to University. The trend now is for children to neglect these areas and concentrate only on exams. But ultimately when they are in the working environment these skills are needed. This is why some young people who join companies as executives rise up to the level of chairman, even if they don't have degree qualifications.

Following their school career, most students do not have the opportunity to enter University. Are there programs to cater for them and what training opportunities should be available for these students?

The training opportunities available at present are not adequate. Of the students who pass the Advanced Level examination, only a small percentage enter university. Even if they don't enter university, the number of choices available is quite large but the students are unaware of these. Most students are aware of well known areas of study such as accounting and Information Technology. We need to encourage professional institutes to concentrate on lesser known fields such as transportation, insurance, banking and shipping. Students are not fully aware of these fields and how to start their education in those fields. We also need to upgrade our vocational training institutes which at present are not up to the mark. There is a lot to be done in regards to vocational training.

How can these training opportunities be provided? Should the private sector be involved?

The government alone cannot provide sufficient training so the private sector should be encouraged to become involved in providing training opportunities. At present the private sector does provide educational opportunities, but only in popular areas. There are worldwide opportunities for professionals skilled in areas such as transport and logistics and the maritime industry. Sri Lanka is situated on a major sea route and we have a good opportunity to train maritime professionals. The private sector should be encouraged to forge links with international educational institutes to provide the necessary training. We need people to spearhead these initiatives.

For some students financing can also be an issue. That is why we must encourage the provision of student loan schemes. There should be a major push to give concessions to students. Students can study and pay back loans after they start working. This is the system that operates in other countries. Most students don't have money up front but after working for two or three years they are able to pay off their loans.

What advice would you give regarding the improvement of English language skills?

English language skills have improved somewhat among the younger generation perhaps because of increased exposure to media. But I feel we are beating around the bush and not facing the real issue. The solution is to teach subjects in the English medium. If every student has to take at least one subject in English that will compel the student to learn English. The subject learned should be a subject that has a language component and requires the use of language, for example it could be History or Social stud-

ies. Switching to English medium may cause problems at the beginning. But you have to start somewhere.

I speak from personal experience. I did Sinhala as a subject for my Advanced Level examination. But when I entered university I opted to study law in the English medium. Even though I thought it could be more difficult initially, I knew that the experience would be of benefit in the long run. Our students go to China and Russia, learn Chinese and Russian and study in those languages. So there is no reason why they can't learn English. We teach English as a subject from Grade one, but many students are still not fluent in the language. That means there is something wrong.

In around 2000, the Government began an initiative



Mr. Isuru S. Tillakawardana, the Deputy General Manager (Human Resource Management)

through I have to say that I am impressed. Do you have any general advice for young professionals? What skills should they develop?

to teach in the English medium in schools. This was a very good initiative but now it is in the doldrums again. Sufficient support is not being given to the training of teachers. If it had been supported properly things would have been much better by now. Generally when recruiting we have found that English knowledge levels tend to be better among students from main towns such as Colombo, Kandy and Jaffna. We have been recruiting people from Jaffna and I have to say I am impressed by the standards. I wouldn't say that getting people with the required qualities is easy, but given all the hardships they have gone

The most important thing is to identify where a person's talents lie. Everyone must select an area they are passionate about and focus on it. The field is immaterial today. Things are much more open and there are no hard and fast rules. You have to select a field you are talented in, go into it, live it, breathe it and become the best. The most important thing is where your natural talent lies. You must find that out and go into a related field. If you like music, become a musician, if you like writing, become a writer. Whatever route you take, you can climb to the top. Society respects all the top people in each field in the same way. The difficult thing is to understand where your abilities lie. This needs some soul searching and guidance. Go where your heart is.

What is your opinion about the Human Resources (HR) sector in Sri Lanka today?

Human Resource Management is now a major field in Sri Lanka. The recognition it receives is much greater than it was several years ago. There is a better understanding of the impact Human Resource Management has on business and HR professionals are now in demand. But you must have the necessary qualities to be successful in this field. People who have a talent for dealing with people, their personality will give them an edge over others. An HR person should enjoy dealing with people and listening to them. They should be prepared to spend time on the development of people. A person who has these necessary qualities plus the relevant educational background will have many opportunities both locally and internationally. Organisations are driven by people. HR focuses on people and their performance and this is why it is so important.

- Chiranthi Rajapakse

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