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INTERVIEWING THE INTERVIEWERS: BRITISH AMERICAN TOBACCO

BY Shahirah Hamid

Ever dropped your curriculum vitae into the hiring inbox of a large company and wondered what the interview process would be like?

Some companies do it quickly and easily — a glance at your CV, followed by an interview. But most companies have a set of processes, including several rounds of interviews, assessments and tasks.

Whatever it may be, going through a recruitment exercise can be daunting for most people. The “Interviewing the Interviewers” series sheds light on the recruitment processes of large firms and multinational corporations.

This week, #edGY speaks to British American Tobacco (M) Bhd’s human resources director Fiona Geddes about its hiring process.

The British multinational company operates in more than 180 countries. It has a long history in Malaysia and celebrated its centennial anniversary in 2012. It is a market leader with a 62% share.

Headquartered in Petaling Jaya, Selangor, the group manufactures and markets tobacco products designed to meet diverse consumer preferences.

The sale of cigarettes might be controversial in the country but demand is holding up. Last year, BAT recorded RM4.517 billion in revenue compared with RM4.365 billion in 2012.

BAT Malaysia has a staff strength of more than 1,000. It is a dynamic organisation, with 28% of its employees below the age of 30.

Why would you work with a tobacco company?

The tobacco industry’s relationship with the entertainment industry has been a struggle. Cigarettes were deliberately placed in the hands of

Hollywood stars as an early phase of product placement until health regulating bodies tightened rules on tobacco advertisement. Even the 2005 movie satire *Thank You for Smoking* pokes fun at and criticises the industry.

There is always a certain stigma attached to the tobacco industry.

Still, it does not prevent candidates from wanting to join BAT — whether or not they are smokers themselves.

Geddes points out that there are a few employees who are non-smokers. There are various reasons why someone would choose to work in a controversial industry, she says. Due to the nature of the tobacco industry, it can be quite challenging to market a product for which advertising is prohibited.

Geddes says the biggest deciding factor for many of its staff is the international exposure they will get. “BAT offers a fantastic experience. It provides the right environment for you to explore yourself and be the best you can be. The internationalism ... very few companies can rival that. The stretch you’re going to get in your job role, it’s fantastic!”

The selection process

Interested candidates can apply for a job at BAT by submitting their résumé or CV through its corporate website.

Geddes says 13% of the company’s successful hires are through its employee referral programme. It generally takes three weeks to a month for the tobacco giant to decide on hiring a particular candidate.

The vetting process starts with a phone interview, followed by an online psychometric test, a stint at its assessment centre and finally, a face-to-face interview.

“We need to ensure that they have the skills and aptitude for the

job. Predominantly, we are looking at the outcome of what they have achieved. Putting together a list of activities that they have been involved in, that really doesn’t tell us enough. We are a results-driven organisation, very action-oriented. We need to see the results people have achieved,” she says.

According to Geddes, it is not enough for a candidate to have been involved in a lot of extracurricular activities or have a varied working experience. What BAT looks for is leadership potential, specifically in collaborating and influencing.

“The selection methods are very much designed to screen candidates ... to find out if they are the right cultural fit. We are able to see if they will be successful in BAT,” explains Geddes.

She reveals that the company receives a lot of interest in non-management level posts, mainly the marketing function. The company also offers a two-year management trainee programme — an intensive preparation course to mould trainees for higher management roles. Geddes adds that most of the company’s directors had graduated from the trainee programme.

Once the candidate has been offered the job, he or she is required to undergo the company’s onboarding process, which inducts him or her into the company. “The onboarding process will ensure they get the right sponsorships and are able to have successes in their career. From the very beginning, they are involved in our development programme. We look at their performance objective, work through their function development and leadership development plans and create that successful career with them. It very much comes down to the skill of the line managers,” says Geddes. ■

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