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Mr Ho Chee Haw, Sheng Siong's operations director, was in charge of the supermarket group's first foray out of Singapore – a joint venture with a Chinese company in 2014 to establish an outlet in Kunming. ST PHOTO: CHEW SENG KIM

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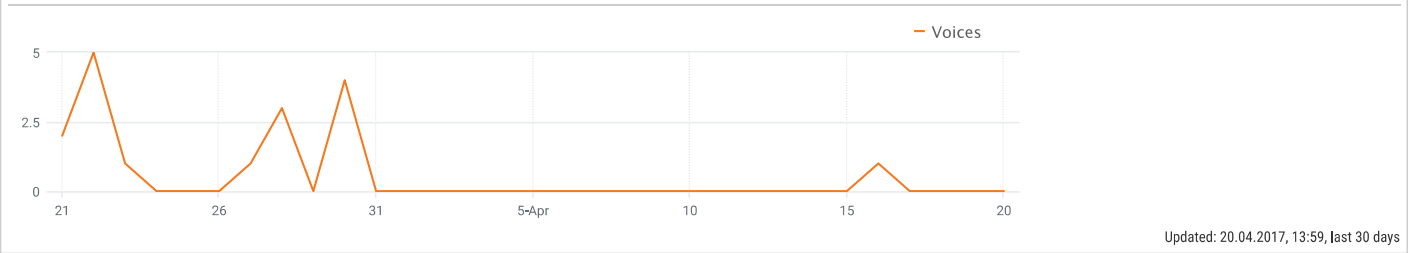
In the fourth of a weekly series on job creation, we look at opportunities abroad.

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When Mr Ho Chee Haw started his job as a cashier at a Sheng Siong supermart, he never expected that it would amount anything more than a way to put food on the table.

Instead, it proved to be the 18-year-old's first step towards a fulfilling career in the organisation, including a stint overseeing an overseas venture. Since then, Mr Ho, now 36, has steadily climbed the corporate ladder at Sheng Siong and is now its operations director.

"Although I did not have stellar academic qualifications, my bosses at Sheng Siong never valued me based on that. Instead, they invested in me because I was willing to put in the effort and take up new responsibilities as I went along. That made me buy into Sheng Siong's vision," he said.

Top themes and market attention on: **Sheng Siong Group Ltd**

Mr Ho's dedication to the organisation did not go unnoticed by his superiors, who put him in charge of Sheng Siong's first foray out of Singapore - a joint venture with a Chinese company in 2014 to establish a supermart in Kunming, China.

To ensure he had the right skills to take on the job, Mr Ho completed the senior management programme on internationalisation at the NUS Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy last year - subsidised by the SkillsFuture Study Award for Internationalisation from trade agency IE Singapore.

He also visited Kunming 10 times in the last two years to understand the local culture before Sheng Siong's official entry in the market in the third quarter of this year.

EFFORT PAYS OFF

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MR HO CHEE HAW, on how he rose up the ranks at Sheng Siong.

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"Every market comes with its own set of challenges. In Kunming alone, the population comprises up to 29 different ethnic groups. It is important that we understand the local culture in terms of their preferences, needs and purchasing power in order to provide what the customers really want," he said.

Mr Ho's journey reflects the kind of adaptability and openness to change that the authorities would like Singaporeans to adopt as they face a future where job roles are likely to change drastically.

It also reflects a willingness to embrace an international mindset currently lacking among Singapore's talent pool, noted Ms Angeline Chan, IE Singapore's group director of capability development.

"When venturing overseas, one challenge often cited by companies is the lack of talent with the right skills and expertise," she said.

"Companies find it difficult to hire suitable talent or deploy their existing staff overseas, and have to hire ready talent at a premium."

Many Singaporeans turn down opportunities to take on overseas postings because they lack familiarity with the foreign market, find it difficult to relocate families and are concerned about how their career path might be affected by the posting, Ms Chan said.

But local firms are increasingly realising the need to venture abroad regardless, given fierce competition and a limited market at home. "We are but a little red dot. With such a small market, everyone wants a slice of the pie and there might not be enough to go around. If a company wants to expand, internationalisation is the only way," said Mr Ho.

With that in mind, Ms Chan said it would be to Singaporeans' advantage to start rethinking their attitude towards taking on regional and international job roles.

"As internationalisation becomes more crucial and prevalent, jobs will increasingly adopt a global perspective," she noted.

"While technical skill requirements may shift over time, the soft skills required for overseas roles are applicable across time and industries. Individuals therefore need to adapt their skills for global roles to stay relevant and employable."

IE stands ready to help, even if the individual is not yet working.

Initiatives such as the Young Talent Programme and International Trading Programme send students abroad to gain experience. The early exposure would help them gain insight into different business environments, overseas business knowledge and cross-cultural communication, Ms Chan said.

Mid-career professionals, managers and executives can also pick up skills and knowledge to navigate and operate effectively in international markets with IE's help, for example through the SkillsFuture Study Award for Internationalisation or the International Business Fellowship Executive Programme.

IE also works directly with companies by offering, for example, customised training programmes on internationalisation and support for staff on overseas attachments.

