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<td><strong>Author(s)</strong></td>
<td>Liew, Chen Chuan</td>
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<td><strong>Date</strong></td>
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Human Resources Needs Of Chinese Newspapers

By

Liew Chen Chuan
Malaysia's multi-racial society is reflected in the print media. Newspapers are printed in Bahasa Malaysia, English, Chinese and Tamil. They are widely circulated throughout the country.

As a journalist in a Chinese newspaper, I am only qualified to talk about problems relating to Chinese newspapers. Needless to say, Chinese newspapers cater for a particular community, but they are mindful of their responsibility to promote national unity and identity. They have never lost sight of such objectives while attempting to explain the rights and obligations of a particular racial group.

The total reading population of Chinese newspapers is in the region of 1.5 million; one out of three reads a Chinese newspaper. There are eight Chinese dailies in Peninsular Malaysia. According to a research accepted by local publishers, the number of Chinese readers have remained stagnant in recent years—obviously the result of the national education policy. However, based on the population growth rate and enrolment in national Chinese primary schools, the general view is that the number of Chinese newspaper readers will not further decline in the decade to come. In other words, the Chinese-language newspapers are not in danger of being phased out in the immediate future because the community still needs them.

The overriding question in the minds of the Chinese newspaper owners now is how to be the fittest for a long-term survival in a highly competitive market. Apparently, the war for a bigger share of the market, both in terms of readership and advertising revenue, has long begun. It is still escalating. The approved means to outdo
the competitors is product quality which include contents, printing techniques and back-up services.

To prevent the unscrupulous ones who resort to extreme sensationalism to boost their sales—to the extent of discarding the accepted code of professional ethics which is frowned upon by journalists—a body is being formed to check such unethical practices.

The advent of Chinese publications dates back to the turn of the century. However, the established few came into existence a little more than half a century ago. The development of journalism in the Chinese-language newspapers is a steady, uphill process, compounded by problems relating to limited capital and shortage of trained human resources.

I would like to touch on the trained manpower relating to journalists, translators and the management staff.

To be a Chinese newspaper journalist, one has to be bilingual, i.e. he or she has to be conversant in Mandarin and English or Bahasa Malaysia. In practice, a proficiency in three languages, namely, Mandarin, Bahasa Malaysia and English is almost the pre-requisite for entry into the profession.

The general entrance requirements of a cadet reporter in a Chinese newspaper is the completion of a secondary education, with credits in languages. The candidate must pass a written test set by individual newspaper organisations with emphasis on a good command of general knowledge and languages.

More and more university graduates with business and economic backgrounds are being taken into the profession. However, graduates of other disciplines are also in demand.

Prejudice or jealousy between the graduate and experienced non-graduate journalists does exist, but it is not the main factor that causes the high drop-out rate of graduate journalists. It is generally caused the remuneration that is not commensurate with the effort put in the job. Mere monetary reward is not sufficient to retain a capable journalist if he or she is just a job-seeker.

As most of the recruits have little or no professional training at all, in-service and on-the-job training is provided to new-comers by individual newspapers. The period of such apprenticeship varies from six months to a year or longer, depending on the individual's ability and attitude to acquire skills and knowledge.
As the recruits stay on longer in the job, they have the opportunity to be selected for training courses provided by institutes such as the Malaysian Press Institute. Good performers are often sent abroad for short-term training courses. Editors are always scouting for potentials to join the profession which is undergoing a phase of tremendous competition.

Translators, mainly from English into Mandarin are in demand. However, fewer of these translators are needed as most of the Chinese newspapers are cutting down on foreign news coverage which used to be the in major features.

Sources of Manpower

Currently, recruits with prior training in journalism are drawn from the following resources:

1. Local universities or institutes of higher learning which provide training in journalism or related fields.

2. Graduates returned from overseas, mainly Taiwan

3. Institute of Journalism, Han Chiang High School, which conducts a three-year diploma course in Chinese.

Apart from journalists, the mid-level and senior level management staff trained in a newspaper operations are being sought.

Presently, most of the Chinese newspapers are run by "outsiders" who have proven management expertise in other fields. As a result, problems which are peculiar to the newspaper industry are not properly handled. Examples can be found in the personnel management of some Chinese newspapers. Not surprisingly, journalistic talents are lost due to ill-handling of such personnel by the management who lack an understanding of the peculiar nature of the industry.

One more aspect which I like to point out here is the increasing number of female journalists joining the Chinese newspapers. A random survey shows that almost a half of the young reporters and sub-editors are women. A similar situation is found in the other language newspapers. Females used to shy away from journalism due to discrimination. It is now a thing of the past. In due course of time, we will see women occupying positions as editors, general managers and other top management posts in the Chinese newspapers.

Editors of the Chinese newspapers do worry about the keen business competition. However, they are more concerned
in playing the role expected of a journalist in a multi-racial and multi-cultural society whose sense of values is rapidly changing. The new breed of journalists in the Chinese newspapers believe in the same commonly accepted principles and concepts of free but responsible journalism. They believe that freedom of the press can only be effectively protected if journalists have a strong sense of fairness and integrity and more importantly, with a strong faith in the profession which contributes positively towards national objectives.