by Scott Younger

HR development – Ignore at peril

On three occasions I have spent some time as an educator/researcher at the tertiary education level. In a number of ways these were the most stimulating times of my life, especially when in later years I could witness encouraging results from former students doing well in their careers.

Between 2005 and 2007 I was involved in various projects concerning the reconstruction of Aceh, and was pleased to note that some 11 engineering graduates from our Bandung Institute of Technology (ITB) MSc program of the '80s and '90s were involved in good positions in the beleaguered province.

There are four all-defining issues in the world today, although not everyone is on board with some of them. These are climate change, food supply for the human race, sustainable development and capacity building.

In many ways they are interdependent. In the following paragraphs, I am limiting myself to the 'Cinderella' of the four, capacity building, in an Indonesian context, although many aspects of the issue are transferable elsewhere.

Drought of talent

I was stimulated to write about the development of Human Resources after talking to one of my oldest friends the other day, and the catalyst of why I have spent so much of my career in Indonesia.

He had just hosted a wedding party for the daughter of Ir Wiyoto Wiyono, remembered in the toll road to Tanjung Priok, and whose early demise was a cruel blow to the small group of bright young men coming through to take leading positions in Indonesia's development in the 1990s.

At the get-together were many of the clever minds who steered Bina Marga through the 1980s and 1990s, hosting the ITB program I referred to above. The hot topic was the lack of human resources coming through to build the infrastructure essential for Indonesia to maximise its potential and provide the sustainable development so badly needed.

In the early 1990s, the Institution of Civil Engineers, with support from the UK government, the cooperation of Indonesian universities and ministries and with Public Works as the linking agency, carried out a comprehensive study of engineering skill needs for the years ahead.

The resulting document showed clearly that there would be a steady upward demand for qualified engineers of various disciplines to meet expanding development requirements as the economy continued growing.

The projection was then for a minimum output of 4,000 engineering graduates every year for the foreseeable future, and then increasing, based on projections for the economy and a population growth rate which, in hindsight, was conservative.

However, as a result of the 1997-8 Asian economic crisis, many engineers were made redundant or could not find a job. Many of those attached to public service found that they had little or nothing to do, and what had to be done to support the many programs in place on significantly cut budgets was depressing or unsatisfactory work.

Not surprisingly, some from the private sector went back to their villages, some drove taxis and others switched careers, as did many of those still at university.

The attractions of engineering as a way of life 'died', and the recovery has been slow and behind requirement, with new entrants apparently better rewarded by opportunities in careers in IT, business administration, banking and other financially based programs.

From a development perspective, we are now left with two serious problems: a 30,000+ shortage in the professional engineering workforce, and a generation that is under-trained because of lack of or poor work opportunities.

Furthermore, the structure to support continuing career development is inadequate. This is an alarming situation when, hopefully, infrastructure construction is about to take off in a process that needs to be maintained.

There is also the issue of funding in the education sector at all levels. There are huge competing requirements on each government budget, and growth of the economy is mandatory in order to increase allocations to fundamentally important areas such as this.

Private sector role

Regrettably Indonesia has one of the poorest budget allocations to education in the region and, while funding steadily improves, it still lags well behind requirement for all levels from primary upwards, and is not made easier by a population increase of over 2.5 million per year.

Encouragement of private sector involvement is a comparatively late development but is healthy and needs to expand. It is absolutely necessary that a greater level of

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funding of education by the private sector is promoted aggressively.

Another concern is that too many fresh graduates cannot or do not know how to find jobs. There is clearly a dysfunction between university career offices, where these exist, and human resources departments of commercial and industrial companies.

Returning to the question of engineers for development, thought should be given to reactivate the early 1980s initiatives, and variations thereof, to supplement and upgrade national programs, and stimulate tertiary interest in engineering sciences and technologies.

After all many of the available comforts of life have arisen from the endeavours of engineers and scientists.

I would like to see a healthy proportion of every loan from multilateral and bilateral agencies set aside for capacity building within the scope of a given project. Without this there is a real danger that the quality of works could end up sub-standard, as can sometimes be witnessed, leading to unnecessarily high maintenance and repair costs.

I applaud the concern of yesteryear's public servants. I hope today's treat the matter with equal concern and institute a wide range of capacity-building initiatives. GA

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