Rich pickings on Lantau jobs trail

A mix of better transport options, vocational training, well-coordinated recruitment programs, employment flexibility, financial subsidies and population policy changes is needed to boost employment on Lantau island, agreed panelists at a Recruit roundtable, Oswald Chan reports.

Panelists at the Recruit roundtable were united in emphasizing the need for specialized and improved training as well as flex-time options in order to tap the large labor market in demographically young Lantau. (Provided to China Daily)

Airport, among others. The administration estimates that job opportunities in Lantau can skyrocket from the current 90,000 to 470,000 as these projects roll out.

A positive feature amid the expected surge in new Lantau jobs is the island’s strong youth population compared with the average age level in Hong Kong.

In Tung Chung, 15- to 34-year-olds account for over 25 percent of the total population; while those aged between 35 and 44 make up more than 15 percent. Over-65s are only 7 percent of the total population on Lantau. As more new towns develop, the population in Tung Chung is tipped to balloon from current 60,000 to 160,000 people.

A roundtable conference on held on Dec 11 at the Conrad Hotel by recruitment service provider Recruit, and co-organized by China Daily Hong Kong Edition and the Hong Kong Management Association (HKMA), saw government officials, academics and employers in Lantau exchange views on job opportunities for engineering graduates and the blueprint for long-term manpower planning strategy for the island.

There are numerous employment opportunities in Lantau, panelists noted.

The Hong Kong International Airport currently has 65,000 job positions that need to be filled up.

According to the SAR Labour Department, there are 23,000 private-sector job vacancies on Lantau island, accounting for 1.8 percent of the total 1.22 million private sector job vacancies in Hong Kong from January to November.

Despite the bright employment prospects projected for Lantau, roundtable guests still reckoned that it is hard to recruit staff to work on the island because of insufficient transportation, inadequate vocational training qualification, fragmented staff recruitment bodies and lack of personnel data banks to facilitate hiring.

“Regarding transportation, current bus services to Lantau are very time-consuming as buses have to make all the stops in the airport area. Local residents living outside Lantau are unwilling to travel there as they worry that long commutes after work may increase their physical fatigue,” said Cecilia Cheung Fung-ming, executive director at Hong Kong Air Cargo Terminals (HACTL), the major cargo terminal operator at the airport.

Roundtable panelists suggested that the Airport Authority Hong Kong consider providing subsidies to bus companies to streamline routes in Lantau and so slash travel hours, and urged the Airport Authority to play the role of a coordinator to streamline bus services in Lantau and encourage more employment.

“With the anticipated opening of the Tuen Mun-Chai Wan Express Link in the next two to three years, residents in Hong Kong’s northeastern area can travel more conveniently to Lantau for work. This could break the psychological block among local residents which impedes recruitment in Lantau,” Secretary for Labour and Welfare Matthew Cheung Kin-chung said.

The lack of training facilities for jobs on Lantau relates to inadequate vocational training qualification. Employment in Lantau is usually associated with low job skills that lack the qualification frameworks to facilitate career mobility.

Skills upgrade

“Every year we organize training courses for our technical staff so that their technical expertise can be up-to-date to fulfill the requirements of other degrees courses. This is useful for staff retention and our staff can also benefit from career upward mobility,” said Stella Kwan Man-yan, managing director at Ngong Ping 360, a wholly owned subsidiary of MTR Corp and the provider of cable car services from Tung Chung to Ngong Ping Village.

Aviation Security Company (AVSICO) told of how it revamped benefits after launching staff training programs.

“After refining the job process and building the industry image for our airport security staff, the job image has drastically improved and (this) helped trim staff turnover rate from 40 percent three years ago to the current 20 percent,” the aviation security service’s general manager said.

“We will work with the government next year on how to design qualification frameworks for the security industry.”

Andrew Wong Hiu-lam, general manager at SSP Hong Kong — a global operator of branded food and beverage outlets at travel locations across 29 countries — said that the provision of qualification frameworks can help retain low-skilled workers.

“Currently only the 530 staff here have completed more than 10 years of service. About a third of our total employees have worked for us for over five years,” Wong noted.

Raymond Su Wai-man, dean of the Business School at Hang Seng Management College, highlighted the importance of understanding the current mindset of young local job seekers. “Employers have to carve out employment conditions that can fit the life cycles of young job seekers these days to unlock the potential of young workers.”

“Many young people are building on the prospects of Hong Kong as an aviation hub so that many young engineering graduates are willing to commute to Lantau for work,” said Man Hau-chuen, dean of Engineering at Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU).

“Leading aircraft manufacturers Boeing and Airbus have cooperated with PolyU to introduce engineering courses to train qualified personnel.”

Albert Wong Shun-yan, general manager of Hong Kong’s flag carrier Cathay Pacific Airways, said the aviation industry has a bright future. “Educational institutions and corporations should cooperate to provide solid employment opportunities for engineering graduates.”

Allen Hua Wing-on, chief executive officer at AsiaWorld-Expo Management (AsiaWorld), an exhibition and convention venue provider in Lantau, suggested a closer working relationship between educational institutions and employers to boost employment.

“Through the one-on-one mentor internship programs provided by employers, the Vocational Training Council (VTC) has recently started training programs in Lantau that enhance employability. Close connections forged between the two parties can encourage more employment after students finish their education in these places,” noted Hua, also the founding chairman of non-government advisory group Lantau Development Alliance (LaDA).

“The VTC is correct in launching these mentorship programs to enhance career mobility for skilled workers. In the construction industry, we also have devised specific programs to upgrade workers’ career trajectory so to speak, to create a middle class in the construction industry,” said chief executive Thomas Ho On-ching of Gammon Construction.

“Local universities in Hong Kong lay too much emphasis on elevating their international branding and research capability ranking rather than focus on training enough qualified workers for recruitment. The government should consider reviewing its university policy to keep abreast of current social and economic development,” suggested Victor Lee Sze-luen, executive director of the HKMA and the moderator of the roundtable.

The fourth impediment to jobs on Lantau — a fragmented recruitment campaign — is also crippling the growth of the job market there.

“Employers in Lantau should coordinate all their resources to launch a major recruitment exercise that contains all the available jobs in Lantau to raise the brand image of the Lantau labor market,” AsiaWorld’s Hua suggested.

Hold in September endorsed the proposed four major parts of the overall spatial planning for the island, with promotional activities to gather public views planned next year.

The four parts proposed are the Northern Lantau Corridor focusing on economic and housing development; the Northeastern Lantau Node for leisure, entertainment and tourism; the East Lantau Metropolis as a strategic growth area with a core business district; and the predominant part of Lantau for conservation, leisure, and cultural and green tourism.

The LaDA was formed in early 2014 as a top advisory body for the government related to policies, measures and specific proposals conducive to the sustainable development of Lantau. Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying in his 2014 policy address pledged to develop the island to bolster economic development and employment opportunities.

Building the future

A conference of infrastructure projects is in full swing to cement Lantau’s strategic location within the Pearl River Delta region. These include the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau Bridge, Tung Chung New Town Extension, East Lantau Metropolis, the Three-Railway System and North Commercial District at Hong Kong International Airport.

Panelists also noted that offering financial subsidies to the lower-income family can get as much as HK$2,200 to HK$2,600 in monthly financial subsidies.

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