



By SANDY CLARKE
editor@leaderonomics.com

WHEN Tony Blair became Prime Minister of the UK in 1997, one of his key mantras to drive the country forward was “education, education, education”.

Blair wanted to create an aspirational Britain, a country in which young people could create successful futures, regardless of their background.

Meritocracy was the new buzzword and, to that end, the Labour Government aimed to have 50% of all school leavers attending university by 2010. Predictably, the policy failed.

Speaking to *The Guardian* in 2010, the chief executive of the Association of Graduate Recruiters said that “too many young people are left to graduate without vital employability skills”.

Critics swamped media outlets, warning that the policy had driven down standards and devalued the asset of degrees.

Tony Blair’s “New Labour” brought with it an air of hope, following decades of Conservative rule. During Margaret Thatcher’s reign, manufacturing in the UK accelerated its decline. In 1970, it accounted for 20.57% of UK gross domestic product. By the time she left in 1990, it had fallen to 15.18% and, by 2010, it was at 9.68%.

When Blair came to office, he told Britain that we were “all middle class, now”. Parents looked at their children and saw a bright career in front of them; the prevailing attitude among many was that they worked hard and “got their hands dirty” so their children wouldn’t have to.

A number of parents – particularly in deprived areas – looked forward to seeing their children being the first of the family ever to attend university.

To attend university was prestigious, and it promised to provide a lucrative future.

FISH OUT OF WATER

In his book, *The Rhythm of Life: Living Every Day with Passion and Purpose*, Matthew Kelly writes: “Everybody is

HIGH VALUE IN VOCATIONAL TRAINING

MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE



a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.”

An article in the *Independent* last year cited research that suggested 40% of graduates are looking for work six months after graduation, while a quarter are still unemployed after a year. It seems not everyone is suited to climb the tree of academia.

An article in *The Guardian* in February of this year warned that Britain is facing its “biggest skills shortage for a generation”, lamenting a dearth of plumbers, builders and engineers. Despite the fact that these skilled trades promise potentially large salaries, the cultural stigma clearly remains: the preference for young

people in the UK is to seek out careers where suits are worn to work, rather than suffer the perceived ignominy of wearing overalls and tool belts.

MISGUIDED ASSUMPTIONS

Even with the recognition that more young people need to be encouraged to take up a career in a skilled trade in order to address the skills shortage, progress in pilot programmes, such as Skills for Work in Scotland, is fairly bleak and exemplifies the cultural stigma.

A Scottish Government Review notes a report into the Skills for Work programme (McCrone and Morris, 2004) which cites an Increased Flexibilities Programme co-ordinator who suspect-

ed that, although schools identified pupils who would benefit from courses, “the reality was more probably that ‘the schools will benefit from not having them in school’.”

SKILLS IMPERATIVE

Speaking to *The Star* in 2013, Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin said there was a need to produce at least 3.3 million skilled workers in the next 10 years in order to meet the demands of the country’s economic developments. The article noted the disparity between the percentages of students enrolled in vocation courses (around 10%) compared to those in the OECD countries (around 44%).

The Star reported that the Government was pro-actively seeking to increase the number of students taking up vocational training as it was a key driver in ensuring a growing and stable economy.

Despite the cultural stigma existing in both Malaysia and the UK, the message from the experts seems to be clear: vocational training is not only vital to helping economic growth but, in many cases, careers in skilled trades is likely to be a much more valuable alternative to sitting in a lecture theatre.

BUILDING THE FUTURE

In the UK, plumbers, joiners, engineers and builders can earn in excess of £100,000 (RM590,000) per year – significantly more than many of those who are required to wear a suit to work. Conventional wisdom may say that getting our hands dirty is to be shunned for nobler pursuits, but it seems a shift in cultural perception is needed in order to recognise that a career in a skilled trade is just as noble for the individual and the country as a whole, if not more so.

■ *Sandy is the editor of a regional magazine based in Scotland, UK. He has a keen interest in what makes great leaders tick and in helping others to unlock their leadership potential. To engage with Sandy, write to editor@leaderonomics.com*

INNOVATION & ENTREPRENEURSHIP

PLANTING THE SEED EARLY

By KAREN NEOH
karen.neoh@leaderonomics.com

AN exciting initiative by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) to foster innovation and entrepreneurship in youth has arrived on our shores. Introduced by the Innovation & Entrepreneurship Center (IEC) of the Asia School of Business (ASB), we had a chat with Rajesh Nair, director of the center.

1 Would you like to share how you started and what inspired you to dedicate your time to incubating entrepreneurs?

Growing up in a lower middle class family in India, I always believed that entrepreneurship was something only a gifted few could do and not for everyone. So I did not venture into that realm for years.

After working for an entrepreneur for a long while, I noticed that I could have made the same decisions he was making, and I wondered what was so special about starting up a company that others could not do it.

I tried my first start-up and it failed miserably. But I learned what worked and where I needed help. For the second start-up I joined an experienced entrepreneur as a cofounder. This experience gave me a ringside view of the start-up process and I later decided to launch a third start-up company.

I had to gather a lot of courage to face a high probability of failure, but I took the plunge. What changed over time was that I was more comfortable with what I could do, and found people who could help me with my weak areas.

Through this series of experiences, a

few things became clear to me:

- Anyone can learn to be an entrepreneur. Confidence is a key ingredient, and that can be built.
- Failures are common and that is how one learns.
- If youngsters can be exposed to this process early, more of them will take on an entrepreneurship path.

If I was able to start-up a company late in life, with little kids and family responsibilities, I believe younger people should be able to launch a start-up when they don’t have such responsibilities.

My thesis research at MIT suggests that the ideal time to expose people to entrepreneurship is when they are still students, because at that age, people can afford to fail and learn with little penalty. They are also more adventurous and live in a student community that is daring and nurturing.

Most entrepreneurs are innovators first. They find a new solution for an existing problem and that leads them to entrepreneurship. So, my hypothesis was that if college students are trained to be innovators and exposed to entrepreneurship at the same time, they would drift that way over time. My experiments have shown that it happens faster than I initially thought.

2 Is it possible to teach creativity, the ability and desire to innovate – be it a technological advancement or an innovation in business practices?

Absolutely. Creativity comes from exhausting the first round of ideas we are familiar with and then digging deeper into new uncertain models. Most of us avoid going into the



unknown realm. But training to explore develops creative thinking.

This kind of exploration builds self-confidence and that is the key factor that triggers the entrepreneurial attitude. This process of building creativity was developed and tested as part of my research in India – in rural areas and small colleges.

3 From your work in India – reaching out to communities to identify a problem and developing a sustainable solution – there appears to be a parallel with what social enterprises try to achieve. What are your thoughts on that?

My work in India was focused on incubating entrepreneurs rather than companies. An inspired entrepreneur will find worthwhile problems to solve and create companies in different fields.

Social enterprise is a bit of misnomer. All applications need to solve a social or individual problem in the end. So every start-up solves some social

problem, even if it is a technology or non-tech company.

I believe that the methods that worked in India will work in Malaysia just as well. But the process starts with inspiring young minds, helping them realise their potential to innovate and start up companies, and developing a supportive ecosystem that promotes them.

The ASB is planning a series of programmes to catalyse innovation & entrepreneurship (I&E) initiatives in Malaysia and the greater ASEAN region.

The IEC at ASB has two major goals:

- To give ASB MBA students a place and platform to learn to develop products and solutions, and launch companies.
- To offer multiple non-degree programmes to student communities as well as executives in Malaysia and other ASEAN countries to promote innovation and entrepreneurship.

We believe that grassroots initiatives

like the ASB 48-Hour MakerFest, the ASB Innovation & Entrepreneurship Bootcamp and the ASB 100K Entrepreneurship competition would bring catalysing events to the region to nurture and promote future innovators and entrepreneurs.

MESSAGE TO YOUNG MALAYSIANS

The amount of talent for creativity is spread uniformly across the world. So, any of you can do whatever anyone else in the world can do. The big opportunity is to nurture your skills locally, so more innovators will emerge and many of them could pursue entrepreneurship.

The path to entrepreneurship is often hard. Failures are common, but that is the learning process. The earlier you learn to handle failure and get past it, the faster you will mature.

We hope to help you to maximise your capabilities.

■ *For more leadership content, do go to www.leaderonomics.com*



The International Labour Office (ILO) and International Ergonomics Association (IEA) developed the Ergonomic Checkpoints mobile app, which provides best practice recommendations for implementing effective improvements in the workplace.

It also allows users to create interactive checklists of ergonomic checkpoints. As there are 132 checkpoints, I thought we might share a select few in this instalment – with an emphasis on skilled trades.

For more detailed information on each of the checkpoints, do go to the ILO website.

1 Eliminate tasks that require bending or twisting while handling materials

WHY: Bending or twisting of the body is an unstable movement and is one of the major sources of back injuries, and neck and shoulder disorders. We spend more time and become more fatigued than when doing similar work, but without bending or twisting.

RISKS/SYMPTOMS

- Muscular strain
- Low-back pain
- Slips, trips or stumbles
- Excessive reach

HOW

- Change the positions of materials so that the handling work is done in front of us, without having to bend.
- Improve the working space so that we can adopt stable foot positions.
- Use mechanical means to bring the work items and replace the finished item without being forced into an awkward posture.

HEALTH & SAFETY PEOPLE ARE PRECIOUS!

- Change the working height so that the worker can handle the work item without bending.

2 Provide safe power tools and make sure that safety guards are used

WHY: Power tools are efficient but usually more dangerous than non-power tools; the greater the energy, the greater the danger. Nevertheless, safe power tools are available. There is no need to use unsafe tools.

RISKS/SYMPTOMS

- Amputation
- Hand/finger injury
- Excessive force
- Upper limb disorder

HOW

- Order power tools only after safety specifications have been examined. Three important points are:
 - a. protection against power transmission and points of operation
 - b. prevention of unintended activation of controls
 - c. easy operation with secured grips

- Purchase tools that have been designed for use with a balance if they are to be used over a fixed workstation.
- Check that the guards are sufficient to protect workers, and are used.
- Guards should not interfere with work, otherwise people will remove them.
- Check if multiple means are used in

order to prevent unintended activation of controls.

3 Provide a “home” for each tool

WHY: If each tool has a “home”, i.e. a special and permanent place allocated to it, workers can find the tool quickly and are encouraged to use the right tool at all times. If tools do not have “homes”, some workers lose time searching for lost tools.

Tools stored in their special places can be seen at a glance. Their inventory is therefore easy, which is a great help for good maintenance.

RISKS / SYMPTOMS

- Tool damage
- Slips, trips or stumbles
- Hand/arm injury

HOW

- There are various means of providing a “home” for each tool. This can be a special shelf, a drawer, a particular place on a rack, an easy-to-see container, a tool trolley, a hook on the wall, suspension from an overhead structure, or a tool board. The most appropriate means should be chosen considering the size, shape and weight of the tool.
- Do not forget to find a “home” also for bigger tools. Avoid the practice of put-ting large tools on the floor.
- When various small tools are used, provide a tool storage board or special containers in which each tool has its own “home”.
- In the case of a tool board, the outline of each tool could be drawn to show where it goes. Alternatively, labels could be used.
- The more frequently a tool is used, the closer its “home” should be to the worksite.