

[Source: Scholars' Choice III, The Straits Times, 2 March 2007, Friday]

Matchmaker with the Right Connections

FIREFly scholar Valerie Chee enjoys linking Singapore companies with their European counterparts

By Chan Seet Fun

Within a year, her work has taken her to the United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands and Kazakhstan. And for her first overseas assignment, to the UK and France, Ms Valerie Chee, 24, senior officer, international relations (Europe) at IE Singapore, was given full autonomy to drive the project.

"My supervisor told me, this is what you will do," she says, recalling how he outlined what was required and then let her run with it. "It was very empowering to be left in charge of a project. There was a bit of pain and stress. But you learn."

"In companies, you are attached to a project group. For us, we run our own projects. You can let your imagination run wild, within reasonable limits and with guidance from your supervisors, of course," she adds.

Ms Chee joined IE Singapore 1.5 years ago after graduating with a degree in biochemistry with management from Imperial College in London in 2005 on a FIREfly Scholarship. She is now serving a six-year bond.

"I applied for it because I wanted an overseas scholarship and to meet people from different countries. It adds to the overall learning experience. In Singapore, we hardly see anyone from, say, Turkey, or Greece or Africa. I wanted to get to see how people think and view things differently," she says.

But she adds that a scholarship should not be just about financing an overseas education.

"You have to ask yourself what kind of career you want. I know of some scholars who have returned and are not happy with the work they do. The first few years of your working life are very important. They are especially crucial if you are the sort who hopes to become a CEO someday. And if it is research you want, then, look for a scholarship that leads to a PhD. The main thing is to think about what you want to do," she says.

She had opted to study biochemistry out of interest and for the intellectual stimulation but had no intention of doing research.

"I wanted a people-oriented job, and one with international exposure," she says.

“Of all the scholarships, I felt that this would be the most fun for me because I get to see different industries and different parts of the world. In the private sector, I don’t think you get to travel as much at this junior level,” she adds.

Aside from the overseas trips, her job typically requires her to handle requests from Singapore companies that are interested in venturing into Europe and to fill them in on things such as the business operating environment of the city and industry they are interested in.

She also helps to set up meetings with overseas companies that could potentially engage Singapore companies for products and services. And if there are major trade shows or exhibitions, she ensures that the potential partner companies are invited to them and facilitates meetings at these meetings.

“A lot of what we do involves looking at particular countries in Europe and what the key promising industries are and whether there is a match from the Singapore side.”

“We help identify market opportunities and potential matches, and champion certain industries,” she says. “It is like opening the right doors to the right people – making the right connections,” she adds.

She and her colleagues also work together with other organizations, including the Economic Development Board, the Singapore Business Federation and various embassies to host overseas delegations that come here. These may be presidential or ministerial delegations, or delegations involving chambers of commerce.

“These delegations include businessmen whom we try to match with Singapore companies that can work best with them,” she says. She estimates that on average, her group sees about eight to 10 such delegations a year.

Now that she has chalked up experience in dealing with developed markets, Ms Chee is considering her options for her next posting. Generally, postings for scholars like her span two to three years.

She says: “I’d like to work on something like the India or China desk, or in an industry cluster that has a lot of work in emerging markets. You can state your preference but it also depends on what is available.”