



Search for the 'right' manager

Is a shopping centre manager born, made - or both?

■ By Richard Chan and Evelyn Lo

Sourcing the right person to manage a shopping centre can be likened to finding the right sauce to go with a meat. Those now employed in shopping centres in the Klang Valley come with myriad qualifications, and are from all walks of life.

One can find managers who are qualified as engineers, accountants, architects and lawyers, as well as managers who have degrees in economics, marketing, business or advertising. In short, as many disciplines as one can think of.

There are even those without tertiary qualifications - managers who have "qualified" through the school of life as a result of being thrown into the deep end of shopping centre management, whether by choice or circumstances. These people could even be from industries such as entertainment, food and beverage, banking, construction or even an owner's silver-spoon offspring.

Shopping centre management today involves a plethora of functions: Finance and administration (including billings and rent collection); marketing and leasing (sourcing tenants and retailers); advertising and promotions (endeavouring to make shopping an attractive experience); security and car-parking (making

free from traffic woes); maintenance and engineering (M&E or keeping the machinery and back-of-house services ticking); and house-keeping (ensuring that the place is clean and pleasant).

Of course, while certain functions relate directly to specialised fields, such as marketing and M&E, which rightly ought to be tackled by personnel skilled in those areas, the centre manager has to know enough about the functions of the various departments to be able to direct the show.

Centre managers in the shopping industry are definitely a unique bunch: One could say that they are both specialists and generalists at the same time.

Sometimes, their qualifications and experience may not be as

important as their aptitude and inclination. They have to be outgoing, pleasant but firm with just about anybody - from complaining retailers to fussy patrons.

Shopping centre management belongs to the service

industry, which means that when members of the public come out to play, or literally speaking to shop in the centre, that is the time the manager is hard at work. This is especially so after offices close on weekdays and during weekends, public and school holidays. It applies particularly to those involved in the operations aspect, which includes promotional activities, security, car-parking, M&E and housekeeping.

It may be quite exciting for a young employee to be involved in such activities, especially in a new, vibrant and popular shopping centre where he or she is exposed to the spotlight of shoppers' observations. However, the toll on personal or family time and social life can be stressful over time.

Such a person needs to balance (or actually, juggle)

personal time with working hours during the weekends. It is not unusual for one to invite boyfriends or girlfriends over to the shopping centre for "social time" during promotional activities over weekends

for the women, it may not be uncommon to bring young children for an "outing" to the mall during weekends or school holidays, complete with patient hubby or maid in tow.

It is no small wonder then that there is a huge turnover among such employees, whether they leave for the greener pastures or to another centre, for better work conditions in a more senior appointment or, simply opt out of shopping centre management altogether.

It is sheer passion and tenacity that make a centre manager remain in the industry today. Sheer passion, it has been said, has kept several notable personnel in the industry for more than 20 years, and their combined experience is surely formidable.

It is interesting to note that top centre managers today earn as much as RM30,000 a month, while there are also others who are only paid RM3,000 to RM5,000. Why this disparity?

The difference lies in the calibre and competence of the managers and the current demand in the industry. This means that less experienced personnel are also employed



Onerous tasks: Working in a new, vibrant and popular shopping centre may be exciting for the young employee, but the toll on personal life can be heavy.

those who can be termed as the "rabbits" of the industry - managers who literally "hop" from one centre to another, gaining just nominal experience and exposure from their short stints there.

Centre management no longer means merely managing the property or building per se, that is, ensuring that it is kept in good running order by ensuring that both shoppers and tenants or retailers are happy. It also means striving to achieve the healthy bottomline demanded by the owners. As in balancing between indulgence and moderation to keep to a healthy lifestyle, it is the overall balance that a manager has to maintain in order to make the shopping

What is the "right" or "proper" qualification, then, for a centre manager? In truth, there are no specifics - and this is the reason why PPK Malaysia, as the overall industry representative, has embarked on training and education courses to equip younger centre industry employees with at least an overview of what is involved. In the end, experience is the master teacher, but it comes at a price.

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*Today,
it no longer
means merely
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but includes
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bottomline
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