

## HR CORNER

# Only the best need apply

Telecommunications employer stands firm on hiring goals

by Grace Chan

It pays to hire the right persons. Leading IP services provider City Telecom (HK) Limited (CTI) understands this.

Last year, the company short-listed 17 candidates out of 793 applications for its hugely popular "CXO of the Future" management trainee programme. All but one failed to meet the company's expectation and no job offers were made.

There was no let up in acquiring the best talent though. Earlier this year, CTI rolled out the programme for the fifth time since 2007 and in a bid to attract the top one per cent of graduates from across the globe, upped the CXO pay cap to HK\$36,000 along with a generous discretionary performance bonus on a par with those offered by investment banks and leading management consulting firms.

"This is only a fraction of the investment that we're prepared to make to strengthen our talent pipeline," says Ni Quiaque Lai, chief financial officer and head of talent engagement, City Telecom (HK) Limited. "When it comes to talent succession, we've always prioritised home-grown talent. This explains how this costly endeavour has been worthwhile."

A total of 1,153 applications from 153 universities around the world flooded in as a result. Pre-screened candidates were assessed through an exhaustive process comprising a written test, group interview, and further down the line, a 36-hour Outward Bound live-in programme during

which a handful of carefully selected CXO hopefuls engaged in a series of simulation activities that were both physically and mentally stimulating.

A 15-minute face-to-face interview may only allow a quick glimpse into a job candidate's personality and career preference. For this reason, Mr Lai, CTI's group chairman Ricky Wong and group chief executive officer William Yeung made a point to partake in the live-in programme to get a better understanding of individual candidates' psychological making, behavioural traits and perhaps most importantly leadership potential.

This year, Chinese University of Hong Kong graduate Kiana Shek, and Mingo Tsang, a graduate of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, grabbed the "future CXO" titles. They realised then the challenge had just begun.

## Intensive training

The selection process is stringent and the 18-month "CXO of the Future" programme is equally demanding. It encompasses a series of rotational stints through 40 business divisions across the group during the first 12 months. "We also involve them in executive meetings," Mr Lai says. "This helps them to build a network within the company prior to a six-month final placement."

This is in addition to a Chartered Financial Analyst (CFA) Level I exam in December, half-marathon next year, monthly reflections on management books, and several ad-hoc projects.

In order to stretch the future CXOs' potential to the full and cultivate a business mindset, CTI arranges for them to be mentored by some of the company's veteran managers and to step into the role of personal assistant to the group chairman. There is also a chance to shadow CEO Yeung.

Exposure to the highly charged business world is core to the CXO training, Mr Lai says. "An innate capacity to turn stress into motivation is expected of our CXOs," he remarks.

Only one month into the programme, for example, Mr Tsang had already been given a chance to accompany Mr Lai to a Kellogg-HKUST EMBA alumni event during which he rubbed shoulders with senior executives from various industries.

"That was an exceptional opportunity for idea exchange with business gurus from a cross section of industries," he says, adding that CTI's forward-thinking corporate culture impresses him most.

Ms Shek too was tasked with presenting CTI's corporate profile to investors in a Goldman Sachs Corporate Day alongside Mr Lai not long after she signed on for the CXO programme in May. "The experience boosted my confidence as a professional," she reveals.

Post-training employment is not guaranteed though. The MTs must follow a standard job application process. "In other words, they must submit a cover letter and resume for consideration for the position they wish to take," notes Mr Lai.



Ni Quiaque Lai (right), chief financial officer and head of talent engagement City Telecom (HK) Limited, with the company's future "CXOs" Kian Shek (left) and Mingo Tsang  
Photo: Wallace Chan