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Matt Kerr: Tough task ahead for APAC HR managers

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With rapid growth of life sciences industry in Asia, we have seen many success stories over the last decade. However, any period of extensive growth is often accompanied by growing pains, particularly relating to staffing requirements. Organizations simply cannot get the teams in place fast enough to capitalize on the growth of the market.

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These issues still prevail and the teams working on the situation comprise specialists in human resources (HR). Here, we have outlined five of the key challenges faced by the HR managers in the life sciences sector in Asia today.

Mismatch between supply and demand - There is a fundamental mismatch between supply and demand of labor. While there is an abundance of people looking for work in Asian countries, there is also a fundamental lack in the standard of labor compared to skill requirements of various companies. Also, there are no government or educational initiatives that have been put into place to bridge this gap.

Salaries - Skills shortage puts significant upward pressure on salaries. "In demand" candidates often receive multiple job offers, giving them opportunities to negotiate higher salaries that are not commensurate with their skills and experience. For

example, in Malaysia, high demand for Clinical Research Associates (CRA) is driving salaries higher. Many companies are willing to offer candidates 30-35 percent salary increases just to lure them away from a competitor. And, these are not even the best candidates. Such is the demand for a CRA that an average performer with competent skills can garner a steep salary increase through skilled manpower scarcity in the market.

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High turnover - For organizations, costs are not going up only because of high salary demands, but also in training employees who quickly switch over to another company. Once new employees are given the skills and training to enhance their worth for a specific job function, we often see them move on to a new company as there they can negotiate for a much higher salary. This underlines the need for a clear and comprehensive retention strategy.

Communication skills - Companies find it difficult to find people who are professionally proficient in both, the native language as well as English.

Recruitment in remote areas - It is challenging to find talent in remote areas and an even bigger challenge is to attract candidates who are willing to relocate. This tremendously affects the ability for companies to grow. For example, skilled professionals for places like Pontianuk or Makassar in Indonesia or Can Tho in central Vietnam, are very hard to find, and attempts at staff relocation there have been a challenge.

Therefore, organizations need to have clear candidate attraction strategies in place and perhaps, more importantly, initiatives to retain their top talent.