

## The younger set are taking time off work to pursue their hobby or a different career path altogether

Kimberly Spykerman and Cheryl Faith Wee

**A**uditor Kevin Goh took a year off work last year – to play chess.

The 29-year-old had been working at accounting firm KPMG for 3½ years when he decided to take partially paid extended leave to pursue his passion. The firm gave him the green light and he spent the next 11 months training for, and competing in, chess tournaments all over the world, including Hungary, Vietnam and the Philippines.

He is now back at work and happier for the experience. "Going professional was always something I wanted to do and I never thought I would get the chance. I felt I progressed tremendously as a player," he says.

Until the opportunity arose, he had not considered giving up his job for chess as he felt that his career progress would be hampered. Also, he had his retired parents to think about, as well as his wife, who is a doctor.

The fact that his company supported him and he still had his job gave him peace of mind, he says. The couple have no children.

Like Mr Goh, many of the younger set are hanging up their corporate suits (in some cases, for good) to pursue their passions – a phenomenon experts term the "quarter-life crisis", in a twist on the more common "mid-life crisis".

It can mean swapping a cushy engineering job to photograph wildlife, or leaving the glamour of marketing to slave over a hot oven (see side stories).

This "crisis" is a period of anxiety, uncertainty and inner turmoil that often accompanies the transition to adulthood. These days, that transition can take longer, depending on financial independence and plans for starting a family.

And human resource experts say that younger people here, usually those in their mid-20s to mid-30s, are acting on this impulse for change, fuelled in part by support from parents who do not require their children to provide for them.

Mr David Ang, executive director of the Singapore Human Resources Institute, says: "Younger people today have a different set of values because they are more well-travelled and their parents are more indulgent. They tend to be restless and interested in challenges."

Take, for example, Ms Claire Phuah, 26, and Ms Yessica, 25.

The two ex-schoolmates from Temasek Polytechnic left their jobs as account managers of two separate advertising firms to open cafe-bar Ardent's in a shophouse in Neil Road last October. They both felt they were not getting anywhere after two to three years in their former jobs.

Ms Phuah says: "We came to a point where things were stagnant in terms of prospects and advancement. We wanted to do something of our own."

The two singletons pooled their savings and conceptualised the eatery from scratch, down to its decor and menu.

Experts say it might be wise for companies to adapt to this new breed of workers. "With multi-generational workforces, there is the need to understand and respect the different value systems," says Mr Ang.

Last week, The Business Times reported that a survey conducted by the S.P. Jain School of Global Management showed that



ST PHOTO: CHEW SENG KAM

Ms Yvette Tee gave up the corporate life six years ago when she was in her 30s to pursue her passion, yoga, and is now a yoga teacher.

# Hit by quarter-life crisis



ST PHOTOS: RAVINADARAJAN, CHERYL FAITH WEE

Ex-classmates (from left) Yessica and Claire Phuah left the advertising industry to open a cafe-bar in Neil Road. Auditor Kevin Goh (above) took a year off work to train and compete in global chess tournaments.

the main barrier to retaining younger talent was a mismatch between individual and corporate goals.

Already, some companies here, such as HSBC, Standard Chartered Bank and IBM, are accommodating younger employees' requests for time to pursue their interests.

No-pay-leave, sabbaticals, a short work-week and working from home are some options open to staff regardless of age.

Mr Irving Low, head of people, performance and culture at KPMG here, says:

"These arrangements allow us to maximise our talent pool while enabling our staff to achieve work-life satisfaction."

Mr Bob Grove, 46, managing director of South-east Asia for global public relations firm Edelman, agrees. He says: "The workforce here seems at times to be obsessed with productivity. But even the most talented staff will get burnt out, call it a day and leave to do something different."

A handful of Edelman's younger employees have flexible hours – agreed upon on a

case-by-case basis – because of pursuits such as running a dance studio or even a retail shop selling dresses.

But some younger people here choose to leave their jobs completely. And this does not always sit well with their families.

Mr Lim Yeow Kiat, 62, a semi-retired project supervisor in an oil refinery, was shocked that his son, 28-year-old Ethan Lim, would leave his stable job as an engineer to be a wildlife nature photographer cum nature conservationist.

He says: "There is less risk when you stay in a big company. Now my son's future is uncertain. There are so many entrepreneurs out there, everyone wants to dream, but how many can succeed? But at the end of the day it is up to him and he has to make his own choices."

Yoga teacher Yvette Tee, gave up corporate life for good in mid-2006, when she was in her 30s, to teach yoga. Doing so was probably the best decision she has ever made, she says.

Ms Tee, now 41, who previously held positions in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Monetary Authority of Singapore as well as in PR firms, says she decided to teach yoga full-time only after months of careful thought, and with the support of her parents and husband, who was then her boyfriend. She and her husband have no children.

"Teaching yoga is my true passion, but I was fearful about giving up a stable job at first because of the loss of regular income," she says. She teaches at True Yoga and also holds private classes.

She recalls: "I used to rush through meetings, even meals were wolfed down in a hurry. I never stopped to enjoy the little things. My life now is such a joy. I am more self-aware, have greater self-confidence, and I live and breathe what I love. My only regret is not doing this earlier."

[kimspyke@sph.com.sg](mailto:kimspyke@sph.com.sg)

[cherylw@sph.com.sg](mailto:cherylw@sph.com.sg)

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