

Apprenticeship to boost skills of workers

MD FAZLUR RAHMAN

INDUSTRIALISTS and factory owners in Bangladesh often complain of shortages of skilled workers, although technical schools, colleges and universities churn out thousands of graduates every year.

Their explanation being that although there is a huge supply of educated youth, their skills do not match the industry requirements.

That grievance might not last long, as the government has come up with a project to train the youth such that they find good jobs and the industries also get their supply of skilled workers.

Called the Bangladesh Skills for Employment and Productivity (B-SEP) project, it is funded by the Canadian government and being executed by the International Labour Organisation.

Over the next two years, the UN organisation will train 12,000 apprentices in areas of tourism and hospitality, agro food processing, ceramics, furniture and pharmaceuticals with 20 million Canadian dollars from the Canadian International Development Agency.

Of them, 6,000 will be in the formal sector and 6,000 in the informal one, said Francis Dilip De Silva, senior specialist of the B-SEP project of ILO Bangladesh.

The ILO will pilot the model with two furniture makers this year and scale up the project next year.

The project is the outcome of a successful pilot project of the ILO's technical and vocational education and training programme.

In order to find out the scale of apprenticeship in the country, the ILO conducted a survey in 2008 and found out that only 58 apprentices were legally registered with the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET), Silva said.

"We saw this as a window of opportunity." In the last five years, 15,000 apprentices were trained: 12,000 were in the leather sector and the rest in the informal sectors.

During the training, the leather sector apprentices got Tk 6,000 a month. Now they are earning at least Tk 7,000 a month.

In the first three months, 50 percent of the costs came from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and the other 50 percent from the prospective employers. After the three months, they were absorbed by the companies.

For the next nine months, the companies paid the full salaries.

More than 95 percent of the apprentices in



Begum Shamsun Nahar, director general of Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training, and Michael Axmann, senior specialist for skills development at the International Labour Organisation, exchange documents after signing an agreement to strengthen the BMET's apprenticeship cell in Dhaka recently.

the leather sector are currently employed.

It is 99 percent in the informal sectors, where six-month apprenticeships were conducted through Brac, a leading non-governmental organisation.

"This is a big achievement. But we need to scale it up as Bangladesh needs millions of skilled workers and not just a few thousands," said Michael Axmann, senior specialist in skills development systems at the ILO.

He said it is recognised that countries with well-established apprenticeship systems tend to be better at managing school-to-work transitions for youth, and enjoy lower ratios of youth unemployment rate to adult unemployment rate.

Apprenticeships are an effective means of bridging school and the world of work for young people by making it possible for them to acquire work experience along with technical and professional training, Axmann said.

He said the ILO has already started dia-

logues with different stakeholders such as the government, the employers and the unions about the importance of introducing quality apprenticeship on a larger scale and helping young people find jobs.

He already held a meeting with the BMET and the National Skills Development Council.

Axmann, who has worked on quality apprenticeship in more than 10 countries, said there is a lot of potential in Bangladesh's IT, health care and garment sectors.

He said the idea of quality apprenticeship is a quantum jump for young people. It is not just a three-month or one-month training programme; it is a very systematic way of getting the right technical and core skills.

The system will also help trainees become entrepreneurs, he said. "Apprenticeship is a very good way of addressing the skills issue."

Axmann said the programme will benefit all parties.

"It will start with employers and it will be good for them. Secondly, young people will get real jobs. Thirdly, the government will not face fallout as the unemployment rate will go down."

He said there is a positive return on investments for employers when they spend the money on apprenticeships and they start to get benefits as early as the second year. "The productivity and competitiveness also go up."

In Denmark, employers bear three-quarters of all the costs for apprenticeships and in Germany two-thirds.

Trade unions also need to be part of every apprenticeship programme, he said, while citing the case of Germany, where there is a very good apprenticeship programme due to the trade unions having a say in developing them.

Axmann is aware of the reality that every year about two million people are adding to Bangladesh's workforce, and this keeps on adding.

He said the government's commitment to

the apprenticeship system is the key to its success.

"And fortunately, there is a political will on the government's part to do this. The second thing is that a country needs strong and committed employers, which Bangladesh has."

His piece of advice for any country about to start apprenticeship programme is: "When you do apprenticeship programme, you must start with employers. When you get employers on board you will win. That goes for every country, irrespective of the income levels."

He highlighted the contribution of apprenticeship programmes in some other countries: the rate of apprentices getting jobs is 85 percent in Germany and 95 percent in Switzerland.

"That's the kind of numbers the governments want to see. To see this, there has to be a paradigm shift in the mindset of the people."

Silva said the ILO is drafting an apprenticeship strategy for Bangladesh, as there is no such thing in the country, except apprenticeship regulation in the Labour Act.

The ILO is working keeping in mind the skills need for the next 15 to 20 years.

Apprenticeship has to be branded so that it becomes attractive to young people, according to Silva.

Axmann did his apprenticeship as a bank clerk at the age of 20. When he went to university his mother asked: "Are you sure you want to do this [go to university]?"

"This is the image apprenticeship has in some of the countries that has a quality programme," he said, adding that the image of apprenticeship and vocational education has to change in the country.

Silva said there is no dearth of money but the funds have to be channelled in the right way.

The Asian Development Bank has promised to provide \$1.7 billion to Bangladesh over the next 10 years for skills development. The World Bank is also providing \$100 million for the same purpose.

GIZ, the German international cooperation agency, is also promoting the system.

Axmann hopes that in 2020, out of two million people joining the workforce, 100,000 will join the apprenticeship programme.

Of them, 90,000 will find jobs at the end of the programme. At least 10 sectors will take part in the programme.

"After five years, Bangladesh will be known as the country of apprenticeship programme in Asia."

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Nuclear and renewable: S Africa's ambitious new energy mix

AFP, Johannesburg

HEAVILY reliant on coal-fired electricity, South Africa is launching ambitious new projects aimed at diversifying its energy sources and avoiding the regular power cuts that have hobbled the economy in recent years.

Solar and wind energy plants are mushrooming across the country while the government is planning a huge -- and controversial -- expansion of nuclear power. But coal is not going away anytime soon.

On the outskirts of Johannesburg and near the industrial town of Vereneeng, six large turbines spew white smoke above the desolate landscape.

Lethabo thermal power station is generating 3,600 megawatts (MW) of electricity -- around eight percent of national production.

The Lethabo plant, operated by the state-owned utility firm Eskom, is using inexpensive, poor quality coal which is found in abundance in this part of the country.

"We don't have big resources in water, solar is still expensive to build and wind isn't 100 percent reliable because wind can't blow all day long," said Thomas Conradie, the Lethabo coal power station chief.

"The most affordable option to produce the majority of our energy remains coal," which provides 85 percent of the country's energy, he said.

Two mega coal plants -- Medupi and Kusile -- are under construction and will each have the capacity to produce around 4,800 MW.

But the government believes that for South Africa to cut down its excessive reliance on coal, it has to expand its nuclear power generation -- despite opposition from environmentalists and fears that the huge cost could cripple the economy.

South Africa currently has the sole nuclear power plant on the continent, situated at Koeberg, north of Cape Town. The twin reactors there contribute nearly 2,000 MW, a little over four percent of the national power output.

The government wants to pump an extra 9,600 MW of nuclear power into the national grid by building eight new reactors at an estimated cost of some \$50 billion (46.5 billion euros).

China, France, Russia, South Korea and the United States are bidding to construct the plants, with the winner expected to be announced early next year.

Apart from nuclear energy, South Africa is pressing ahead with renewable energy options.

"Coal will continue to be one of the sources of electricity in South Africa for a foreseeable period of time in the future," said Brian Mantlana, director of climate change issues at South Africa's environment ministry.

But "what is important is how South Africa changes its energy mix going forward," he said.

Eurozone economy picks up pace in November: survey

AFP, Brussels

EUROZONE business activity hit a four-and-a-half year high in November, helping create much-needed jobs in a broad-based upturn despite the impact on France of the Paris attacks, a key survey showed Monday.

Data monitoring company Markit said its closely watched Composite Purchasing Managers Index rose to 54.4 points from 53.9 points in October, putting it well above the 50-point boom-or-bust line.

Markit said "employment, new orders and backlogs of work indicators all signalled the strongest monthly expansions in four-and-a-half years."

"The survey data also highlighted the broad-based nature of the upturn."

Markit chief economist Chris Williamson said in the statement that the report was encouraging overall but noted the impact on France of the November 13 Paris attacks which left 130 people dead.

"The improved performance in terms of economic growth and job creation seen in November are all the more impressive given last weekend's tragic events in Paris, which subdued economic activity in France -- especially in the service sector," Williamson said.

For France, the Composite PMI fell sharply to 51.3 points, a three-month low, from 52.6 in October, Markit said in a separate report.

Williamson said the survey suggested the 19-nation eurozone economy could grow 0.4 percent in the last three months of this year and even a modest December performance could make it 0.5 percent.

Retailers give shoppers new reasons to use mobile phones in stores

REUTERS, New York

AT some Macy's outlets this holiday season, shoppers who download the retailer's app will be able to use their smart phones to guide them through the store to products they're seeking.

At JCPenney, customers will be able to take a snapshot of, for example, boots worn by a person passing by and quickly find out if the store has similar ones in stock. And Staples is testing an app that will allow sales clerks to let customers know how the store's prices match up against Amazon and other rivals.

Hoping to claw back market share from online rivals - and tired of watching customers use their phones to find better deals than those offered in stores - brick and mortar retailers are trying to give shoppers different reasons to use their phones while doing holiday shopping.

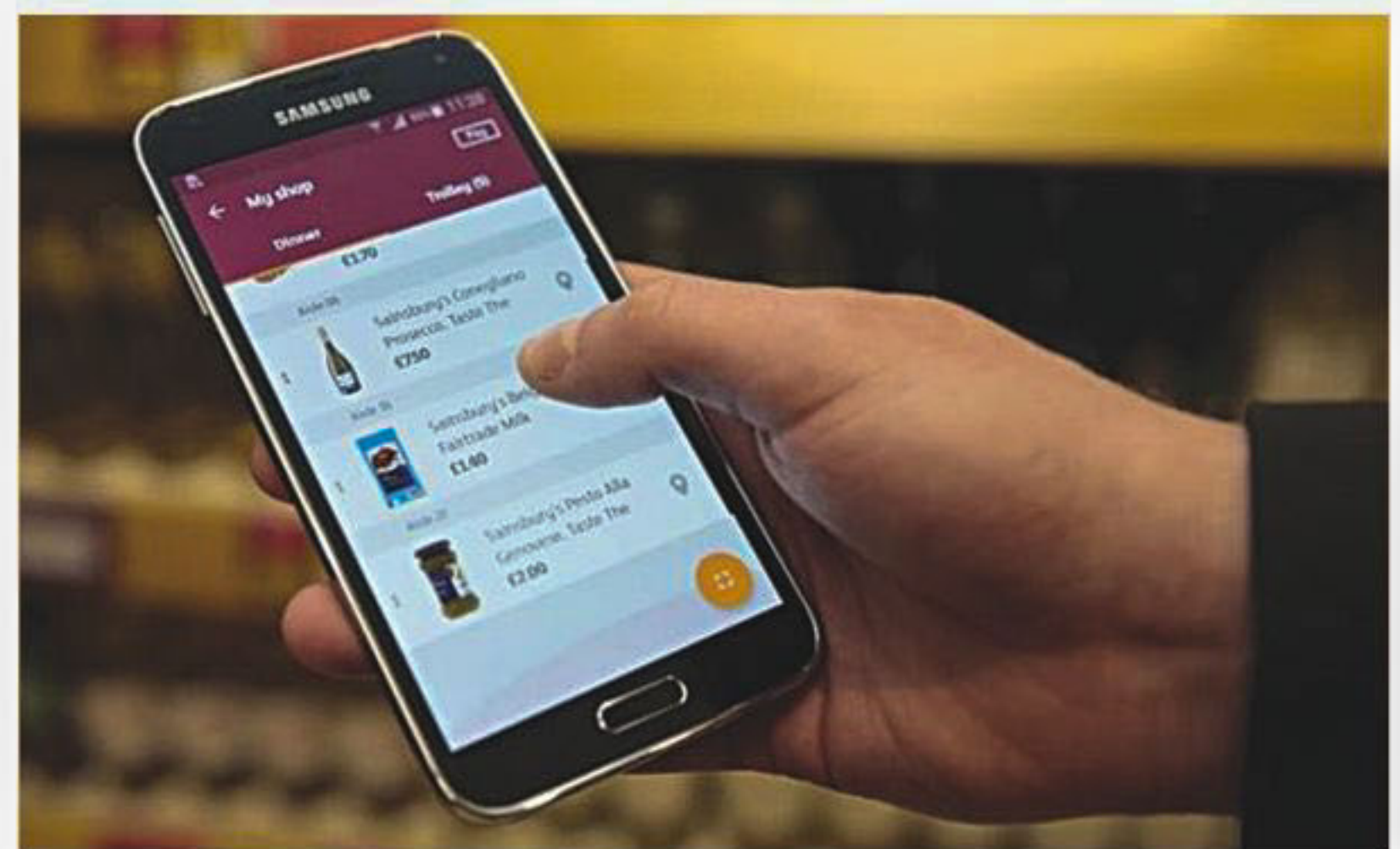
The new apps will allow customers to easily order out-of-stock items for home delivery, to check store prices and even to summon a clerk.

But the retailers' efforts will face two significant challenges in the looming holiday season: getting customers to embrace the new technology, which is still sometimes glitchy and dependent on in-store systems, and getting them to trust that stores can match the Web's prices and convenience.

Retail purchases by mobile phone have increased by 34 percent in the last year, according to IBM, which estimates that more than 40 percent of the online traffic and about 20 percent of sales this Thanksgiving weekend will come from smart phones.

A Reuters/Ipsos poll of more than 3,000 respondents this month found that about half of those surveyed said they would use their mobile phones while shopping in stores this holiday season, for such things as making price comparisons, taking photos or researching products. Last year, only about 42 percent of respondents said they would use their phones while shopping.

Companies that don't make mobile work are playing a "very



REUTERS/FILE

A journalist trials a SmartShop mobile app, which is still in development, at a Sainsbury's store in northwest London, Britain.

dangerous" game, said Jay Henderson, head of IBM's cloud-based marketing platform. "Retailers that can't deliver a more personalized experience on mobile devices will start losing customers to businesses that can," he said.

In addition to its pilot program guiding customers to products within stores, and a photo program similar to JCPenney's, Macy's has taken inspiration from dating app Tinder, recommending products to customers online who swipe one way to like an item and the other to reject it.

JCPenney's app can be used to scan barcodes to pull up product information or order out of stock items, and it saves digital coupons - two increasingly common offerings in retailer apps. "We look at using phones in stores as an enhancement to shopping," said Kate Coultas, a representative with JCPenney which is heavily focused on mobile this year.

Stores are trying to make customer service easier, too.

Best Buy's app now lets shoppers call, text or email a representative while in stores.

Target Corp is testing an in-store "digital service ambassador" in 25 Los Angeles stores to help customers use Target apps.

Ulta Beauty is testing an app that will allow clerks to access customer

information and point them to products they might like.

Faisal Masud, executive vice president of global e-commerce at Staples, said his company knows that it must satisfy the desires of its customers to find low prices. The company, like many others, will match online and in-store prices of competitors, including Amazon, Best Buy and Office Depot.

Customers "have a phone that is basically a super computer, and they will find it somewhere else" for less if they can, he said.

Companies offering web apps and in-store technologies will also have to grapple with keeping the new apps and systems working and up to date. That means ensuring that WiFi in stores works, and that terminals function.

Recent visits to a Staples store in New York City found that a kiosk set up to allow people to order online wasn't functioning, and at a JCPenney store in the city, the WiFi didn't work. Both companies said the problems encountered were unusual and that they have backup systems in place.

"Poorly executed plans can be worse than no mobile strategy at all," said Perry Kramer, vice president at Boston Retail Partners. "The dangers are losing those customers for the rest of the year or for a long time."



AFP

Solar and wind energy plants are mushrooming across South Africa.