SINGAPORE job-seekers joined others to battle for a handful of jobs at Dutch oil giant Shell.
The place: Langkawi.
The one-week test: Solve business problems based on real-life Shell operations.
Nine Singaporeans applied.
We look at how three of them fared in a situation not unlike that of reality TV hit The Apprentice.
They were part of 47 contestants from seven countries — undergraduates from Australia, Egypt, Korea, China, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore.
Contestants were vying to hear the words "You're hired!", or at least, that they have been shortlisted for a job in the company.
It was the first time that the Shell Gourami Business Challenge has been used in Asia by the oil company, which has conducted it in Europe for the last 10 years.
The contestants were split into seven teams for a test of analytical, leadership and inter-personal skills.
Each team represented a different process in the oil-energy industry and had to come up with five-year business strategies in a fictitious country named Gourami.
Shell assessors lurked around to judge their performance during team discussions.
Individually, students also had a final round of interviews with Shell executives at the end of the stint.
He charmed 'em

WANT JOB? PLAY TO WIN

Name: Andrew Wang
Age: 24
Qualifications: Final-year student, Business Administration, NUS
Position applied for: A posting in business development
Personality trait: The Charmer

He played hard and worked hard

He was Mr Popular, thanks to his good looks and outgoing personality. Andrew Wang was also known as the cutest guy in the competition, one who played hard and worked hard.

He had braced himself for fierce competition, but was relieved to be put in the sales and marketing team, because he felt it was his strength.

Some of that salesmanship shone through on the second day, when things got chaotic during his team’s first meeting.

No one was listening, all were trying to impress the assessors.

Sensing it was heading nowhere, Andrew jumped in. “I told them that everyone was talking, no one was listening. Too many leaders, we must give and take.”

It worked. Team members relaxed. Workable suggestions came. They decided to take turns leading.

He played hard and worked hard

Said his Singaporean team-mate Lin Weiling, 22: “He is charming, he gets along with everyone, is able to communicate well. He would make sure everyone had a chance to say something.”

That was easy. What was tricky was dealing with team-mates who refused to shut up.

In a meeting with a different group, a foreign team-mate was pushing his ideas with disregard for others who were already talking.

He interrupted Andrew a few times, to which Andrew responded: “Do you mind?”

But the guy didn’t get it. “I persisted and said louder, ‘Do you mind?’”

That was when my team-mate mediated because the atmosphere just got tense.”

Still, that wasn’t the most unpleasant episode for him. The next day, he ate humble pie. He had e-mailed a “director” in a Gourami company (role-played by a Shell assessor) asking about trends in global demand for oil.

He got chastised instead.

“She replied, ‘You are my sales and marketing team. Shouldn’t you be the one telling me about this trend?’”

“I felt stupid for a while. So I thought, okay, no choice but to suck in the ego, admit it was a mistake to ask and move on.”

“I had this feeling that I cannot make it in Shell already.”

The day’s mistakes soon became a distant memory, as the participants relaxed during and after dinner.

Most of them gathered at the bar to celebrate a Chinese participant’s birthday.

By the fifth day, team members had started opening up to each other. But annoyances persisted.

Slight tension arose when the team member he crossed swords with on the first day turned caustic and snapped at Andrew.

Not wanting to weaken his chances at the bigger game, Andrew decided the best strategy was still to just shrug it off. After all, the assessors were watching.

By the last night, he had earned himself the nickname “kababayen”, or honorary Filipino in Tagalog—a sign of the close bond he had developed with the Filipino camp.

“A lot of teams had nicknames for some people. Like, the Aussies called one of their own, a guy who liked to dress fancy, the Melbourne Metrosexual.

“Me, they jokingly teased as ‘bahaeo’, which means sweet-talker in Tagalog. I guess it’s because some of the girls thought I was a smooth-talker!”

JUNE Goh admitted that some people see her as a goody-two-shoes. But that didn’t stop her from signing up for this Challenge, where, instead of trying to outwit and outlast your competition, you’re supposed to impress the assessors with your analytical and leadership skills.

Her first taste of tension happened almost immediately after she met the nine members in her Refinery team.

She said: “I remembered this guy getting on all our nerves because he kept questioning everything we did.

“When we had finished discussing, he persisted with his ideas and refused to agree.

“We didn’t mind differences, but it was annoying as he was the only one who kept protesting, not trying to work together. When we tried to explain why his suggestions were not good, he just sulked.”

“I was prepared for this because in any group project, there will be that one person who will be difficult.”

Her absence from many of the recreational activities didn’t help debunk the goody-two-shoes image.

Feeling unproductive that nothing much came out of the discussions, she had skipped the activities to read some of the materials provided:

“I was hoping to come up with something concrete, like a clear set of guidelines so we can get started.”
The following day, she switched strategies by taking a backseat in the discussions. "I didn't want to appear too bossy. It's about group effort, no need to show off." Break-time came. Some went to the beach, to the gym or the pool. June skipped the activities again for a long shower and a call home.

"We have only an hour's worth of free time and I wanted to call my parents so they wouldn't be concerned. That call took 20 minutes, so I felt I would not have enough time for activities." If the other contestants had thought she was taking it all too seriously, June insisted she wasn't feeling the best. "I did not feel as if I was in a competition. It was more like being in a school project. It was more fun than I thought because I had braced myself for the bitching." And if they thought of her as a square, she proved them wrong on the last night, when, while having post-dinner drinks at the hotel's bar, she picked up a guitar and started playing hits like Kiss Me and Tears In Heaven.

"They were surprised because, from my image, they thought I was a goody-two-shoes. So, when they realised I was in my half's rock band, love rock music and I even play the rhythm and bass guitar, they felt I was more of a rock girl."