Psst! Here's a way to get US work visa

Melissa Koh

Living and working in New York has proved exciting for Singaporean Bryan Chuah. He has met head honchos of multinational firms, done projects with a mini-United Nations of fellow workers, and gone to concerts to catch singers like Mariah Carey.

All this ever since Mr Chuah, 33, acquired a piece of paper known as the H-1B1. That was five years ago.

The University of Michigan master's degree holder works as a consultant in credit risk in the Big Apple.

He said he would not have had such an opportunity if not for the visa scheme, which came together with a free trade agreement (FTA) with the United States that took effect in 2004.

A total of 5,400 Singaporeans a year are eligible for the H-1B1. In 2006, Mr Chuah was one of the 288 Singaporeans who secured one.

Professor Tommy Koh, who was the chief negotiator for the US-Singapore free trade agreement, said the visa "was a unilateral gift from the US side".

"They offered us a special quota of 5,400 H-1B1 visas annually. We accepted the offer," he said.

The visa allows holders to live and work in the US for up to 18 months, accompanied by their spouses and dependent children.

It can be renewed and extended indefinitely.

Some of its holders contacted by The Sunday Times learnt of it while they were studying in the US. Some others were told about it by immigration lawyers handling their visa applications.

"I've become more independent than I would have had if I had remained in Singapore," said Mr Chuah, who is married with no children.

"The friendships across nationalities and the different cultures I've been exposed to are experiences I never imagined were possible."

Mr CHUAH

Since then, however, there has been a dip. 302 in 2009, and 251 visas last year.

Some Singaporean H-1B1 holders felt this could be due to the recession, which made it hard to find jobs in the US, plus a lack of awareness.

Those who already hold this visa said it is not hard to get one — but only if the applicant has found a company in the United States that is willing to sponsor him for a job.

"I've become more independent than I would have if I had remained in Singapore," said Mr Chuah, who is married with no children.

"The friendships across nationalities and the different cultures I've been exposed to are experiences I never imagined were possible."