

Do away with bias against mature workers: Tharman

He urges employers to use grants to hire and train such workers

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Employers in Singapore still harbour a bias against mature workers, Senior Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam said yesterday. He called on employers to “take the high road” and make use of government schemes to hire and train such workers.

This will benefit both workers and companies, given the tight labour market, Mr Tharman said at a forum on jobs and skills at the Singapore Perspectives conference organised by the Institute of Policy Studies.

“We are not going to loosen up our foreign worker policy – quite the opposite,” he said. “So, make the most of our Singapore workforce.”

On the panel with Mr Tharman were American economics professor Tyler Cowen and OCBC Bank chief economist Selena Ling.

Asked about the challenges that younger and older job seekers face when entering the workforce, Mr Tharman said the issues faced by mature workers are not limited to a mismatch in skills.

On their part, employers should be willing to hire, reskill and upskill such workers, who already have significant skills, he said.

“In general, you hire someone, you train them up, and they have to adapt. It can be done.”

Singapore has people with experience, a willingness to work hard and a willingness to learn, said Mr Tharman, who is also Coordinating Minister for Social Policies.

He added this is why the Government has slanted incentives such as the Jobs Growth Incentive towards mature workers. The scheme gives higher wage subsidies to companies that hire local workers aged 40 and above.

For young job seekers, Ms Ling stressed the importance of internships and real-life experience to help them get a sense of what employers are looking for.

The panellists also spoke on entrepreneurship and whether Singapore’s recipe for talent will ever produce the next Elon Musk or Mark Zuckerberg.

For Prof Cowen, this outcome seems



Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam said the issues faced by mature workers are not limited to a mismatch in skills.
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unlikely. “I think Singaporean society is in some ways much too conformist to be the land of Mark Zuckerberg, much less Elon Musk.”

Instead, Singapore’s strength lies in its people’s ability to work in teams and boost each other’s ability, with plenty of top talent going into Government, he said.

“The core Singaporean start-up is the Singaporean state, which has the most talented, most cohesive civil service in the world,” Prof Cowen added.

Responding to Prof Cowen, Mr Tharman voiced his belief that there is scope for more individual exceptionalism here.

“That individual exceptionalism is needed for the future, to complement that system exceptionalism that we have, that system entrepreneurship that Singapore is well known for,” he said.

Touching on Covid-19, Mr Tharman said the pandemic has driven home the important role of essential workers, and a key challenge is to raise the incomes of such workers who are at the bottom of the ladder.

Lifting their wages is in the interest of a cohesive society, and Singapore must tap the spirit of solidarity demonstrated during Covid-19 to push ahead and do better for them, he said.

“It can be done. It requires collective solutions, and it requires economic strategies that ensure we can continue to create jobs up and down the ladder.”

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