

By Invitation

The five Ps of a good job and how public policy can help

How should one choose among the various job opportunities available amid a tight labour market in Singapore? And how can public policy facilitate the best outcomes for individuals, the workforce and society?



Terence Ho

For The Straits Times

Much is riding on good jobs and rising incomes to deliver financial assurance and better living standards for Singaporeans. At the National Day Rally last week, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong spoke of the need to become more productive and competitive, so that workers can earn more in real terms.

PM Lee also reiterated the importance of Singapore attracting international talent to grow the collective pie for Singapore. While the benefits of an open-door policy for talent are clear, the reality is that Singaporeans will face competition – both from fellow citizens as well as foreigners – for jobs and opportunities. High inflation also adds impetus to seek jobs that pay well in order to live comfortably in a global city with a rising cost of living.

Fortunately, Singapore's labour market remains tight. Companies are hiring and competing for talent, allowing workers to choose from a spread of jobs and career options. Workers here are becoming more selective in their job search, as results from a Randstad survey released this

month show ("2 in 5 here will not accept a job if they can't work from home: Poll", *The Straits Times*, Aug 16).

Under these circumstances, how should one choose among the various job opportunities available? And how can public policy facilitate the best outcomes for individuals, the workforce and society?

An individual weighing up job and career options would do well to consider the five "Ps": pay, prospects, purpose, proficiency and personal time. Few jobs will offer these in equal measure. It is therefore important to take a life cycle perspective to maximise financial security along with career and overall life satisfaction over the long term.

Focus on prospects, not just pay

Pay is an obvious consideration in choosing a job. Those with family means or significant savings may choose to forgo high pay in pursuit of passion or lifestyle, but for many, remuneration is consequential, and may become even more so given the desire for financial security amid the rising cost of living.

Nonetheless, a young person entering the workforce would do well to consider not just starting pay, but also the prospects a job offers – in particular, the potential to acquire skills and earn higher wages over time.

The prospects which a job can offer depend on several factors. The first is whether the sector

itself is poised for growth or decline. For instance, opportunities in clean energy and information technology are likely to expand as sustainability and digitalisation efforts gather pace. By contrast, industries and jobs that could be displaced by technology are unlikely to offer good long-term prospects.

Second, a job may offer progression pathways, whether within an organisation or beyond. A worker should seek opportunities to acquire market-relevant skills, including industry-specific knowledge and technical expertise that allow for progression across firms within the sector. The more employers there are within the sector, the greater the potential for such movement. Workers may also acquire skills and experience that can be transferred from one sector to another, such as management, communication and marketing skills, which can greatly expand career options.

Finally, working for a recognised industry leader such as a McKinsey or a Google can increase one's marketability and future prospects. At the same time, start-ups and small and medium-sized enterprises should not be discounted as they may offer a set of unique and valuable experiences, such as handling multiple job responsibilities or building up a business.

Consider purpose and proficiency

While pay and prospects are what a job can offer, a worker brings purpose, passion and proficiency to the job, to the benefit of both the individual and the organisation. We are most motivated and productive when we do what we enjoy, and work on issues that matter to us. If this is also what we are good at, so much the better.

Purpose and proficiency are not immutable. It is possible to find greater purpose and fulfilment over time through immersion in the job and the acquisition of skills needed to excel in it. However, those who realise they are really not cut out for a job after some time may be better off making a clean break and entering another occupation or sector with a better fit.

The aspiration must be that after some years in the workforce, one would have found a job that one finds meaningful and which makes good use of one's skills. It would be a pity otherwise, given how much of our lives is spent at work. At this stage, a key consideration for taking on a new job should be to leverage one's expertise and experience to contribute purposefully, while gaining opportunities for further professional development and growth.

Personal time and flexibility – appraising trade-offs

The Randstad survey conducted from March to April this year found that over three-quarters of Singapore-based respondents valued remote work and flexible working hours. Conversely, about two in five respondents would not accept a job if it did not offer remote working or flexible working hours.

While some may take this to mean that Singapore workers have become complacent and choosy, others may cheer the greater focus on work-life balance and mental well-being. There is also recognition that with many juggling work and caregiving responsibilities, job flexibility – whether in the form of flexible hours, location, or part-time work – is increasingly important.

In considering the trade-off between pay and personal time, it

is useful to take a life cycle perspective. Some may choose to push themselves hard at the outset of their careers, to build up career and financial security before taking a step back to spend more time with family or pursue personal interests. Others may pace themselves to avoid burnout, selecting jobs that provide enough flexibility to attend to family needs, or free time to smell the roses.

A job is particularly fulfilling if it aligns perfectly with one's life purpose and passion. Otherwise, we can take comfort from the knowledge that we can have a life outside work. There are civil servants, professionals and other employees who pursue theatre or baking in their spare time; just last week, a video of two cleaners jamming ebulliently on a discarded piano went viral, to public acclaim.

How public policy can help

From the national perspective, society prospers when workers and families thrive. Improving pay and progression prospects, such as through the expanded Progressive Wage Model, will benefit many lower-wage local workers while tempering reliance on foreign manpower and the need for ever-increasing social transfers. Strengthening Singapore's competitiveness and hub position, through investment in infrastructure and people, will likewise help Singaporeans across the income strata.

Employers have a key part to play in redesigning jobs and investing in employee skills upgrading. The Government encourages this by offering training subsidies, along with grants for job redesign.

Well-structured education and career guidance, both for students and working adults, can improve the chances of a good job fit. Internships and job attachments

are particularly helpful for people of all ages to try out new jobs and careers. Recognising this, the Government has decided to make permanent the SGUnited Mid-Career Pathways Programme, which co-funds work attachment opportunities for mature, mid-career workers.

A situation where work productivity is high but family life suffers is not sustainable and will lead to poor social outcomes. Hence, every encouragement should be given to employers to offer work flexibility where possible. A target has been set to increase the voluntary adoption of a tripartite standard on flexible work arrangements by employers by the end of the year, ahead of a requirement for employers to consider staff requests for such arrangements fairly by 2024.

Building up creative economy ecosystems, such as the arts and sports industries, can provide more outlets for Singaporeans to pursue their passion while earning a good income. More broadly, strengthening social security can give Singaporeans the confidence to explore their strengths and interests, maximising opportunities to unlock their potential for individual and collective gain.

In these various endeavours, market forces must be allowed to work, but judicious public policy interventions, including incentives, nudges, funding and regulations, can help to bring the five Ps within closer reach for most Singaporeans.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• Terence Ho is Associate Professor in Practice at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore. He is the author of *Refreshing The Singapore System: Recalibrating Socio-Economic Policy For The 21st Century* (World Scientific, 2021).



Republic Polytechnic students having a picture taken during their graduation in May. The writer says that an individual weighing up job and career options would do well to consider the five "Ps": pay, prospects, purpose, proficiency and personal time. For instance, he should consider not just starting pay, but also the prospects a job offers. ST PHOTO: THADDEUS ANG