

Less-educated S'poreans risk falling behind as jobs change

They are less aware of tech disruptions and less adept at getting trained, says IPS study

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Tough times lie ahead for Singapore's less-educated workers.

They are less aware of technological disruptions, less open to workplace changes, and less adept at getting themselves trained.

Compared with degree holders, workers with secondary education at most are also more anxious about changing jobs.

In a nutshell, they are more likely to be displaced by automation and digitalisation relative to their more-schooled peers, said a study released by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) on Monday.

This group of workers, comprising 27 per cent of the 2.3 million local workforce, needs help, the researchers said.

So while eight in 10 local workers from lower social brackets said they have moved up in life since childhood, at risk is their future ability to do so.

Dr Laurel Teo, who co-led the research with Dr Chew Han Ei, said: "If we don't do anything about these gaps and vulnerabilities, I am not sure how much further we can continue to enjoy such social mobility."

The survey of 1,010 local workers last October sheds light on the Singapore workforce's preparedness for the future of work, its work aspirations and perceptions of social mobility.

The report pointed out that for decades, Singapore has placed emphasis on knowledge work over technical and services jobs – also known as blue-collar jobs – that are occupied by 20 per cent of Singapore's 3.5 million-strong labour force.

Hence, despite being lauded as "essential workers" during the pandemic, only about half of clerical, sales and service workers, as well as production and transport operators, cleaners and labourers, said in the poll that they have a meaningful career and that their work makes a positive difference.

In contrast, more than six in 10 PMETs (professionals, managers, executives and technicians) believe so.

Excluding foreign workers, degree holders comprise 41 per cent – the biggest group – of the local workforce.

Like it or not, bias over paper qualifications remains, said Mr Jansen Gwee, founder of recruitment platform OppTy. "Having been a recruiter for over a decade, I see the struggle and challenges faced by lower-schooled workers."

"This is due in large part to three elements – the threat of them being replaced by lower-wage foreign workers, the glass ceiling that we have for those without diploma or degree qualifications, and the lack of social protection and safety net for this group."

Just the thought of a job change can be difficult for them, as many of these workers live from pay cheque to pay cheque, he added.

"All too often, it is easy for them to get caught in this Catch-22 situation – they want to upgrade themselves, but employers are hesitant to consider them as they don't have at least a diploma," said Mr Gwee.

It is important for blue-collar workers to thrive, said Assistant Professor Chong Sin Hui from Nanyang Technological University (NTU), even if they make up only a slice of the local workforce. They are usually more affected in economic downturns as they can easily be displaced and require more state aid, she said.

Their children are also less likely to get opportunities and resources, which reinforces the national income and social inequality, making social mobility even more difficult, she added.

Associate Professor Trevor Yu from NTU agreed, saying: "A significant portion of them are in jobs that are particularly susceptible to automation or significant disruption in the near future."

In October last year, Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong acknowledged that Singapore has not sufficiently valued workers engaging in "hands-on and heart work".

Businesses should play a big part in social mobility by promoting meritocracy in hiring, training staff and paying fair wages to their employees, said Mr Gwee. But the realities of inflation and the challenging business climate, especially this year, mean their role will be cramped.

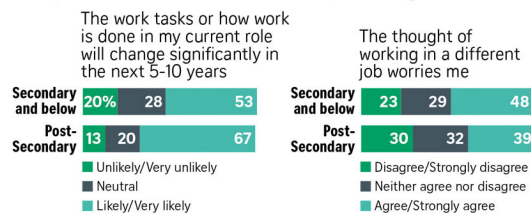
"This issue of improving social mobility is one that has to be addressed on a governmental level," he said.



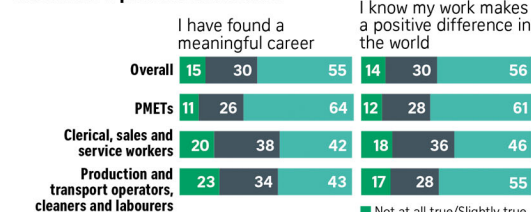
Workers with less education in Singapore are more likely to be displaced by automation and digitalisation relative to their more-schooled peers, said a study released by the Institute of Policy Studies on Monday. ST FILE PHOTO

Survey findings

Lower-educated workers are less aware of impending disruptions and more anxious about job change



PMETs are more likely to say they have meaningful careers that make a positive difference



PMETs: Professionals, managers, executives and technicians
NOTE: Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole
Source: IPS STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

The survey also shows fewer than half of local workers actively pursue critical core skills such as creative thinking, career planning and networking.

Fewer women, in particular, said they network, get training for themselves outside their organisations, or strive to get credit for their work. They are also less likely

to enjoy a creative job, such as coming up with new products, services or work procedures.

The same could be said for workers with secondary-level education or below. The fact that most non-PMETs do not find meaning in their work is also a cause for concern, as this has significant implications for work motivation, performance and, ultimately, the satisfaction and sense of fulfilment that people derive from their work.

"To continue to ensure social mobility going forward, these areas of vulnerabilities will need to be addressed," said the report.

Across generations and races, one thing that Singaporean workers agree on is the importance of including people with mental health conditions or disabilities at the workplace.

Awareness has been growing that these workers can be productive given support, and having them boosts the image of an inclusive workplace, which helps raise employers' attractiveness to talent, said Prof Yu.

Calling it a personal hope, Dr Chew said he hopes that this survey shows where government intervention and resources can reduce creeping social inequalities.

"It is heartening to see that now there is the political will to value vocational work – the hands-on and heart work. When there is political will, society can move forward together," he said.

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Blue-collar workers may have internalised society's lower valuation of their work: Expert

Tay Hong Yi

A survey by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) has found that blue-collar and semi-professional workers are less likely to believe they have meaningful careers and make a positive difference in the world.

Only about half of clerical, sales and service workers, as well as production and transport operators, cleaners and labourers, believe this, compared with six in 10 professionals, managers, executives and technicians (PMETs).

Moreover, the percentage of workers in the first two groups who said it was not at all true or only slightly true that they have meaningful careers is double that of PMETs in the poll of over 1,000

working Singaporeans and permanent residents.

This suggests that blue-collar workers are less valued by society, and they have internalised this lower valuation in how they see their own careers, said organisational psychologist Brandon Koh, who was not involved in the study.

The study was conducted in October and released on Monday, on the last day of IPS' Singapore Perspectives 2023 conference.

It was led by IPS senior research fellows Laurel Teo and Chew Han Ei.

"Without targeted forms of recognition, people may turn to their comparative salaries to appraise their value," said Dr Koh, a Singapore University of Social Sciences lecturer. "It can be therefore important to highlight what voca-

tional workers do, how they do it differently, and the positive impact it contributes to society."

"This is even more important for preventive and safety roles, where a job well done ensures its invisibility to the people it benefits," he added, citing railway engineers as an example.

Dr Chew from IPS said the findings may indicate Singapore society does not sufficiently value hands-on and care work, echoing a point Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong made in an October 2022 speech.

"And sometimes it reflects in the opinions of workers in these professions – (that) because their work is not valued by society as much, it may seem like their careers are not as meaningful," said Dr Chew.

Singapore Management University sociologist Paulin Straughan said that societies tend to valorise professional work as they progress, but the Covid-19 pandemic has fleshed out how essential hands-on and care work is.

"We need to re-toggle (perceptions), because how can it be that your essential core is indispensable during a pandemic, and yet, in terms of remuneration, we do not demonstrate that," said Professor Straughan. She added that an increased emphasis on advocacy, sustainability and mental health, particularly among youth, is cause for optimism that the gap would narrow in the next few years.

PMETs, who are usually mid-level executives directly involved in daily business operations, business strategy and planning, may find

their jobs more meaningful due to a greater sense of involvement and execution, said Ms Betul Genc, Singapore country manager at recruitment firm Adecco. The firm handles recruitment of both rank-and-file workers and PMETs.

"Blue-collar roles tend to require more manual work, and some may be on a part-time or contract work-basis, where they are not as involved in business strategy," said Ms Genc.

This underscores the challenge of communicating to these workers a sense of meaning and potential to make a positive difference, to forge a sense of belonging in the organisation.

But she added: "In 2023, there is still high demand for blue-collar workers within sectors such as e-commerce and retail, where we have observed that students and retirees are open to such roles due to work flexibility, opportunity to socialise and pick up some soft skills such as teamwork and communication."

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