



The importance of local workers in essential service sectors requires a transformation of jobs that today are less popular among Singaporeans, says the writer. Pay, work conditions, job image and recognition are all needed to make these jobs more attractive. The jobs of the future must seek to maximise human potential, particularly given Singapore's workforce constraints. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

The sticky manpower problem in a super-aged Singapore

Meeting workforce needs in a super-aged society requires making every job attractive and maximising every worker's potential.



Terence Ho

National Day Rally 2023 reminded us, once again, that Singapore is fast becoming a super-aged society. While Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's speech focused on various aspects of successful ageing, including retirement adequacy, active ageing and senior-friendly infrastructure, there is one dimension that looms large over Singapore's future: The impact of ageing on our workforce and economy.

With an ageing workforce, fertility far below replacement rate and limits to immigration, it will not be long before Singapore's

workforce size plateaus. Ageing will also create additional manpower needs in healthcare and aged care services. This could lead to manpower shortfalls in key sectors as workers retire and healthcare needs rise.

On the other hand, the emergence of new technology such as generative artificial intelligence (AI) is expected to put many existing job roles at risk. This could help Singapore produce more, even with fewer people.

Alas, the two trends are unlikely to generate perfectly offsetting impacts, because the jobs created by an ageing population may be quite different from the jobs displaced by AI. The transition to a new equilibrium will not be neat or seamless: Labour market imbalances in the interim could see elevated unemployment

accompanied by high job vacancies.

LIMITS TO IMMIGRATION AND AUTOMATION

Labour shortfalls may be plugged by increasing the inflow of foreign workers, deploying automation and attracting more local workers. Earlier in 2023, Singapore announced that it would be stepping up recruitment of foreign nurses, while workers from "non-traditional" source countries are now allowed to take up jobs such as those of food-processing workers, housekeepers and porters.

Importing workers is a strategy several countries with ageing demographics are turning to. Japan, whose population has been declining since 2008, has seen its foreign workers more than double

in number over the past decade, although they still comprise a mere 2.6 per cent of Japan's workforce. South Korea, too, is turning to foreign workers to help offset its population decline.

However, reliance on foreigners should not be the main or only strategy. The Covid-19 pandemic has underscored the risks of high foreign-worker dependence when borders close or travel is disrupted.

Besides, it cannot be assumed that there will always be a ready supply of foreign manpower as job opportunities in other countries expand and these countries themselves undergo demographic transitions. In Singapore, there are limits to overall immigration, given our land and population constraints and the need for a core of local workers in essential jobs and sectors.

Automation and AI can help boost productivity, but are unlikely to be able to significantly reduce manpower needs in service industries like healthcare and hospitality.

Robots have been deployed for a diversity of tasks beyond manufacturing, such as mowing grass, surveying construction sites and brewing coffee. However, jobs requiring manual dexterity or empathy, such as nursing, housekeeping, counselling and early childhood education, cannot be readily devolved to robots.

MAKING EVERY JOB A GOOD JOB

The importance of local workers in essential service sectors requires a transformation of jobs that today are less popular among Singaporeans. Pay, work conditions, job image and recognition are all needed to make these jobs more attractive.

The Progressive Wage Model helps to lift wages and provide career pathways in sectors and occupations with significant numbers of lower-income workers. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Manpower's Workcare Grant supports efforts to improve workplaces, such as providing rest areas for workers.

The jobs of the future must seek to maximise human potential, particularly given Singapore's workforce constraints. It is not just essential service jobs that need transformation, but every job.

Such jobs must combine cognition, skills and empathy – broadly speaking, "head", "hand" and "heart" competencies.

Head competencies require a job holder to go beyond knowledge, to assume a wider appreciation of the purpose and context of the job, which enables enterprise innovation and adaptation.

Hand competencies refer to the skills needed to work with machines or software so as to complement technology.

Heart competencies are empathy and interpersonal skills adding a human touch, differentiating people from automation.

Jobs that combine these three sets of competencies will not only be less prone to obsolescence but also be more fulfilling and attractive than jobs that are one-dimensional.

For instance, a cleaning professional employing knowledge, skills and technology can raise cleaning standards and productivity while brightening up someone's day with a smile or a word. Similarly, an accounting clerk could be entrusted with wider responsibilities, helping the company to identify trends, recommend process improvements and build client trust.

WORK FLEXIBILITY AND INCLUSIVENESS

Maximising workforce potential also entails enabling people to extend their employment or return to the workforce.

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Housewives, older workers can help fill gap

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Older workers can be retained by making workplaces more inclusive and designing jobs that allow seniors to contribute at a pace and intensity they are comfortable with. While some older workers wish to continue shouldering a full workload, others may prefer to work part-time or take on different roles, such as mentoring younger colleagues.

The potential of people with disabilities can be maximised by designing inclusive workplaces accessible to those with physical disabilities, or customising equipment, workflow or job assignments for workers with sensory impairment, autism or intellectual disabilities.

Likewise, housewives and those with caregiving responsibilities can be enticed back into the workforce with flexible work arrangements that allow them to balance work and family commitments.

Inclusiveness depends not just on formal rules but, more importantly, how work policies are implemented. Understanding bosses and well-trained human resources professionals can make all the difference.

EQUIPPING WORKERS TO FULFIL THEIR ASPIRATIONS

Finally, it is necessary to equip workers with the skills and adaptability to take up good jobs and thrive in their careers.

As skill demands continually evolve, workers will need strong foundational skills and a growth mindset to be able to acquire new skills throughout their working lives. More than ever, education should be aimed at cultivating a love for learning, curiosity, teamwork, resilience and a tolerance for ambiguity.

It is also critical to strengthen education and career guidance, as well as career counselling, to help individuals chart their career paths amid a rapidly changing job market.

The jobs of the future should aim to maximise the potential of every worker as the labour-force profile changes and manpower becomes increasingly scarce. At the same time, workers must be equipped with future-ready skills to take up these jobs and find self-actualisation through their work and contributions.

Workers who find meaning in what they do, beyond material rewards, will be more productive and innovative. They will also be happier and more fulfilled, with spillover benefits for families and society at large.

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