

Employers need to keep up with radically changing expectations of work

Some young Singaporeans want flexibility, and amid the talent crunch, it's time for new strategies.

Sriram Iyer

Social media platforms, especially Instagram and TikTok, are abuzz with the trend of young individuals around the world leaving their jobs to pursue "funemployment" – a playful take on voluntary unemployment.

In the past, they may have felt disheartened or even embarrassed about lacking a steady full-time role and a consistent income. However, some now perceive unemployment as an opportunity to relish their leisure time. They sustain themselves financially through gig assignments or social media endeavours.

While most videos with the hashtag #unemploymentlife seem to originate from the West, the trend is making waves in Singapore, highlighted in *The Straits Times* feature on Oct 8, 2023, "A new generation of Singaporeans says unemployment can be fun".

The rise of trends like "funemployment" and gig work signals a radical transformation in the employment landscape when it comes to younger workers.

It puts paid to traditional notions of work – and Singapore employers and human resources (HR) teams need to adjust their expectations to this new normal.

REASONS FOR THE CHANGE IN MINDSET

This shift arises from the younger generation's perspectives on work-life balance or their changing definition of success. Some pursue multiple gigs, in line with a desire to pursue several passions simultaneously. Doing your own thing seems to be a trend – between 2010 and 2021, the number of self-employed people here increased by 7.9 per cent.

This multiple-gig approach contrasts with parents from the previous generation who often urged their children to grab the first full-time opportunity that arose and viewed "joblessness" as a societal stigma.

The change in attitude is seen on social media platforms such as LinkedIn, where young people openly share their retrenchment experiences. The older generation would probably have kept such matters to themselves.

Some gravitate towards gig work



The rise of trends like "funemployment" and gig work signals a radical transformation in the employment landscape when it comes to younger workers. HR teams need to adapt their traditional practices and mindsets to adjust to this new normal, the writer says. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

even when full-time employment is readily available. It used to be that people would seek part-time or casual roles alongside full-time jobs.

Adding to the shift, the digital era has brought numerous remote work opportunities.

Take Ileana Diez, the 32-year-old daughter of Dr Fermin Diez, former deputy chief executive of the National Council of Social Service. Dr Diez says: "Ileana has chosen not to pursue a full-time job, opting instead to freelance permanently."

His daughter specialises in branding for artists, with projects such as Rihanna's line of perfumes, Jay-Z's champagne and Mariah Carey's Black Irish liquor. "She's firm about not working for anyone who requires her presence in an office," Dr Diez says. "She doesn't have a fixed residence – opting for Airbnb in locations that match her lifestyle and the ever-changing schedule of her employers. In the past 18 months, she has lived in Paris, Miami, New York, Los Angeles, Lisbon, Mexico City, Tokyo, Singapore – and after that, I've lost track!"

Of course, not all members of Generation Z – born between 1997 and 2012 – are swayed by the allure of gig work or the concept of "funemployment". In fact, the

majority pursue stable, well-compensated employment, complete with job security and benefits. A 2021 global study by ADP Research Institute found that 54 per cent of Gen Z workers would choose to work in full-time traditional employment over part-time or contract roles. But the shifting attitudes towards work are apparent.

THE SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCE

Social media is another reason why trends like "funemployment" resonate with Singapore's Gen Z. Platforms like TikTok and Instagram, predominantly populated by Gen Z users, play a pivotal role in shaping these perceptions.

Singapore's compact population and tightly woven communities tend to make such trends more pronounced – amplified by prominent social media influencers promoting funemployment. No wonder, as the attention and followers they get from talking about it attracts income from advertisers.

In the first six months of 2023, influencers on TikTok in Singapore with a follower count of 5,000 to 10,000 had an engagement rate of 45.5 per cent, according to data gathered

Statista. Influencers with up to 15,000 followers had an engagement rate of 41.49 per cent. Usually, a rate of between 4 per cent and 18 per cent is regarded as commendable by industry experts. The notably elevated engagement rates of influencers in Singapore could be a key factor behind trends rapidly going viral here.

Then there's the money. In Singapore, micro-influencers with 10,000 to 100,000 followers earn \$50 to \$500 a post, macro-influencers with 100,000 to one million followers make \$500 to \$10,000 a post, while mega-influencers with more than a million followers can charge \$30,000 or more for a single post. This financial buffer allows these fortunate few to venture into unconventional career choices or even take extended breaks from work.

TALENT GAP CHALLENGE FOR EMPLOYERS

For a glimpse into the rise of gig work, consider the job listings on government job portal MyCareersFuture. Out of 82,000 listed positions, more than 19,000 are categorised as temporary, freelance, part-time, contract or flexi-work jobs.

Indeed, despite the ripple effect of the global economic slowdown and tech layoffs, Singapore stands distinct with its tight job landscape. Workers pick and choose – and perhaps opt for a flexible life-work balance. There were nearly two job openings for every unemployed individual, show Ministry of Manpower figures for the April to June quarter of 2023.

Amid this, many companies are moving away from full-timers to hiring part-timers or contractors to keep costs down. Such jobs can be financially rewarding. But it is important that job seekers do due diligence on their clients, such as clarifying aspects of payment and making sure they are known for fair practices.

For professionals in fields such as software development, cyber security, data engineering, visualisation and graphic and Web design, remote or gig opportunities abound. Those specialising in search engine marketing, social media management, marketing analytics and market research are also in high demand.

HOW TO RETAIN THIS TALENT

Small and medium-sized enterprises, which traditionally

face challenges in attracting and retaining young talent, might find managing these new expectations daunting.

Accepting and integrating gig workers successfully requires HR teams to adapt their traditional practices and mindsets to the changing employment landscape.

"The shift towards gig work amongst younger generations brings both opportunities and challenges," says Ms Karina Kuok, head of professional practices and community at the Institute for Human Resource Professionals. "HR professionals need to look into creating policies and practices that can best support and balance the evolving needs and expectations of this mix of full-time employees and gig workers."

This involves complexities in employment-related regulations and managing employee engagement and long-term career planning. It also means refining workplace protocols and bolstering information technology security and data privacy to ensure an inclusive environment for all workers, regular or freelance.

Additionally, companies need to reimagine their employer value proposition and even revamp HR policies to be Gen Z-friendly.

This might involve adopting a skills-centric hiring approach, moving away from the conventional emphasis on education and work history.

Evaluations should focus on the proficiency candidates offer and their capacity for upskilling.

HR teams and hiring managers have to grasp that a career gap in terms of full-time work need not be a sign of inconsistency or unreliability. It might indicate periods of intensive project or gig work, skill enhancement or personal development. Employers also need to value diverse short-term roles across different industries or domains, as a person with such experience can bring in adaptable skills and diverse perspectives.

Hiring such people may involve more flexible work conditions, like allowing remote work, flexible hours and sabbaticals. New career paths that encourage the internal mobility of talent are also essential, such as customised programmes and professional development courses.

It may also mean that enterprises need to embrace more gig-like, project-based roles within the organisation to meet the needs of employees looking for diverse short-term roles.

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