

Budget 2024

Some vulnerable workers need more help to act on the latest upskilling measures



The new SkillsFuture measures may not effectively reach those in lower socioeconomic status groups, who may lack access to knowledge about market developments, how to interpret such trends and the associated long-term impact on their careers and lives. A more targeted approach for such workers could help maximise success, says the writer. LIANHE ZAOBAO FILE PHOTO

Lack of awareness and misperceptions among some workers with lower socioeconomic status could hold them back from accessing the support available.

Laurel Teo

The latest round of SkillsFuture measures announced in Budget 2024 focuses on mid-career workers – those aged 40 and above – as this is a group that is widely perceived to be more vulnerable to labour market disruptions for several reasons. First, their knowledge and skills

are more likely to be outdated. Second, their family care and financial burdens are also likely to be heavier, thwarting many of them from pursuing what Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong terms “a proper skills reboot”. Among this vulnerable group, some are significantly more at risk than others, and may require specific additional support to ensure they do not miss out on the SkillsFuture enhancements.

BARRIER ONE: LACK OF AWARENESS AND KNOWLEDGE AMONG LOWER SES WORKERS

A recent study by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) found that Singapore workers with lower socioeconomic status (SES) are far less likely than higher SES workers to be aware of impending changes in the workplace and the need to reskill. About one in four (26 per cent)

of Singapore’s labour force in 2023 has only secondary or below-secondary education, according to statistics from the Manpower Ministry. The main divide in awareness and knowledge is between this less educated group and those with higher educational qualifications. In the IPS study, which surveyed 1,010 economically active adults representative of Singapore’s workforce, only about half of this

less educated group believed that how work is done in their jobs will change significantly in the next five to 10 years. Additionally, fewer than half of those with the least education (below secondary) feel they will need to reskill themselves to adapt to workplace changes. In contrast, at least eight in 10 diploma and degree holders were acutely aware that they need to reskill themselves. These differences between groups are statistically significant.

What this means is that the new SkillsFuture measures may not effectively reach those in lower SES groups, who may lack access to knowledge about market developments, how to interpret such trends and the associated long-term impact on their careers and lives. Research suggests that their social networks are usually less diverse compared with those of higher SES workers, so they are less able to rely on “tip-offs” or advice from better-informed friends and relatives.

Even if lower SES workers are aware of the recent Budget announcements and the need to upgrade their skills, they may still be hampered by the lack of knowledge about where and how to apply for training programmes, how to evaluate which courses to choose, and how to qualify for these programmes.

Anecdotal experience shared at various feedback sessions and public group discussions on employment-related issues suggests that many from this group are often stumped by questions such as which skills courses would be suitable for them and which would have better employment outcomes. A number of them may even have been deterred from applying because of the impression that these courses require formal qualifications – for example, O-level passes – which they lack.

However, a quick check online – if you know where to look – shows that National ITE Certificate (Nitec) courses for adult learners typically allow applicants to use Workplace Literacy and Numeracy (WPLN) assessment results in lieu of O-level or N-level passes.

Interested learners can sign up for WPLN training run by appointed training providers before registering for WPLN assessments, which test individuals in listening, reading, speaking, writing, grammar and vocabulary skills in the English language, as well as numeracy. These assessments cost \$4 in total (excluding goods and services tax)

for Singapore citizens aged 40 and above.

So, while lower SES workers may need to take an additional step or two before they can enrol in reskilling or upskilling courses, the entry barriers may not be as prohibitively high as what some of them assume to be.

BARRIER TWO: AWARENESS-ACTION GAPS

Awareness or knowledge alone is rarely enough to motivate people to act. Consider the example of smoking. Most smokers know that smoking is bad for their health, yet many are not seriously inclined to quit smoking. Among those who intend to do so, even fewer eventually take action to kick the habit.

The case is similar when it comes to continuous learning and refreshing skills. The IPS study mentioned earlier found that a significant gap exists between awareness and action across SES levels – from the least educated to diploma and degree holders. In general, over seven in 10 survey participants agree there is a need to reskill, but only slightly over half admit they are actively or moderately seeking opportunities for continuous learning.

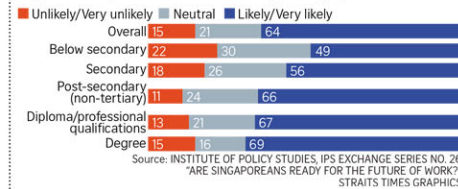
What accounts for this gap? And what can be done to narrow the gap? Research suggests that different factors may be at work for lower SES versus higher SES workers.

One of the most influential social psychologists, Professor Icek Ajzen, has done significant work on what determines the progress from awareness to intention, and eventually to action. There are three main sets of factors or determinants.

First, people need to have positive attitudes about the activity or action involved. In the case of reskilling, individuals need to be convinced that there is significant benefit in doing so. Lower SES workers who are less informed may be deterred by confusion over the process of getting reskilled and misperceptions. This could be aggravated by doubts over their chances of securing a good paying job even after completing training. So much so that they may start to wonder if it is worth going through all the trouble to reskill.

Second, accessibility and control factors such as the availability or lack of time, money, or other resources, as well as cooperation from relevant parties – for instance, employers’ permission to

How work is done in my current role will change significantly in the next 5 to 10 years (%)



Are Singaporeans ready for the future of work?

	AWARENESS*		ACTION**		
	Need to reskill to adapt to changes in work/career	Seeking training outside current organisation	Remaining current on trends in my field	Have diversified job-related skills	Seeking opportunities for continuous learning
Overall	73%	43%	53%	46%	55%
Below secondary	45%	24%	34%	33%	38%
Secondary	61%	34%	39%	36%	44%
Post-secondary (non-tertiary)	72%	39%	50%	44%	55%
Diploma/professional qualifications	80%	49%	58%	50%	62%
Degree	82%	50%	61%	52%	61%

NOTE: * % who indicated “Likely” or “Very likely”
** % who indicated “Moderately” or “To a great extent”
Source: INSTITUTE OF POLICY STUDIES, IPS EXCHANGE SERIES NO. 26
“ARE SINGAPOREANS READY FOR THE FUTURE OF WORK?”
STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

take time off or leave work early for training – need to facilitate rather than impede the intended action, which would be reskilling. In this regard, the recent measures announced in Budget 2024, such as SkillsFuture Credit top-ups, subsidies for full-time course fees, and training allowances for full-time courses, will very likely reduce such accessibility and control issues.

However, there is an additional control factor – self-efficacy or people’s beliefs in their ability to succeed in an activity – which may present a greater challenge for lower SES workers. The IPS study found that only about one in three professionals, managers, executives, and technicians (PMETs) surveyed are worried about coping with workplace changes or working in a different job. In contrast, such concerns are harboured by almost half of the clerical, sales, and services workers, as well as production and transport operators, cleaners and labourers, who tend to earn less and have lower qualifications than PMETs.

Self-efficacy is critical because how well people expect to perform affects whether they will embark on that activity, how much effort they will spend on it, and how long they will persist in doing so, especially when they encounter adversities.

In other words, if people lack confidence in their ability to do well in a training course or pass the requisite assessments, they

may drop out midway or may not even sign up in the first place.

Third, social environment and norms matter. Examples include approval or support from family, friends, and supervisors to engage in a certain activity, and even perceived social pressures (or lack thereof) to do so.

Sociological research has documented how people who grow up in lower SES backgrounds are more heavily influenced by group choices and considerations. They prefer making choices similar to those made by family members and friends, and are less comfortable about standing out or doing something different that has not been attempted by those around them.

In contrast, people who grow up in higher SES families tend to make choices aligned with their individual interests.

This implies that lower SES workers could be more inclined to

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take up reskilling programmes if co-workers, friends and family around them do so as well.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS: VARIEGATED APPROACH NEEDED FOR DIFFERENT GROUPS

Policy-makers may wish to consider focusing more effort on plugging the information gap for lower SES workers and offering them more guidance as well as handholding about career possibilities and choices.

Lower SES workers could also benefit from interventions to improve self-efficacy, and campaigns that are more group- or community-based.

For instance, encouraging co-workers or peers to sign up for training together and structuring programmes that involve group participation.

There are existing efforts by the Government – through various career centres, and career conversion and coaching initiatives – to help Singapore workers in their career journey. These can be complemented by a more targeted approach that tailors support for different groups – in particular lower SES workers – for the SkillsFuture initiatives to maximise success.

Dr Laurel Teo, a senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, National University of Singapore, is the co-author of the IPS study “Are Singaporeans Ready For The Future Of Work?”