

The era of job dating? It's all about matching employers and talent



As a city-state with only one urban centre, Singapore's workforce depends on businesses' faith in the ingenuity of its people, says the writer. An over-reliance on artificial intelligence not only crimps companies' hiring needs, but also leaves successive generations of workers undertrained for leadership positions, setting in motion a vicious circle. ST PHOTO: KELVIN CHNG

The success of Singapore's employment strategy hinges on how quickly we connect, adapt and seize opportunities.

Lin Weiqiang

Few anxieties loom larger in Singapore today than jobs.

In his National Day Rally speech, Prime Minister Lawrence Wong acknowledged this unease, citing a global economy riven by tariffs and a technological wave reshaping careers.

Artificial intelligence (AI) in particular has unsettled young workers, with preliminary data showing graduates struggling to secure jobs after completing tertiary education.

Unlike earlier waves of automation, AI is no longer limited to repetitive tasks. It writes reports, recognises faces, and even makes investment decisions – capabilities that cut across industries once thought safe from disruption.

As a city-state with only one urban centre, our workforce depends on businesses' faith in the ingenuity of its people. An over-reliance on AI not only crimps companies' hiring needs, but also leaves successive generations of workers undertrained for leadership positions, setting in motion a vicious circle.

Against this backdrop, three initiatives announced to shore up employment take on sharper relevance: a new government-funded traineeship programme targeted at young job seekers; a new job-matching initiative administered by the five local Community Development Councils (CDCs); and an enhanced SkillsFuture Level-Up programme.

At a time when many feel disillusioned by endless job searches and unanswered applications, these initiatives offer a way forward. They create avenues for employers and job seekers to connect more effectively, ensuring talent is matched with opportunity where it is needed most.

NOT JUST A STOPGAP

On the government-funded traineeship programme, PM Wong had mentioned in his speech that this was in fact not new in Singapore, but had been trialled during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Yet, this time, the new traineeship programme should not be regarded as merely a stopgap measure to tide over a difficult time of low economic

activity like in 2020.

Instead, it should be seen as a tool for fresh graduates to buy time and gain experience, and, more importantly, acquire knowledge to offer added value to the companies under which they are training.

More tech-savvy than any other generation, today's young bring with them a wealth of knowledge with regard to technology, as evidenced in the way they use AI to power through their own everyday needs such as travel planning, shopping and content creation.

Several companies – from Huawei to Shopee – have already been running AI Challenges with our tertiary students for years, demonstrating that companies do value young people's ideas and are eager to tap them to innovate.

As the government creates opportunities for such synergies through the traineeship programme, it becomes important that recipients of the scheme would see these roles as not just an internship or apprenticeship, but an avenue for them to get to know a business, to be inquisitive about how things work, and to initiate unique solutions for their host firms.

Companies that take on the young trainees must resist the temptation to treat the scheme as a source of cheap labour. The real payoff comes when firms give trainees meaningful exposure by involving them in projects that matter. Doing so not only

sharpens the skills of young entrants but also injects fresh perspectives into the company itself.

The traineeship programme simultaneously provides an incentive for industry players to invest in their own futures, not just in terms of headhunting for viable candidates, but also keeping themselves abreast with new ideas and trends.

This would allow the relationship between company

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and trainee to extend beyond the programme, and create longer-term gains. It is as much about cultivating employers as it is about preparing graduates. When firms commit to nurturing fresh talent, they reinforce a culture of renewal that benefits the wider economy.

But the challenge is not confined to graduates and young employees. Mid-career professionals and older workers are seeing their roles disrupted by technological and economic shifts. The employment strategy must therefore create opportunities across age groups.

GOING LOCAL

The new job-matching scheme that will be launched at the town level by the five CDCs signals a strategy intent on finding opportunities at every level and making them accessible.

It seeks to promote job opportunities in the heartland, while localising job searches to within one's neighbourhood.

The rationale of engaging the CDCs is that their local networks would enable them to expedite matches between merchants, small and medium-sized enterprises and community partners, and resident job seekers more efficiently.

The benefits extend in both directions. Residents of all age groups gain access to jobs that might otherwise pass under the radar, while local businesses can

plug into a larger pool of talent, including tech-savvy graduates.

Such exposure through the scheme could potentially even help upskill and upscale these establishments – many of which are run by the Merdeka Generation, and may still rely on analogue ways of doing business before the introduction of CDC vouchers.

Indeed, the right matching between worker and SME could accelerate the digital transformation of the heartland economy. While some establishments (for example, newer cafes) have already begun this process, many others still need a fresh infusion of ideas to digitalise their accounts, inventories and payment systems, as well as to curate an online presence.

This represents a chance to make small businesses more competitive, resilient, and connected to the wider market.

PREPARING EARLY

The third initiative that was announced involves enhancing the SkillsFuture Level-Up programme. This mainly benefits mid-career workers by empowering them to acquire new skills through part-time study and to keep pace with market changes, while on the job.

A similar model of continuous learning can take inspiration from this for younger workers too. This could instil the habit of lifelong skill-building from the start of their careers. Encouraging both younger and mid-career employees to engage in ongoing learning creates a workforce that is agile, future-ready, and capable of bridging generational knowledge gaps within organisations.

PM Wong had also mentioned that he envisioned more job link-ups within institutes of higher learning.

Bringing employers into closer contact with students even before they graduate ensures a constant line of communication between academia and industry. This would give students an opportunity to translate their disciplinary knowledge into real-world concerns.

Our students should not view these engagement sessions as co-curricular activities or even simply job fairs. Rather, they present invaluable platforms for students to network, find internship openings or even proposition future roles with prospective employers.

For these strategies to work, they require Singaporeans to show initiative and grit, making use of the opportunities afforded to them to empower themselves and to enrich the enterprises that they work for.

Graduates must seize new opportunities to gain experience and contribute ideas, mid-career professionals must embrace continuous learning to stay relevant, and SMEs must innovate while staying rooted in their communities.

The stage is being set to open more doors for graduates amid a turbulent jobs market. Much will depend on whether Singaporeans treat these initiatives not just as lifelines, but as launchpads.

Just like the rest of his speech, PM Wong's jobs strategy is in fact a rallying cry for Singaporeans to rise to the AI challenge.

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