

What the Singapore Salary Guide doesn't tell you about careers

High-paying jobs get attention, but careers are shaped as much by mentorship, growth and purpose as by the monthly pay cheque.

Sriram Iyer

The Singapore Salary Guide 2025, published by *The Straits Times*, has quickly become a trending topic among mid-career professionals, fresh graduates and job seekers in the Republic. This comprehensive guide enables individuals to benchmark their salaries against peer averages by inputting factors such as age, current pay and job role. But as the numbers circulate, a deeper question emerges: Should a career be defined by a single figure, or is it time to look beyond the payslip?

SALARY GUIDES CAN BE HELPFUL BUT HAVE LIMITATIONS

Among the guide's highlights are the highest-paying roles, which naturally attract attention. Flying instructors (\$20,000), foreign

exchange brokers (\$19,750) and in-house legal counsel (\$17,972) top the list, followed by commodities traders, senior technology leaders and airline pilots. These examples underscore how specialised skills and leadership roles command premium pay. The buzz surrounding this report highlights its distinction from other traditional and more generic salary guides. The Singapore Salary Guide 2025 uses more individual-specific factors to offer comparisons against a relevant peer group – by age, industry and gender. This nuanced approach enhances the appeal and usefulness of the guide, providing professionals with sharper insights into how their pay aligns with that of their peers. The public interest also reflects two broader forces shaping the workforce. First, pay transparency: Professionals

increasingly want to know if they are being compensated fairly compared with peers, especially amid rising living costs. They expect openness and fairness in how salaries are determined. Second, career planning: In a competitive job market, data-driven guides help workers negotiate salaries with confidence and decide their next steps. This reflects a broader shift in Singapore's workforce, where employees will frequently reassess their market value. While salary guides can be helpful, they have limitations. Built on averages, they can mask vast variations across sectors and company sizes, and even within similar job titles. A commodities trader in a small firm may earn far less than one in a multinational, even if both appear under the same title. The Singapore Salary Guide 2025 also clarifies that the study covers a representative sample of 407,900 full-time resident employees from private sector firms with at least 25 employees, excluding those in the public sector, meaning large segments of the workforce are left out.

Treating these benchmarks as fixed price tags can hence mislead both workers and employers. **DON'T CHOOSE A JOB BECAUSE OF THE PAY CHEQUE** For graduates, the risks of misinterpretation are sharper. A salary table can feel like the most important yardstick when choosing a first job. But a career is rarely just about the monthly pay cheque. Many professionals reach the top echelons of the corporate ladder when they find roles that provide them with good mentors, opportunities to learn new skills, or experiences that align with their long-term goals. Sometimes, a job with slightly lower pay but more opportunities in an emerging area may help someone move ahead faster than one with higher starting pay but limited growth. As human resources veteran Fermin Diez notes, a fixation on salary guides can also distort expectations. "Graduating students often measure themselves by how 'cool' the company is, and how big the

salary. The guidelines exacerbate this by setting a bar that is meant to be an average but ends up being seen as a minimum," he tells me. One unhealthy dynamic can arise, he warns: Salary compression, where fresh hires earn more than those who joined

a year earlier, fuelling dissatisfaction and prompting firms to turn to contract roles instead of permanent hires. While headline-grabbing salary figures capture attention, professionals should also consider the broader package of non-cash benefits that significantly

improve their quality of life – including flexible work, annual leave and wellness programmes. After all, two in five employees in Singapore say they value a strong work-life balance along with opportunities for growth and development, according to a 2025 survey by Randstad.

EMPLOYERS SHOULDN'T RELY ON SALARY GUIDES TO CALIBRATE PAY

Employers, too, rely on salary guides to set pay bands, review annual increments and address equity concerns. But an over-reliance can backfire.

Averages are no substitute for assessing internal realities such as culture fit, niche skills or long-term potential. Reliable benchmarks promote pay transparency, which in turn builds trust and accountability, Mr Mayank Parekh, former chief executive of the Institute for



Emerging trends such as artificial intelligence and remote work are already reshaping what skills are valued and how pay is benchmarked, says the writer. ST FILE PHOTO

Human Resource Professionals, tells me. But companies that communicate their full compensation philosophy – including training, growth and culture – can turn this into a competitive advantage in the war for talent, he adds. Globally, platforms like Glassdoor and PayScale highlight similar debates: Transparency brings benefits, but misinterpretation carries risks. Salary guides are best seen as mirrors, not maps. They reflect where you stand, but they cannot chart your journey.

ALWAYS UPDATE YOUR EXPECTATIONS

Emerging trends such as artificial intelligence and remote work are already reshaping what skills are valued and how pay is benchmarked. The World Economic Forum projects that nearly half of all core workplace skills will change by 2027, as technological advances reshape job roles and the demand for adaptability and lifelong learning accelerates. Both employers and employees will have to update their understanding of what makes for a good job. Salary guides, similarly, will need to evolve, too, capturing new realities of hybrid work, gig economy roles and shifting expectations of value. Ultimately, the most rewarding careers are built not by chasing salary tables, but by aligning choices with values, growth and opportunity.

• Sriram Iyer is an adjunct senior lecturer of management and organisation at the National University of Singapore.