NUS National University of Singapore

Source: *The Straits Times*, pB2
Date: 9 December 2025

AI changed your job description, but performance reviews have not caught up

The metrics-based approach is obsolete. What matters now is identifying capabilities to cultivate, as AI handles more measurable tasks.

Ben Chester Cheong

When companies assess workers on how many documents they process, how quickly they respond, or how consistently they perform, they are applying criteria that AI will surpass. The system trains people to be more like AI precisely when their value should lie in being less like AI, the writer says. PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

As Singapore workers enter year-end performance review season, they face an uncomfortable truth: the system evaluating them was designed for a pre-AI world.

It measures what was once scarce – individual productivity, technical output and task completion – while systematically undervaluing what is becoming critical.

Here is the paradox: if your performance review scores you highly on output volume, response speed, error rates and task completion, you have proven you are good at exactly what artificial intelligence does better. You have optimised for obsolescence.

THE WAVE OF RETRENCHMENTS

The 2025 retrenchment wave tells the story – one that holds lessons for Singapore on AI, automation and the evolving nature of work.

Microsoft, TikTok, Meta, Agoda, Ninja Van – all these companies have conducted layoffs in 2025, citing "business reorganisation or restructuring". Translation: companies are figuring out what AI can do and adjusting headcount accordingly.

Singapore's numbers tell a similar story, albeit more quietly. While retrenchments stabilised at 3,500 in the third quarter of 2025 and overall employment grew by 24,800 in that period, "business reorganisation" remains the dominant reason for layoffs – a euphemism for AI-driven workforce recalibration.

Knowledge workers from lawyers to management consultants face what is euphemistically called "job redesign" – being paid less to do less because generative AI (Gen AI) handles the measurable tasks.

And it's not just knowledge workers. Leaked internal documents at Amazon – the United States' second-biggest employer – have revealed plans to replace up to 600,000 of its domestic workers with robots by 2027. The aim is to automate up to 75 per cent of Amazon's warehouse and logistics network, which could be one of the largest labour transformations in US corporate history. It's a sign of what may come.

In Singapore, every performance review season, organisations make implicit choices and send signals about what they value. In 2025, those choices carry unusual weight. We should be collectively deciding what makes human workers valuable, what contributions merit recognition, and what capabilities we should cultivate as AI handles more measurable tasks.

WHAT WE'VE BEEN MEASURING

Until now, the performance review has served as a formal tool to assess work performance, provide feedback, and plan for professional growth – as well as determine whether an employee deserves a promotion or that all-important pay rise. It's also been the means of delivering tougher news when someone hasn't met their targets. Performance reviews apply to managers, support staff, and non-professional employees alike.

The process has modernised over time. Companies have shifted from annual appraisals to continuous feedback. AI-powered review summaries now supplement manager assessments.

Still, traditional performance systems track documents processed per week, response time to queries, tasks completed on schedule, error rates or productivity ratios. These made sense when distinguishing between high and low performers required measuring individual output. They were reasonable proxies for value when humans did all the work. But these are precisely the tasks AI excels in.

When companies assess workers on how many documents they process, how quickly they respond, or how consistently they perform, they are applying criteria that AI will universally surpass.

In teaching, AI can now draft explanations, generate examples and predict common misconceptions. What it cannot do is recognise when someone needs a concept explained differently because of their specific background, sense when someone is asking the wrong question and redirect them, or invest energy tailored to individual needs rather than optimised for average cases.

This pattern holds across sectors. The colleague who makes everyone else more productive but produces less individual output. The team member who spots problems before they escalate. The professional who invests time understanding contexts that enable better solutions later.

These contributions share characteristics: they are relationship-dependent and context-specific rather than scalable and standardised, requiring sustained attention to individual situations.

THE INCENTIVE TRAP

The trouble is, this dynamic creates perverse incentives. Rational workers respond to what gets measured and rewarded. When performance systems track quantifiable output while ignoring contextual judgment, employees allocate effort accordingly. The system trains people to be more like AI precisely when their value should lie in being less like AI.

A professional spending hours understanding a client's specific circumstances before recommending a solution produces the same measured output as someone applying a template. The investment in understanding context does not show up. And over time, smart workers focus only on what the system measures.

The competitive advantage now lies in what resists measurement – understanding contexts deeply enough to apply knowledge flexibly, investing effort tailored to specific situations, exercising judgment when standard approaches fail.

These capabilities are trainable and important, but they are undervalued because performance systems do not capture them. We risk missing the mark if we train people for technical credentials while performance systems continue rewarding measurable output.

We must begin to incorporate indicators on collaboration, innovation and judgment into performance reviews: how often colleagues seek someone's judgment on complex situations, how well they spot problems before they escalate and how effectively they tailor solutions to specific contexts.

What matters is adding value where standardisation fails, where judgment under uncertainty is required, and how workers perform when there is no clear procedure. This is where humans remain essential.

Our emphasis on continuous feedback and AI-enabled performance tools positions us well if we redirect these systems towards measuring what actually matters.

THIS YEAR'S REVIEW, NEXT YEAR'S STRATEGY

For workers facing reviews this season, reframe how you demonstrate value. Do not just report what you produced – AI will soon produce more. Document when your judgment prevented problems, when understanding context enabled better solutions, when investment in relationships created outcomes that standardised processes cannot deliver.

For companies conducting reviews and making retention decisions, particularly those who have made retrenchments, ask whether you are keeping the right people. Are you retaining those whose value fits neatly in performance scorecards, even if AI will soon exceed them? Or those whose value lies in fostering a culture of excellence?

Some organisations are already showing the way forward. Boston Consulting Group now includes AI competency as a core evaluation criterion – assessing not just what employees achieve, but how effectively they leverage AI tools, their problem-solving efficiency with AI, and their ability to collaborate alongside AI systems.

Technology company Juniper Networks redesigned its performance system to weight "job output" at just 25 per cent, with the remaining 75 per cent measuring learning agility, relationships, and alignment with mission – precisely the capabilities that matter in an AI age.

These are not isolated experiments. They demonstrate that performance systems can evolve to measure what actually creates value when AI handles routine tasks.

The question for Singapore organisations conducting reviews this season: will you be early adopters of these forward-looking practices – or will you wait until your competitors have already secured the workers who excel at what AI cannot do?

• Ben Chester Cheong is a law lecturer and MOE-Start scholar at the Singapore University of Social Sciences and a lawyer at RHTLaw Asia. He is also a visiting fellow at Reading Law School and associate academic fellow at NUS Asia-Pacific Centre for Environmental Law.