

The two competing ideologies on ageing

Ageing workers bring more experience, but potentially more health problems as well. Managing this tension in the workforce is critical.

Jeff Hwang Yi-Fu

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Modern culture holds two competing ideologies on ageing.

One sees ageing as a decline into decrepitude and irrelevance. The other considers ageing as entering a richer phase of personhood and identity, which brings with it greater liberty to pursue fulfilment.

Mr Thomas Cole, director of the McGovern Centre for Humanities and Ethics at Cornell University in the United States, was quoted as saying: "The culture's problem is that we split ageing into good and bad. We're unable to sustain images of growing older that handle the tension between spiritual growth, the good, and physical decline, the bad."

The same tension runs in the workplace safety and health (WSH) arena. The new wave of older workers wants to remain engaged and productive beyond the traditional retirement age, but they are also the ones among whom we see a higher prevalence of chronic

diseases than previous generations.

This tension can be overcome by cultivating a culture where people pursue high levels of well-being from their youth to their older years, and providing the environment for that to happen.

Singapore's new generation of older workers comprises the baby boomers, those born between 1947 and 1964, who are now aged between 55 and 72. By 2030, all our baby boomers will be over the age of 65. One in six Singapore residents will be above 65 years old; in 2005, it was one in 12.

This generation of older Singaporeans lives longer, is better educated and richer than previous ones. They expect to continue living independently and view old age as an opportunity to spend more time with family and pursue activities of interest.

Their top reasons for wishing to remain employed include receiving an income, staying mentally and physically active, and engaging in something meaningful. They do not associate ageing with checking out of living life, but see it as a phase in life that is full of potential for development and self-actualisation.

This is good news for Singapore and businesses. Singapore's resident workforce is ageing and shrinking. Close to one in four, or 23.8 per cent, of our workforce last year was aged 55 or older, a significant increase from 14.6 per cent in 2008.

In 2013, the Government

projected that by 2030, every person exiting the working age of 65 years old would be replaced by only 0.7 person entering working age, or 20 years old. Our old-age support ratio is projected to fall to 2.1 by 2030, which means a ratio of two working-age persons for every person aged 65 years and over; it was 4.8 last year.

An ageing workforce can slow economic growth and national productivity. Singapore's workforce is a key factor in attracting foreign companies to continue doing business here. Enabling older workers to remain in the workforce for as long as they desire is necessary to counter the potential adverse economic impact of an ageing society.

At the same time, older workers are reservoirs of accumulated skills, experience and tacit knowledge, which are invaluable assets to productivity and performance.

The more an organisation can transmit these assets to younger workers as part of its knowledge retention, the more edge it will gain over its competitors. Organisations with a multi-generational employee profile can benefit from mentorship to attract young talent. Inter-generational cross-pollination of ideas and perspectives can yield a dynamic and rich environment for innovative thinking. A company's ability to tap into the potential of workers advancing in age will prove to be a competitive advantage.

In Singapore, half of the top 10

causes of loss in healthy years due to disability are chronic illnesses – cancers, diabetes and diseases of the heart, lung and kidney. To help older workers enjoy more productive years, early detection and good management of chronic diseases are important.

While personal health is an individual responsibility, poor employee health compromises safety, productivity and bottom lines. Therefore, both employers and employees must play their part in managing health.

Companies like SBS Transit and Keppel Offshore & Marine have tapped the Total Workplace Safety and Health (Total WSH) initiative to proactively cultivate a culture of safety, health and well-being among their employees.

Both SBS and Keppel provide free health screenings and follow-up support for its staff. SBS also supports bus captains with chronic conditions like diabetes through modified work schedules. For example, assigning them to shorter feeder services allows them to have timely intake of their medication and food to better manage their sugar levels.

High levels of employee well-being translate to greater employee engagement and productivity. Providing employees with safe and healthy work environments, while supporting their pursuit of well-being, makes good business sense.

A trans-generational perspective has served Singapore well in its

planning and policymaking. In the Ministry of Manpower's latest WSH 2028 strategy, the same perspective is demonstrated in its commitment to prepare for the future of work and promote technology-enabled WSH.

We should approach the issue of an ageing workforce in the same way. We must not only look at the current wave of ageing workers, but also begin considering future generations of older workers, starting from those aged 15 to 30.

The convergence of various trends – an ageing population, intensified digitisation, rise of the gig economy and the Fourth Industrial Revolution innovations – is altering the face of work.

The current 15-30 age group will be the first batch to experience this convergence in full swing. The Government and employers need to begin empowering young Singaporeans to navigate future work, health and safety issues.

A focus on cultivating this age group to value well-being as much as wealth, and developing their individual health literacy, will yield great dividends. By focusing on helping this group pursue well-being early, even as they build wealth, we will push back the onset of chronic diseases in the nation.

As they, in turn, impart to their children the value of well-being and health literacy, our society will truly be well positioned for the future.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• Dr Jeff Hwang Yi-Fu is a lecturer at the Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health of the National University of Singapore, and an occupational health consultant with the university's Office of Safety, Health and Environment.