

NTUC conference addresses concerns about training needs

Labour gathering also discusses future needs of young workers, framework for digital engagement



(From left) Mr Gilbert Tan, NTUC assistant director-general and training and placement division director; Mr Alexander Melchers, vice-president of the Singapore National Employers Federation; Ms K. Thanaletchimi, president of the Healthcare Services Employees' Union; and Mr Tan Choon Shian, Workforce Singapore chief executive, at a panel discussion on developing the workforce of the future on Friday moderated by (far right) Dr Gillian Koh, deputy director of research at the Institute of Policy Studies. PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO

Tay Hong Yi

Employers strongly prefer to send workers with only the highest potential for training, rather than others who might benefit more, for fear of these workers moving to rival firms.

"That is a very real issue, which many of the employers here are still tied to," said Mr Tan Choon Shian, chief executive of Workforce Singapore, at the National Trades Union Congress Labour Research Conference on Friday.

But if industries band together to offer quality vocational training among themselves, it will ensure that there is another skilled worker ready to come in and hit the ground running even if workers move on, said Mr Alexander Melchers, vice-president of the Singapore National Employers Federation.

The men were among four panelists at a discussion on developing the workforce of the future moderated by Dr Gillian Koh, deputy director of research at the Institute of Policy Studies.

The other two panellists were Ms K. Thanaletchimi, president of the Healthcare Services Employees' Union, and Mr Gilbert Tan, NTUC assistant director-general and training and placement division director.

Other topics the panel touched on included instilling pride in vocational jobs such as plumbing, as well as accreditation for human resource professionals.

A new academic journal – the Singapore Labour Journal – set to be published annually by the NTUC was also launched on Friday at the conference, the fourth since 2017, held at the NTUC Centre in Marina Boulevard.

In an address, labour chief Ng

Chee Meng said the journal features insights into labour relationship management and workforce transformation offered by the best minds in Singapore and the world.

Mr Ng said of the inaugural edition of the journal: "The editors have decided to get us to reflect on... how we can re-strategise and really make bold changes in the governance of our country, in the relationship of our people, and get the job done to grow our economy, to distribute wealth and create better lives for citizens and people who have joined us in Singapore."

Two research presentation sessions followed the panel discussion. The first was on the future needs of young workers, and the second was on engaging and organising workers digitally.

In the first, Mr Poon King Wang, director of the Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities at the Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD), presented his team's findings from interviews and focus group sessions with workers aged 18 to 35. The results were published in the journal.

The team found that the young workers they spoke to perceived the labour movement as "a haven of last resort" in times of crisis or need, such as during a retrenchment exercise or in a work dispute.

This perception limits the movement's reach among youth, a trend that can be reversed by positioning unions as an outlet for members to invest in their future.

To achieve this, Mr Poon said, the team made three recommendations: a lifetime career and mentorship office to guide those new to the workforce; opportunities for "short, fun micro-experiences" involving interesting things youth want to learn which can be applied to their careers; and sharing of stories from union leaders on how they overcame adversity.

In the same session, young unionist Lee Yong Quan, industrial sector chairman for the 9th Term Young NTUC Committee, shared how the study from Mr Poon's team helped spark new NTUC initiatives such as Ready for Experience, which curates micro-experiences like craft workshops. The youth wing comprises unionists aged 35 and below.

Mr Horson Cheong, president of the Supply Chain Employees' Union, kicked off the second presentation session by sharing the union's experience in building a digital presence.

Professor Lim Sun Sun, SUTD head of humanities, arts and social sciences, spoke about a four-step framework for digital engagement – awareness, attraction, association and action – that unions could adopt.

Sharing an example of how the framework could be applied, Prof Lim said: "(Unions) could have a photo competition to capture the best moments of everyday events... and that's great because it gives (members) that sense of ownership... and it makes it much more dynamic rather than being one-way, didactic."

All four presenters participated in the second panel discussion on young workers' needs and digital engagement. The session was moderated by Ms Wendy Tan, NTUC head of youth development.

Responding to a question on engaging young workers digitally, Mr Cheong had a word of advice for senior union leaders.

"Get young people in, let them go and organise how to engage their counterparts: You're not an expert, you've not grown up with this," he said.

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