

As employment anxieties grow, love your job but always have a Plan B

Prevention is better than cure in strengthening Singaporean workers' employment resilience

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Is there a cure to job insecurity?

Perhaps not but a slew of treatments can improve career health.

To address Singaporeans' difficulties and anxieties with regard to jobs and the economy, the Ministry of Manpower introduced a slew of measures at the recent Budget debates in Parliament. They included updates to foreign workforce policies, increasing retirement adequacy that extends to platform workers, and improving workplace fairness.

Despite the commendable slate of initiatives, uncertainty among workers will likely persist. Firms coping with persistent advancements in technologies and tectonic shifts across industries must shape up or ship out. The nature of each occupation and the requisite skills in the most competitive businesses will continue to evolve.

Green skills, for example, will become requisites as companies across sectors adopt more environmentally sustainable practices and develop sustainability targets for compliance and reporting, according to the 2022 SkillsFuture Singapore's Skills Demand for the Future Economy report.

At the same time, the increasing adoption of digital technologies by businesses to cope with remote arrangements post-Covid-19 pandemic may intensify the competition for jobs locally.

The 2022 Deel Lab's State of Global Hiring Report points to a 227 per cent increase in hiring remote employees and contractors in the Asia-Pacific, with Singapore being the second fastest-growing market by number of organisations hiring.

Disruptions to the job market also stem from shifting workforce aspirations and interests. As we expect to work more years, we also demand greater flexibility in our career trajectory to match our life stage.

The growth of flexible work arrangements and alternative work arrangements, such as contract-based employment and gig work, has been a boon.

But with more transitions in and out of different forms of employment throughout one's career, such movements can increase periods of unemployment in between.

The post-pandemic future has only started to unfold. The coming restructuring, as some of



For workers, navigating the unpredictable and dynamic employment landscape requires proactive career management to adopt new skills, stay employable and bounce back from shocks. The time for workers to take charge of their own career health is now, say the writers. ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE

today's firms make way for new growth and more promising jobs, will lead to some level of creative destruction. Acute economic conditions will separate the best from the rest.

For workers, navigating this unpredictable and dynamic landscape requires proactive career management to adopt new skills, stay employable and bounce back from shocks.

WE ALL NEED TO BE IN THE PINK OF HEALTH

A dose of supplements to tackle job insecurity also would not hurt. The reality is, everyone should be vigilant and stay prepared to deal with a dynamic employment landscape. For some, it may be "career cushioning" to prepare themselves for another career opportunity while still employed.

Even if workers have no intention of leaving their current role, developing a Plan B can mitigate feelings of irrelevance in a long-held job that can create malaise and discourage progress, even among the most capable of workers. After all, a career helps give life meaning and forms a vital part of our identity for many of us.

The challenge, however, lies not in recognising this but in figuring out how to get into action and mustering the "will to do".

No quarrel here with self-directed folks who are ready to take an active role in managing their careers.

They update their CVs and

upgrade their skills proactively through self-learning or by attending courses. They promote their skills on business networking platforms like LinkedIn, serve in various business associations or company committees and diversify their skills – so they are ready to seize opportunities to transition to another role or industry.

The new CareersFinder feature on the MyCareersFuture portal to be introduced later this year will hopefully go some way in helping workers discover suitable jobs and the training needed to achieve their career goals.

But the warm satisfaction of a comfort zone might lure others into inaction, particularly those who have worked in an organisation for many years. They may be lulled into thinking they can work in the same job until retirement and may not bother to explore other options.

Then there are workers who think of pivoting only when they get retrenched.

A survey on the Future of Work Singaporeans Want by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) found that six in 10 respondents are open to changing their occupations, but fewer than half are actively pursuing critical core skills to adapt and succeed.

Here is a wake-up call: Staying still when the world is moving forward is regression. The long-term disruption in the jobs market requires us to constantly identify new job opportunities, expand the boundaries of our

competencies and broaden our networks to transition well.

LOWER BARRIERS TO MANAGING CAREER HEALTH

Besides possessing the motivation to manage one's career health, one also needs the ability, or the "can do", to do so at different stages of life. This was a hotly debated subject at the recent Ngee Ann Kongsi-Institute of Policy Studies citizens' panel on employment resilience held as part of the Forward Singapore engagements.

During the second session held in end-February, employees across a spectrum of industries and career stages raised the issue of the lack of resources and support from employers and intermediaries to help individuals manage their career goals.

Other barriers in this endeavour include the lack of essential job search or work skills and experience, physical and mental health issues, caregiving responsibilities and poverty.

Gender sticks out in this area. Women were notably less likely than men to pursue career self-management activities in seeking out career-related training and/or development outside their organisation, the same IPS survey found. Women were also less likely to build networks in areas of desired work.

Thankfully, budding initiatives to reduce the barriers for women are under way. A pilot programme

broadening the Household Services Scheme to allow companies hiring migrant workers for part-time domestic services to include child- and elder-minding services announced last year in the White Paper on Singapore Women's Development can move the needle.

The Home Caregiving Grant was also increased in 2022 from \$200 a month to up to \$400 a month. Improving last-mile communications of these measures will nudge female beneficiaries to tap expanding support.

Another key group requiring support is lower-wage workers. Researchers have used the term "bandwidth tax" to describe the cognitive burden of poverty and explain how the urgency of putting food on the table for this group is coming at the expense of their career goals.

Living with multiple challenges and anxieties erodes their ability to do many things the rest of us consider routine, like attending events to meet new professional contacts, much less to plan ahead for their careers.

In this regard, enhancements to the Workfare Income Supplement Scheme to increase the maximum annual payments, from \$4,000 to \$4,200, and its expanded coverage could benefit lower-wage workers in more ways than mere dollars and cents.

In addition, the new adjustments to the age eligibility and income cap for the Workfare

Skills Support Scheme announced by the Manpower Ministry is a timely move, lowering the opportunity cost for lower-wage workers to upskill themselves. About 70,000 are set to benefit when this is implemented from July onwards.

EMPOWERING PEOPLE TO OWN THEIR CAREER HEALTH

The economic outlook for Singapore is uncertain, with government gross domestic product growth projections ranging widely from 0.5 per cent to 2.5 per cent and the path ahead across sectors varying greatly.

As the Singapore economy undergoes transformation, there is little doubt workers must adapt to changing employment conditions. While public policy can be strengthened to encourage employment resilience, the weight of this national push to get workers to be more proactive in managing their own career health lies on the shoulders of working professionals and firms.

People can be empowered to stretch themselves, grow new skills to harness emerging technologies and proactively develop networks that aid them in improving their career health.

Firms should also be partners in this endeavour if they wish to retain and refresh their workforce. Efforts to update their staff on global economic and technological trends impacting their job families and prepare them to undertake the needed reskilling can smoothen spiky work transitions and quicken enterprise transformation.

Regular conversations with in-house human resource personnel or with intermediaries like career mentors and counsellors can help. After all, 87 per cent of respondents to the 2022 Randstad Workmonitor survey in Singapore said they would like a career coach to advise them on job advancement, salary progression and finding a better work-life balance.

Akin to health screenings, such reviews will help workers spot potential problems and encourage them to take preventive measures to ensure they remain healthy and employable as they go through different stages of their career.

Singapore has moved towards a mantra of preventive health through the HealthierSG movement in encouraging Singaporeans to take charge of their health and tackle chronic conditions early rather than wait until a serious illness develops.

This ethos that "prevention is better than cure" should also be applied to employment. The time for workers to take charge of their own career health is now.

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