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English test for foreign front-line staff? Bosses say 'no' **Many not keen on imposing test, citing current labour crunch in service industry** JAMIE EE WEN WEI & DHANY OSMAN

Should there be an English entry test for foreign workers in front-line service jobs?

Judging from the response of employers and human resources experts contacted by The Sunday Times, the answer seems to be no. In fact, most say that such a test may pose more problems than it solves.

The idea of an entry test was mooted amid a brewing debate in the Forum page of The Straits Times over the issue of foreign front-line staff and their English proficiency.

Letter writer Jaggi Kumar, who suggested the test, wondered why it is not in place, since a similar test was imposed on foreign maids.

Introduced by the Ministry of Manpower three years ago, the English entry test for first-time maids was designed to ensure that they have basic numeracy and literacy skills to do household tasks and adapt to life here.

A check by The Sunday Times with employers revealed that most were not keen to impose a similar test on service workers, though the idea did find a few backers.

Among them was Mr Yeo Guat Kwang, president of the Consumers Association of Singapore and co-chairman of the Customer-Centric Initiative, which helps local companies to raise their service standards.

He said: "If we have it for maids, I don't see why we can't have it for service staff too."

Mr Tan Yew Kiat, general manager of fashion chain bYSI, believes that a test would improve service standards and help new foreign workers understand what is expected in their work.

Is it really necessary?

But industry players not sold on the idea worry that the test may shrink the pool of workers and worsen the labour crunch faced by the booming industry.

"Singapore cannot afford to say 'no' to foreign workers. I think if we introduce this, the number coming in will be reduced by 80 per cent," said Mr Heinz Javier Colby, general manager of Novotel Clarke Quay Hotel which has about 30 foreign front-line officers.

Ms Elim Chew, director of streetwear chain 77th Street, felt the language problem is actually “minor”. She said: “If we put more obstacles, then it will be harder to get workers. This will raise costs, which will be passed on to consumers.”

There is one foreign front-line worker for every three Singaporeans employed by her company.

Mr Edward Tan, human resources director of department store chain Metro Private Limited, which employs foreigners from Malaysia, China, the Philippines and Myanmar, also wondered if there is an over-emphasis on English.

“If some stores are in the suburbs, having staff who can speak Mandarin or dialects may be more appropriate,” he said.

Mr Josh Goh, corporate services manager of recruitment company The GMP Group, agreed, noting that English speakers may not necessarily deliver better service.

“Implementing such a rule will eliminate those able to give good service but not privileged enough to learn the language.”

His company has recruited more than 100 workers from China for the service industry since hiring rules were relaxed last year.

That said, employers agree that English skills are good to have. In fact, given a choice, most companies would prefer to hire English speakers, said employment agencies.

The reality, however, is that it is hard to find such people, especially when the industry is turning to non-traditional sources like China.

“Some know English, but it is still hard to understand them because of their pronunciation,” said Mr Daniel Low, director of Wilm Management, a recruitment company. It has recruited more than 200 Chinese workers for service-sector companies this year.

Those who do speak English well also expect higher salaries. Often, they also prefer to work in Western countries where the pay may be better, said employment agents.

Training efforts

Still, employers agree that more can be done to train staff to communicate better. Some employment agencies and service-sector firms have started in-house English training programmes.

On a national level, there is also help offered by the Singapore Workforce Development Agency (WDA), which companies like Sakae Sushi are tapping into.

Mr Douglas Foo, chief executive officer of Apex-Pal which runs the Japanese-food chain, said all his workers have to go through the Employability Skills System under the WDA. Under this, there are courses to upgrade English proficiency.

A few weeks ago, Mr Foo said his company hired its first batch of 10 Chinese workers. They are undergoing a three-month English course.

But not all companies may have in-house or external training. Smaller enterprises, noted industry experts, are often hard-pressed to say yes to training.

“Operation costs are going up. Their margins are already very slim,” said the Singapore Retailers Association’s executive director Lau Chuen Wei.

Another issue is time. Mr Justin Ng, director of human resources company AICG, said: “Most employers require their foreign staff to work long hours. By the time they finish, they are too tired to attend any courses.”

Among his clients, only 30 per cent require their foreign staff to go for language training.

When Metro started a computer-based English training course four years ago, it became a hit with its foreign staff.

But after a few years, the department store faced another problem. Some workers, after receiving training, left for better jobs.

Others have suggested that the Government extend subsidies for training to foreign workers as well. Currently, training subsidies are limited to Singaporeans and permanent residents.

Still, in the light of the current situation, most feel that the onus is on companies to train their foreign staff to communicate effectively.

Those which do not may soon lose their competitive edge, said Ms Caroline Lim, director of the Institute of Service Excellence at the Singapore Management University. “After some time, customers will stop going to their shops. This is when the companies will start feeling the pinch.”

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