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### Foreign service staff as good as locals: Poll

By DHANY OSMAN & DEBBIE YONG

Those surveyed say foreigners make up for lack of English with positive service attitude

Their lack of English proficiency may have drawn criticism from some Singaporeans. But a Sunday Times poll of 50 people revealed that more than half of them believe the foreign front-line staff provide at least equal, if not better, service than their Singaporean co-workers.

Take entrepreneur Karamjit Singh, 49, who lunched at Inle, a Myanmar restaurant in Peninsula Plaza, recently. "The service there is better than that of any restaurant I have been to, even though its foreign staff do not speak much English," he said.

Accountant Boey Wen Sim, 26, also gave the thumbs up. "I went to this store to buy a bag and the shop assistant, whom I believe is from China, took the trouble to call up its various outlets to see if they had the stock and colour I wanted. Singaporean sales staff would have just said 'no stock'."

#### Choose well, pay fairly

"The key is to recruit quality staff with the right educational background and attitude. They should also be treated the same as locals and paid fairly."

**MS IRIS ONG, founder of  
Eyeball Resources, on foreign  
front-line staff**

Mr Hermann Seet, brand manager for Fila, said its foreign employees "keep the local staff on their toes, but I believe it's healthy competition".

The sports brand, which has 12 stores, employs 10 foreign front-line staff, mainly Chinese nationals. Seven of them are in its in-house management trainee programme.

"Their attitude has been superb. They're very open to constructive criticism and they're sincere about wanting to improve," noted Mr Seet.

Fila started recruiting more foreigners last year to deal with the high turnover rate of local workers.

It is common knowledge that many Singaporeans do not consider service jobs as a long-term career and tend to job hop.

At the National University Hospital (NUH), foreign-staff recruitment is also up, with 13 per cent of its nurses from countries such as India, China, the Philippines and Myanmar.

Ms Mona Soh, assistant director of NUH's department of nursing, said that while some of them might not communicate as effectively as their local counterparts, "they usually make it up with their enthusiasm, adaptability and eagerness to learn".

Some do not mind working longer hours as they are single and their families are abroad, she said.

One reason that foreigners have made a good impression lies in the selection process.

"The key is to recruit quality staff with the right educational background and attitude. They should also be treated the same as locals and paid fairly," said Ms Iris Ong, managing consultant and founder of Eyeball Resources, a training and recruitment firm.

With a client list that includes Jay Gee Enterprises, Aspial-Lee Hwa Jewellery and Nuance Watsons, her firm has provided more than 100 China front-line staff to medium-sized and large retailers this past year.

All are diploma or degree holders, and as Ms Ong noted, "it may be a matter of time before perceptions of foreign workers start to change".

But she also lamented that there are recruitment firms "that will provide low-grade workers in large numbers to companies looking to cut costs...That's where you get the bad reports".

Ms Annie Yap, chief executive officer of The GMP Group which recruits workers from the Philippines and China, said: "Foreign staff appreciate the opportunities given to work here as they enjoy a better compensation package and work environment.

"As a result, they show more pride in their work by providing good service. This certainly gives them a more competitive edge in the service and retail industry."

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