

RETRENCHMENTS

The big question mark

Workers most at risk not as easily identifiable as before

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WE KNOW lay-offs will rise this year, and certain industries such as the export-oriented manufacturing and electronics sectors are likely to be hardest hit. But which groups of workers are most at risk of the pink slip?

In past downturns since the Asian financial crisis, the 500,000 Singaporeans with less than a secondary education, doing jobs that could be done cheaper overseas, were the most vulnerable.

This time, the retrenchment picture will be less clear-cut, say labour economists and human resource companies.

For instance, Ms Annie Yap, chief executive of The GMP Group, said that besides those in support functions such as marketing, "new hires might be asked to go, too, as they would be deemed less productive" compared to longer-serving staff.

On the other hand, Robert Walters Singapore managing director Andrea Ross has seen an increase in senior-level retrenchments, while

fresh graduates continue to be in demand, even in banking.

"Graduates are viewed as future leaders for the organisation, and are usually not a huge cost to the company compared to individuals at more senior levels," she said.

Then, if Nanyang Technological University labour economist Rosalind Chew is correct, unskilled employees should remain the most concerned. If a firm has invested in training an employee, he "will not be retrenched so fast", she said. "Unskilled staff will be more likely to be retrenched because they receive less training."

With workers "in danger across the board", as Robert Half Singapore managing director Tim Hird put it, the layoff risk really depends on the organisation's profile.

"It's more a case of looking at the companies they work for, its exposure to international markets, its strategy (to managing the crisis)," he said, as some are more quick to retrench while others tend to invest in re-training.

Companies most prone to retrench this time would also be those with "the most significant exposure to the credit crisis", which includes those in financial services or industries that "closely track economic cycles."

Labour economist Chew Soon

It's more a case of looking at the firms they work for, its market exposure and strategy.

Mr Tim Hird of Robert Half

Beng of NTU told TODAY companies with the Monthly Variable Component in their employees' wage packets can cut pay — thus reducing costs — without too much complaint. "From there, we can argue that firms whose workers are not protected by the MVC would go first," he said.

Amid all the uncertainty, Acting Manpower Minister Gan Kim Yong said yesterday that while affected workers will cut across different levels, "this recession we will see more PMET (professionals, managers, executives, technicians) workers affected".

HR experts also agreed that workers should expect a wider job scope as they take on the responsibilities of those retrenched.

And for a few, a silver lining. According to Mr Hird, there is "significant increase" in the hiring of specialised contract workers, as companies are still looking for experience and skills in areas like finance and accounting.

More courses and diplomas

» CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1 occupations and industries.

Firms that wish to design their own in-house upgrading programmes for workers may also apply for Spur funding.

Singapore Polytechnic (SP), which offers 40 Spur-approved courses — such as Hospitality Information Technology and Electricity and Electronics — told TODAY it is preparing six purpose-built classrooms for adult training that will be ready in April. More staff will be sent for courses to be certified as trainers in March.

With the changes, SP will have the capacity to train some 2,000 workers in one year.

Temasek Polytechnic, too, will increase the number of classes to accommodate the increase. It currently offers 22 courses, and will introduce three more specialist diplomas in April and September: Biopharmaceutical Technology, Gerontology Studies, and Media and Communications.

The \$600-million Spur scheme was developed with two main aims: To help employers cut business costs during the downturn and stave off retrenchments; and allow both rank-and-file and PMETs

to upgrade their skills and find new jobs.

The Government foots up to 90 per cent of a worker's training fees and companies will be subsidised up to 90 per cent of the worker's salary, capped at \$6.80 an hour, while he is away.

Building services provider Naturalcool Holding Limited, for one, has committed to sending 800 of its workers for training over the next six to 12 months. Medical care equipment maker Becton Dickinson, which has more than 100 vacancies, is prepared to hire retrenched workers and re-skill them using Spur.

Announcing the scheme's changes yesterday, Acting Manpower Minister Gan Kim Yong said he expects more companies to retrench after Chinese New Year; help will be extended to those affected.

With over 200,000 Spur training places targeted over two years, does the take-up rate seem slow? Mr Gan said: "Some of the companies need time to understand the programme better, and to make adjustments within company processes so that they can make available workers."

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