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Employers hit by stricter S-Pass system

MOM says it may grant one-time pass renewal for affected firms to manage transition

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The Ministry of Manpower (MOM) has tightened the criteria for giving out foreign worker S-Passes and the June 1 change has hit hiring in sectors from services to IT and manufacturing.

S-Pass applicants are assessed on a points system based on multiple criteria including salary, education qualifications, skills, job type and work experience.

Although the criteria are unchanged, MOM has recalibrated the points allocated in each criterion to encourage employers to employ better qualified S-Pass holders.

Foreign workers eligible for the S-Pass must be semi-skilled diploma or post-secondary holders earning at least \$1,800 a month.

As of December 2008, there were about 74,000 S-Pass holders.

Last week, responding to queries from The Sunday Times, MOM said the recalibration was to encourage employers to employ better qualified S-Pass holders.

An example would be hiring an employee with longer work experience.

The ministry did not disclose what specific points are allocated for each criterion.

MOM said the revision will apply to renewals and to new S-Pass applications.

To help companies manage the transition, MOM said it will consider granting a one-time renewal of up to one year to affected S-Pass holders who may not have acquired enough points.

The ministry said it has briefed employers and industry associations.

It has also created an employment self-assessment tool and an online calculator on its website to help bosses assess if their S-Pass applicants meet the criteria.

Human resource experts and employers The Sunday Times spoke to said companies, especially those in retail, IT and manufacturing, as well as shipyards, are feeling the impact of the stricter rules.

These jobs often require shift work or hard labour, and are often unpopular with Singaporeans.

Department store Metro's human resource and operations director Edward Tan said his company now has to be more selective about the S-Pass workers it hires. They make up about 5 per cent of its workforce.

Over at shoe retailer Charles and Keith, human resource manager Chia Wai Jyy said her company has had difficulty upgrading its workers from work permits to S-Passes.

One case was rejected recently. "Previously, if the worker satisfies most of the criteria, chances are he or she would get the pass, but now the standards are higher and all criteria are strictly adhered to," she said.

But taking another perspective, Mr Josh Goh, senior manager of corporate services in The GMP Group, a human resource firm, said companies here should look into revising their job compensation and benefits package, or redesign them.

The aim, he said, is to make them more appealing to Singaporeans or permanent residents, rather than depend on S-Pass holders.

He also advised local job seekers to be less fussy, and to adjust their expectations and explore opportunities in the less popular jobs.

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Have you been affected by the tightening of S-Pass criteria? Send your feedback to suntimes@sph.com.sg

WHAT IS AN S-PASS?

The S-Pass is for semi-skilled foreigners who earn a fixed monthly salary of at least \$1,800.

Applicants are assessed on a points system, taking into account multiple criteria, including salary, educational qualifications, skills, job type and work experience.

S-Pass applicants accumulate points based on how well they meet these criteria.

The criteria for S-Pass holders has been raised since June 1. The Ministry of Manpower (MOM) has recalibrated the points allocated in each criterion to encourage employers to employ better qualified S-Pass holders.

The limit on the proportion of S-Pass holders that firms can employ remains unchanged at 25 per cent.