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>>JOBS IN NEW GROWTH INDUSTRIES

Doors are open to low-skilled workers?

The good news on the labour front is not just about more vacancies and less unemployment, it's also about giving lower-skilled workers a second life in New Economy industries. But what kind of jobs can they look forward to? **Leslie Koh** takes a closer look



BOLD MOVE : After being retrenched in 2002, former export manager Tan Kok Wah, 55, plucked up the courage to make a career switch by signing up for a culinary course even though he had to take a pay cut of more than \$1,000.

THEY call him Uncle Tan. Even his managers do. At 55, Mr Tan Kok Wah is one of the oldest cooks in the kitchen at culinary academy at-sunrice.

To many of the other full-time staff and students, the grandfather of two girls is a mentor of sorts, dishing out advice on relationships, career and life in general.

But his own story of how he got to the school perched high on Fort Canning hill, is a lesson on its own.

After being retrenched in 2002, the former export manager with a local firm made the bold move to step into the kitchen and take the heat, despite having to take a pay cut of more than \$1,000.

It was tough, he says candidly, but he realised that the days of his pitching local products for sale overseas were numbered.

“Nowadays, you can set up a website, and anyone round the world can see your products. The things I used to do are no longer valuable,” he says.

Like many other retrenched Singaporeans, he searched for a similar job in a familiar industry, but found his A-level education and age a handicap.

It was at a job fair that he saw a vacancy for a cook at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel. He bit the bullet and went for it.

There, he found that the trade was traditional but the working environment was anything but.

“There were avenues for advancement. From commis cook - which is a trainee - to chef de partie, then sous chef, then chef,’ says Mr Tan, who moved to at-sunrice four months ago.

“It's a very professional trade.”

Drive to upgrade

BUT this is not another 'older workers' story.

What makes Mr Tan a person of note is the way he had dared to move to a different industry, despite lacking the experience and the skills for it.

This is exactly what the Government and unions have been trying to get Singapore's workers to do, to ensure they stay employed and employable as the country restructures its economy and moves its industries from the lower to higher value-added variety.

Statistics indicate that the thousands of workers, displaced from the production jobs that are disappearing overseas, are doing what Mr Tan did.

Long-term unemployment - often seen as a measure of structural unemployment - is down to 0.5 per cent, a figure not seen since 1997. But anecdotal evidence also suggests the local workforce still has some way to go.

Job-matching agencies and recruitment companies still find workers reluctant to leave the traditional manufacturing industries, even though jobs in this sector are moving overseas.

Says the managing director of recruitment specialist GMP Recruit, Ms Annie Yap: “Singaporeans need to understand world trends and prepare themselves for the dynamics of the job market.

“We must look forward and start anticipating the jobs that would be available and the skills required. Currently, it's still rather reactive. We need to shift to a higher gear.”

Likewise, even though the Workforce Development Agency (WDA) has found fewer people turning up for job interviews, it still sees many resisting recommended moves to new growth industries like tourism, pharmaceuticals and retail.

Says WDA chief Ong Ye Kung: "Many still prefer to do odd jobs or part-time jobs rather than train to become a craftsman, like a chef or an electrician."

In fact, many do not even see the food and beverage industry as a 'new growth sector'. That term is often more closely associated with pharmaceuticals, petrochemicals and logistics.

Mr Tan himself confessed that he was not very impressed by the job before he took it on. "Some of my friends did ask me, Why do you take this kind of dead-end job? "

It was only after he joined the industry that he found that it was anything but a dead end.

The WDA could not agree more. It knows that hotels and restaurants around the island are looking for 2,000 cooks, chefs and kitchen assistants over the next three years.

It also hears from employers looking for thousands of waiters, doormen, chambermaids and other staff to join the booming tourism sector.

Logistics firms are also short of forklift drivers; service centres need call-centre operators badly; and hospitals are in need of health-care assistants.

"There is demand; there are opportunities for vulnerable workers," says WDA's Mr Ong. "But companies are asking, Where's the manpower? "

Ironically, the current boom in the economy could be hiding the ongoing problems of structural unemployment.

Buoyed by economic growth and high demand, companies in all sectors are expanding aggressively and hiring workers - including the lower-skilled ones.

When these workers go back to lower-skilled jobs that are available, they are likely to be less willing to subsequently try out new growth industries, especially when pay cuts and extensive training could be involved.

It's hard to sound cautionary when job creation is at its highest in 10 years - 45,000 jobs created in the first three months of this year - and the unemployment rate, at 2.6 per cent, is at its lowest in eight years.

But the Singapore National Employers Federation's (SNEF) Mr Koh Juan Kiat does not shy away from sounding the warning bells.

If workers don't get upgraded, he notes, the good news in the job market may not last.

Says the executive director of the employers' body: "Everyone wants to ride on the wave, and all workers will be dragged up. But we must ensure that they are dragged up not just in pay but also in skills, or else it's not sustainable."

Sustaining progress

SO WHAT'S sustainable, then?

Past efforts at generic skills upgrading for workers have not exactly succeeded. As analysts point out, this does not prepare them for the needs of the constantly changing economy.

The general manager of recruitment specialist GMP Recruit, Ms Annie Yap, notes that low-skilled workers will find it increasingly harder to jump from one industry to another.

"The specialised knowledge required for a new economy job takes a longer time to acquire, unlike a laborious job where the worker can be productive within a couple of days after training," she says.

The WDA's answer is equipping workers with certifiable skills that are specific to industries, so they can take up jobs in the new growth sectors like aerospace, tourism, retail and precision engineering.

It has trained 11,000 workers under its Workforce Skills Qualifications system and aims to train another 20,000 over the next two years.

The National Trades Union Congress has its Job Re-creation Programme (JRP), which redesigns jobs to make them more productive and hence better paying. Its scoresheet so far: 7,200 jobs created last year, and 10,000 targeted this year.

It is an approach that SNEF's Mr Koh supports.

"It makes jobs higher value-added, which would then require the retraining of workers," he says.

Not just rocket scientists needed

Retail

>> 7,000 needed for shopping mega-mall VivoCity when it opens in October, as well as for retail, food and beverage, entertainment sectors.

>> Sales representatives, customer service officers.

Aerospace

>> 1,000 new jobs every year between now and 2014, for maintenance, repair and overhaul sector.

>> Seletar Aerospace Park expected to create 10,000 new jobs by 2018 for licensed aircraft engineers, aircraft engine mechanics and aeronautical engineering technicians, as well as for airport management, cleaning, training, logistics and transport.

Tourism/entertainment

>> 2,000 vacancies for chefs over the next three years.

>> New developments like St James Power Station - an integrated entertainment complex, the Singapore Flyer observation wheel, and Cannery@Clarke Quay will create another 2,000 jobs.

>> Also in demand: Tour consultants, room attendants, project managers.

>> 10,000 jobs from the Marina Bay Sands integrated resort.

New industries

>> Skilled technicians in research and life sciences sector as well as plant operators needed in new plants set up.

Logistics

>> In demand: Forklift drivers, logistics clerks and officers, despatch drivers

Others

>> Call-centre operators, security guards, financial consultants.

>> Health-care assistants, assistants at care centres

“This is more stable and sustainable, because there's a business case for employers to send workers for training and to pay more.”

Attitude mismatch

THE repeated stories of early JRP successes could well give the impression that vulnerable workers are destined for jobs as cleaners, security guards, health-care assistants and gardeners.

Certainly, the bulk of the vacancies registered with the Manpower Ministry come from the services sector, which now dominates the labour landscape.

In March, this sector reported 13,100 vacancies. As far as lower-skilled workers were concerned, the best industries to go to were the retail, hospitality and community and social trades.

As expected, the manufacturing sector had fewer vacancies - 7,100.

But what about the other new growth sectors like pharmaceuticals, chemicals and aerospace? Are they out of reach for workers with just O levels and little exposure to the new technologies involved?

Many workers certainly think so, says WDA's director of tourism division Teo Sio Hoon. “A lot of them shun these sectors, because they think these jobs are for graduates only. It's not so much a skills mismatch as an attitude mismatch.”

But in reality, there are opportunities for vulnerable workers in these new sectors.

Says country manager Rosa Goh of recruitment specialist Manpower: “Yes, the pharmaceutical and chemical firms tend to hire white-collar and specialized workers. But the plants that build life sciences products will still need operators.”

Mr Russ Watson of drug giant Merck Sharp & Dohme agrees.

Although the industry is highly automated, about 10 per cent of the 300 staff running the plants have O levels and below, says the managing director of its Singapore pharmaceutical operations.

“There're people doing warehousing, in addition to mechanical and operational technicians,” he explains.

Of course, these high-tech industries do not produce jobs in the same numbers that the electronics companies used to create.

Says Mr Watson: "It's a highly automated industry. You don't find pharmaceutical plants hiring in the thousands. A large plant might have up to 800 people, and they're hired over time, not at one go."

Demand for low-skilled

THE barriers to entering the much-touted new growth sectors are lower than some workers believe them to be.

Many employers are open to taking in unskilled workers and sending them for training to get them up to scratch - especially now that they are feeling the manpower crunch.

Mr Gary Haris, operations manager of KH Security Agency, is on the lookout for people to join his company to meet the demand for security guards created by the opening of new condominiums and shopping malls.

But he is not looking for experience nor even skills. Rather, he wants people who have the right attitude towards customer service.

"I can provide the training, but it's the tact, the service attitude that's harder to groom."

Not all employers, however, are so enlightened.

Mr Ken Koh, a former store specialist in the army, thought his experience could help him land a job in the logistics sector after he ended his contract with the armed forces, but found it harder than he thought.

"I tried for jobs as store supervisor or warehousing, but companies told me I needed a driving and forklift licence, and they would not pay for it."

The 28-year-old adds wryly: "Some even told me they preferred younger people."

Need to be flexible

THE phrase 'mindset change' is an overused one, to be sure, but it is hard to avoid it when you look at what changes Singapore's labour scene needs.

Yes, dealing with structural unemployment and helping vulnerable workers fit into the restructuring economy has very much to do with training workers and redesigning jobs.

But it is also about getting employers to take an active role in training workers, no matter how old, a move which will surely benefit them in increased productivity and a bigger pool of skilled workers.

Workers, too, have to make that step into new growth areas, and realise that 'traditional' jobs like in hotels, restaurants and the tourism industry are no longer the dead-end jobs of yesterday.

It is a lesson that Mr Tan, the gentle, fatherly cook at at-sunrice, learnt fast to his benefit.

Today, he still earns less than he did in the trading business, but he can look forward to a career in an industry which is booming.

He says: "Jobs disappear. If you insist on staying in your old industry, you're just banging your head against the wall."

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