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**Headline: Not enough focus on soft skills in S'pore workforce: Study**



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SINGAPORE — Despite the focus on innovation and the workforce’s adaptability as drivers of future economic growth, there is an insufficient focus on teaching soft skills, even in the Government’s SkillsFuture programmes, a year-long study has found.

The report, published by the Singapore Management University and financial services group J P Morgan, studied skills challenges in Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines — the five core member-states in the Association of South-east Asian Nations.

In Singapore, it found that the success of the country’s approach towards managing skills — through a raft of measures, including plugging skills gaps through foreign labour — has “brought with it other skills challenges”.

For example, the SkillsFuture movement tended to focus on hard skills, paying inadequate attention to skills that may be used across jobs.

“There has been insufficient focus on the teaching of soft skills and other cross-job skills — a deficiency ... also seen in the SkillsFuture programmes, which tend to encourage learning of technical knowledge and skills,” the report stated, without specifying what it meant by soft skills.

When contacted, SkillsFuture Singapore declined to reply before it had seen the report, which will be made public today.

Singapore’s heavy reliance on foreign workers and low productivity growth also pointed to it lacking a “strong indigenous production capacity”, the report said. This, in turn, triggers an “urgent need to re-orientate the education and training policy, and to re-examine the pace of change in industrial policy”.

Its findings were derived from interviews with the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC), the Singapore Workforce Development Agency (now Workforce Singapore), and industry associations. Skills gaps were found in three key sectors here: Info-communications technology (ICT); electronics and electrical manufacturing; and finance and insurance.

In the ICT sector, which hires about 170,000 workers, there was a “particularly acute” shortage of skilled labour in cybersecurity, especially at the middle and senior levels “due to insufficient training programmes and entry routes for mid-career professionals”.

Lower-level software-engineering and programming workers were also in short supply. While foreign labour has helped, it has created a vicious circle. The influx of these workers brings wages down and prompts resident graduates to shun such jobs, which, in turn, drives up foreign labour demand.

The report also found that the prospect of pay cuts and steep learning curves made mid-career professionals reluctant to join the sector, despite well-funded government initiatives.

Early last month, for example, the authorities announced initiatives to provide extra support for ICT job-seekers, including a platform that offers career support and matches them to jobs.

One of the study’s recommendations is to reduce the country’s reliance on foreign labour by redesigning jobs to tap technology more and raise productivity. It also suggested moderating the pace of industrial policy change to allow more time for sectors to mature and gain global competitiveness.

DBS Bank’s senior economist Irvin Seah agreed with the study’s analysis that cross-job skills were vital, because digitisation has revolutionised how businesses function and people live.

However, human-resource expert David Ang said that professionals were already given soft-skills training by firms, although the effect of such skills was “hard to establish”. Mr Ang, who is the capability and business development director with

Human Capital Singapore, said that opportunities for rank-and-file workers to acquire such skills were limited because of the nature of their jobs.

Member of Parliament (Tampines GRC) Desmond Choo, an NTUC director, is of the view that both technical and soft skills were crucial. Soft skills, which are “fairly generic”, cannot stand on their own, he said. “Without showing (a worker undergoing a change-management course) what are the skills ladders involved, for example in ICT, the soft skills will have very little use.”

He added that SkillsFuture should not be construed narrowly as “a directory of courses”, but as a movement, and institutes of higher learning play a big role in imparting soft skills as well.

Mr Song Seng Wun, an economist at CIMB Private Bank, said given Singapore’s small population, it is difficult for workers to have skills that are in demand “all the time”. They should pick up skills when needed, “rather than (when they are) being led to”.