

Career mobility is the new job security for Singaporeans

Prodding workers to upskill and businesses to invest in their workers must be a mainstay of the Singapore Budget

Jack Lim

The central problem Singapore faces today can be summed up in one word: jobs.

Over the past three Covid-19 years, we were concerned that massive unemployment could unleash a destructive cycle of declining incomes and despair, if companies facing collapse shed workers, leaving the older folks jobless for good and trapping the young in stasis and unable to start a new life.

And in the years before the pandemic struck, the perennial issue of how to equip workers for jobs of the future has been our singular obsession. We have formed entire government agencies like SkillsFuture around it and have devoted large chunks of the Singapore Budget to this mission.

Call it enhancing productivity, encouraging innovation, workforce upgrading or reskilling. At the core of our national efforts stands the priority of prodding individuals to adapt to changing employment conditions and technological disruptions in order to stay gainfully employed and achieve career progression. All the while taking a heightened focus on targeting those who find it

harder to reskill.

Budget 2023 certainly has invested in human capital – with a doubling down of wage credits for a wider swathe of workers – ranging from seniors, to persons with disabilities, to former offenders.

Investing in human capital must be our mainstay when Singapore's only natural resource is our people. Our workforce can be an enabler of or a constraint on the country's economic success. I would wager on the former, seeing how the past five decades have shown that our human capital has been key to Singapore's remarkable transformation.

CAREER MOBILITY IS THE NEW CAREER GOAL

Time and time again, Singapore workers have proven embracing of change, instead of shying away from challenge. What stands out, especially, is our recognition that there is no such thing as "a job for life" and the need to keep learning to secure stronger career prospects so incomes keep pace with rising costs of living.

Almost eight in 10 Singapore employees will switch jobs if their pay does not keep up with inflation, according to a 2023 Robert Walters survey.

Yet, almost one in two



A job fair in 2022. Investing in human capital must be our mainstay when Singapore's only natural resource is our people, says the writer. PHOTO: NTUC

Singaporean professionals has become more confident in pushing for a promotion or new opportunity in 2023, according to a LinkedIn survey.

"Job seekers are more intentional in their search whereas others are taking steps to recession-proof their current roles by learning new skills or brushing up on existing ones," said LinkedIn career expert Pooja Chhabria.

Our world-class approach to upskilling – taking the form of varied incentives to spur individual action like the provision of SkillsFuture credit for courses, and train-and-place programmes involving ready roles from enterprises for suitable candidates able and willing to commit to new training courses – has provided valuable scaffolding to achieve this broad-based workforce transformation.

The SkillsFuture Career Transition Programme (SCTP), an update of the SGUnited Skills Programme introduced during the pandemic, has been a key pillar in equipping adult learners with skills and knowledge, and giving them access to employment support in moving to a new career in emerging areas, led by continuing education training centres.

Such programmes are complemented by company-led training, under the SGUnited Mid-Career Pathways Programme (SGUP). More than 7,200 local workers have benefited from

SGUP as at January 2022, which provided a \$2,600 average allowance. And SCTP has an even more ambitious goal of reaching 15,000 workers annually by 2025.

AIDING MOBILITY TO MORE PRODUCTIVE FIRMS AND SECTORS

Yet, while Singapore's upskilling progress has seen success, we must not let up. Uncertainty over the bigger global picture looms large, requiring a broader acceptance of non-linear career paths and preparations to move across jobs, companies, and even sectors.

Singapore leaders have spoken plainly on this. "We cannot protect existing jobs, firms and industry capacity... we have to let some of today's firms and jobs go, to enable new growth and more promising jobs to be created," Senior Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam said in August 2020.

He identified the secular decline in productivity growth as a key challenge to tackle in order to arrest the stagnation of median incomes experienced by many other advanced countries.

To this end, news that Singapore will be adding \$4 billion to its National Productivity Fund as part of Budget 2023 to attract multinational investments is welcome. The fund, established in 2010, supports businesses that improve productivity and train workers.

Under Budget 2023, its scope

will be expanded to include investment promotion. This is important as attracting multinationals here has become more difficult amid the geopolitical and economic contest between the United States and China.

The subtext is that enterprises that are less productive will get less help and be allowed to wither away. The key lies in helping workers achieve career mobility to avoid getting trapped in dead-end jobs.

UPSILLING AS A NATIONAL IMPERATIVE

Another positive from Budget 2023: The Government's commitment to bringing together industry partners and training providers through new Jobs-Skills Integrators can help close the feedback loop and narrow the gulf between training courses and skills used in the workplace.

But even with more intermediaries playing the role of helping hands to coordinate, the skill gap will persist.

Solving this wicked problem demands a refreshed compact around work, one where individuals commit to a lifelong learning mindset and actively pursue professional development opportunities, businesses invest in manpower to help employees pick up new skills and relevant training, and the Government and educators promote active reskilling through an enabling framework of up-to-date incentives, programmes and regulations.

Traditionally, institutes of higher learning (IHLs) have looked at facilitating industry experience through internships. We must now flip the script and bring companies into the classroom – at scale and with haste.

More must be done in removing potential barriers that impede industry practitioners entering the classroom to impart knowledge to shorten the education-industry gap. Courses on leveraging artificial intelligence tools like ChatGPT and the use of new social media platforms like Snapchat or TikTok should not require years before adoption by IHLs.

IHLs must also evolve to

become true centres of continuous learning to aid middle-aged Singaporeans, a group often overlooked at a time when the pace of acquiring skills and knowledge is intensifying.

With one of the world's fastest ageing populations and longest life expectancies, our citizen population is projected to shift from a median age of 39 in 2011 to 47 in 2030, and 52.8 in 2050. As our workforce ages, investing in aiding older workers will allow more to remain relevant and productive.

However, returning to formal education for this group of folks – often bogged down with a busy career, family commitments and financial constraints – is not a practical option, meaning training providers must be innovative in their offerings and savvy in catering to this group through bite-size courses, part-time programmes, or other new, less intimidating forms of training.

WHAT NEXT FOR ADULT EDUCATION?

Singapore has done well in providing access to affordable and high-quality adult education. We have built a culture of lifelong learning. About 540,000 Singaporeans benefited from SkillsFuture initiatives in 2020.

The pandemic drove the broad acceptance of e-learning and virtual communications as a viable and scalable mode of effective delivery in schools and at work. We have a well-oiled training ecosystem where government and industry training providers work hand in hand.

But there is no industry transformation without workforce transformation, Minister for Education Chan Chun Sing has often said.

Indeed, moving into the next bound will require Singapore to strengthen the nexus between educational institutes, training providers and industry partners so that workers are prepared for jobs of the future, equipped to join the most productive firms and growing sectors, and can see their incomes rise.

• Jack Lim is executive director of SMU Academy, the professional training arm of Singapore Management University.