

Plumber or farmer? The changing Singapore dream is not a bad thing

By David Gomulya

The Straits Times, Singapore, Page 3, Section: OPINION | B

Friday 13 March 2026

1383 words, 1221cm² in size

386,100 circulation

Plumber or farmer? The changing Singapore dream is not a bad thing

More young Singaporeans are considering skilled trades because they see opportunity and joy. We ought to celebrate that.

David Gomulya

When Ms Geraldine Goh left her corporate job to become a licensed plumber, some friends wondered if she had made a mistake.

When Mr Gng Soon Meng graduated from the Institute of Technical Education with a certificate in electronics engineering and chose to install smart home systems instead of pursuing a desk-bound engineering role, relatives asked what had gone wrong.

Nothing had. In fact, their decisions reflect a gentle shift in Singapore. The long-held assumption that success must follow a white-collar path is starting to loosen.

In the decades after independence, Singapore was built by skilled tradespeople. Shipyards, construction sites and factories powered our growth.

As the economy modernised, national emphasis turned, and rightly so, towards higher education, professional careers and the knowledge economy. “Get a university degree” became the default aspiration.

That strategy worked – perhaps too well – at the expense of other pathways.

Today, only about 2 per cent of our resident workforce is in skilled trades such as plumbing, electrical work, carpentry and lift maintenance.

At the same time, roughly 133,000 foreign workers fill roles in these sectors because local supply is limited. The median age of trades workers here is 56. For years, younger Singaporeans largely stayed away.

This was not because trade works are not valued (I know this because I once tried to replace the pipes for my sink and came away with renewed respect for professional plumbers). Rather, it was perhaps because a stigma had been embedded.

CHANGING NARRATIVE

Trades were often viewed as fallback options, perhaps because they were seen as suitable for those who did not perform well academically.

Parents worried about this, although very few, if any, would say this publicly. Students internalised the message early, only at home perhaps, but still with lasting effects. Thus, even

when demand was strong enough, the career choice never followed suit.

That narrative may now be changing, and I think for the better. One who chooses to become a tradesperson should no longer be seen as “settling”.

Instead, such people ought to be seen as enterprising and responding to real demand in the market. They combine deep technical, hands-on knowledge with business disciplines to create a viable livelihood that earns a steady income and empowers them and others.

Tradespeople who enter lift maintenance, urban farming, and other specialised fields are increasingly playing an indispensable role in a dense, infrastructure-heavy city. These stories may still be the minority, but they are worth highlighting and might signal healthy things to come. It feels like we are correcting course.

A quick look overseas puts things in perspective. In Germany, about 12 per cent of the workforce is in skilled trades. Australia's figure is around 14 per cent. These are prosperous, advanced economies with strong corporate sectors. Their trades cultures coexist with professional and managerial careers.

Singapore is not facing an oversupply in trades. If anything, we are correcting an undersupply. As infrastructure ages, maintenance and technical

expertise become more critical. As we push for food resilience, urban agriculture skills matter.

As high-rise living is the default, lift technicians are indispensable. Ageing plumbing systems will not replace themselves, either.

The good news is that wages are gradually adjusting. The reported median monthly salary of craftsmen and trades workers is about \$2,700, with an average of around \$3,100. These figures are not extravagant, but they are also not negligible, especially when they give lifestyle freedom and independence.

Indeed, for some younger Singaporeans, the appeal goes beyond income. They speak about autonomy, tangible results and direct customer relationships.

The satisfaction of installing a smart home system and seeing it

respond instantly is immediate feedback, which is probably the best kind. It brings inner satisfaction, if not a bit of pride, too.

Still, we should be careful not to romanticise this or take it to the extreme.

GENUINE OPTIONS

Running a small trade business can be tough. Income may fluctuate in the early years. Physical demands are real. There is no corporate human resources department to manage disputes or provide paid leave. Equipment costs money. Customers can be fussy. Anyone who has dealt with renovation timelines knows this. For someone who deliberately chose the path, saved up and planned ahead, these are manageable challenges. However, for someone who entered trades because academic doors seemed closed, the same pressures can feel overwhelming.

This is why the discussion should not be framed as “trades versus corporate”. It is about whether people have genuine options.

Did students understand what each pathway entails? Were they exposed to both professional internships and trade apprenticeships? Were they told that different routes can lead to “success”? Or were some paths quietly whispered as first among equals?

Singapore has long prided itself on pragmatism. If the labour market signals that we need more skilled tradespeople, and if young Singaporeans are willing to respond, that is not a step backwards. It is being Singaporean.

An urban farmer tending to plants at a farm in Lakeside. Tradespeople who enter lift maintenance, urban farming, and other specialised fields are increasingly playing an indispensable role in a dense, infrastructure-heavy city, says the writer. ST FILE PHOTO



True progress would mean that an ITE or polytechnic student can consider starting a trade business with the same confidence that a university graduate can consider joining a multinational firm; not because one is easier, but because both are respected and preferences differ.

Policy matters here, just like it does for corporate jobs. Portable healthcare arrangements, training subsidies and mid-career pathways would make it less risky for people to choose differently. Career guidance in schools should focus on strengths and preferences, not just exam scores.

Families matter, too. Parents understandably want security, if not a bit of status, for their children. But security does not look the same for everyone.

For some, it may come from a stable office job. For others, it may come from a technical service business. Status may matter little, too, if people are unhappy. So, the question is ideally more of “what do you really want to do for your life?”

Singapore has long prided itself on pragmatism. If the labour market signals that we need more skilled tradespeople, and if young Singaporeans are willing to respond, that is not a step backwards. It is an adjustment. It is being Singaporean.

None of this means that corporate careers are diminishing in value. Singapore's economy still depends on finance, technology, logistics, healthcare and many other professional fields. The goal is not to swing from one extreme to another. And I trust that people who are genuinely interested in corporate careers will not be swayed otherwise anyway.

What matters is that we recognise more than one version of success. More options are becoming equally viable and respected, and thus attractive.

For a long time, the “Singapore Dream” came bundled on a well-known path: strong academic results in junior college, a recognised university, a reputable company, steady promotions. That formula delivered mobility for many families.

But I think today's young Singaporeans are contemplating a slightly different question: can a good life be built in more than one way? It can be scary. I know because I have children. But ideally, the answer should be “yes” because no parent can entirely predict or control their children's preferences.

If more people enter trades because they see opportunity and joy, and not because of a lack of alternatives, that ought to be celebrated. If wages gradually reflect demand and skills, that is Economics 101. And if stigma fades along the way, that would be real progress.

The shift is still modest if we compare it against Germany or Australia. But it is a good first step. Singapore was built by hands and minds working together. There is no reason the next stage of our development should be any different.

• David Gomulya is an associate professor at Singapore Management University's Lee Kong Chian School of Business. His research focuses on strategy and entrepreneurship, and he currently serves as academic director at the university's Master of Science in Entrepreneurship and Innovation programme.