

Employers Should Appreciate NS as a Plus

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THE results of a survey by the Institute of Policy Studies on National Service (NS) in Singapore released this week showed some worrying trends, especially when it came to the perceptions of respondents on employers' attitudes towards NS obligations.

While as many as 89 per cent of employed national servicemen (NSmen) who responded said employers were generally supportive of NS commitments, nearly half of the respondents believed that having such commitments could work against them when it came to finding jobs. A total of 42.1 per cent of the employed NSmen who participated in the survey said they either "slightly agreed", "agreed" or "strongly agreed", when asked if they believed that their employers preferred to hire employees without NS commitments.

These results suggest that a significant proportion of NSmen believe that employers are prejudiced against their NS commitments, which may keep them away from work periodically. The validity of this perception can probably only be ascertained anecdotally, but as the saying goes, there is no smoke without fire. If there are employers out there who indeed feel this way about hiring personnel with NS commitments, then something must be done to correct this attitude. NS is not only a key pillar of Singapore's "total defence" strategy, it also provides an integral platform for social cohesion and nation-building as well as character-building. Its value to society should not be underestimated, or diluted.

In a bottom line-driven corporate world it may be easy and tempting for employers to forget the importance of NS. Indeed, through the narrow lens of cost-benefit analysis, the gains from NS may be less tangible and direct, while the costs - in terms of employee absence - are more easily measurable. But they should remember that one of the key factors which distinguishes Singapore's economy and society from many others is its stability and security, which is a major plus for business. These virtues derive in no small measure from a strong NS-led defence strategy. Thus companies should have a vested interest in maintaining its central role. Moreover, hiring NS-trained employees can benefit business: Chances are that a candidate with a good NS track record would bring the same resilience and discipline to the workplace.

As such, the conversation between employers and the government on NS commitments should not be transactional in nature: Employers should not demand tax breaks or financial incentives in return for according greater recognition to NS commitments. On its part, the government can also help make the benefits from NS for employers to be more tangible and less diffused. Accreditation of key skills learnt during NS, for example, would help employers better appreciate the value of such staff. NS credentials may also help improve skill-matching by companies.

NS has served Singapore well and has thereby benefited business. This point may not be obvious to employers. But it deserves greater appreciation.

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