

Want or need Deputy PM says most Singaporean seniors want to keep working, others have their doubts

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Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong said on Jan. 16 that the majority of workers in Singapore want to work longer, as long as they are healthy.

Wong was speaking during a dialogue at the Singapore Perspectives 2023 conference organized by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and held at the Sands Expo and Convention Centre on Monday.

His statement was a response to infectious disease expert Paul Tambyah, who asked if the Silver Support scheme could be more universal to avoid a huge drop in income when they stop working. The scheme provides lower-income senior citizens with a quarterly cash payout during their retirement.

The case of the 70-year-old employee

Tambyah touched on the age of retirement in Singapore and asked, “Would anyone actually want to be operated on by a 70-year-old neurosurgeon? Or ride in a bus driven by a 70-year-old bus driver?”

He added, “The basis of this question is the narrative seems to be that we need to keep working. And if we are unable to do a particular job, we’ve got to retrain.”

In 2022, Singapore increased the official retirement age from 62 to 63, while the re-employment age increased from 67 to 68. This means that we still see people at working at age 70.

On top of that, since 2020, the employment rate of those aged 65 and above has increased gradually.

With longer lifespans comes longer employment

Replying to Tambyah, Wong said, “There’s obviously a limit to how long we can work. But also we must recognize with rising longevity, with people living longer lifespans, when we do our surveys, the majority of people do want to work longer so long as they are healthy.”

He said that “a lot of people” recognize that the minute they stop working, their health starts deteriorating quickly.

“Work is more than a source of income, and provides dignity and purpose... There is something fundamental and important about work,” he added.

Wong also said it is important to hold on to a stable job to “be assured of a basic retirement sum.’

Want vs need

While there may be some truth to the idea that work gives some people a sense of purpose, many on social media were quick to respond to Wong's comments by pointing out that it's important to differentiate between wanting to work and needing to work.

Wong was called out by some for gaslighting – a term used to describe mental manipulation by someone in a position of authority – while others described his comments as “out of touch” and ignorant.

Others questioned the survey that he cited and wondered how the questions were presented.

Singapore's track record with senior employment

But this attitude, or rather, messaging about Singaporeans wanting to work beyond retirement age, is not a new one.

In fact, such surveys are carried out regularly and, surprise, surprise, each year the results show that Singaporeans are seemingly happy to be in the workforce even in their golden years.

In a study commissioned by The Sunday Times in 2022, it was found that 3 in 4 older workers don't intend to retire before 65. The top reasons for wanting to remain employed were staying active, having a sense of purpose, maintaining social connections and saving up for old age.

The rising cost of living or inflation did not even make it into the 'top' reasons, which seems a little bit odd.

In 2015, then Minister for Social and Family Development Tan Chuan-Jin drew flak for his comments on elderly cardboard collectors in Singapore.

He said in a Facebook post, “The normal perception that all cardboard collectors are people who are unable to take care of themselves financially is not really true. There will be some who do this as their main source of income. Some do so to supplement what they have. Some prefer to earn extra monies, treat it as a form of exercise and activity rather than being cooped up at home. They do this to remain independent, so that they can have dignity and not have to ask their families for help.”

While his comments have been said to be in bad taste, there were also those who felt it was taken out of context.

Mindsets need to change – but for who?

Also present at the Singapore Perspectives 2023 conference was former diplomat Kishore Mahbubani, who asked Wong if there was a need to “rebalance” contributions made by the Government and society over the next 10 to 20 years when it comes to addressing key issues.

Wong was ready with his answer: “All of us will have to play a key role in changing mindsets and being prepared to pay more for services delivered by our fellow citizens, especially if we are concerned about uplifting the wages of lower-income Singaporeans.”

“In other words, you have to find other ways of generating revenues. And Singaporeans must be prepared to do their part to contribute those additional revenues in order for us to meet that increased expenditure and provide the necessary assurances and support for Singaporeans.”

Wong also acknowledged that policies have to be reviewed and updated.

Okay, but maybe first we can get rid of this ‘We love to work till we’re 70’ messaging?