

We shouldn't pit 1 generation against the next, both have a place in future workplaces SMU don

Straughan said there were always going to be aspirational similarities and differences between generations.

Tan Min-Wei

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Former Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP) and director of Singapore Management University's (SMU) Centre for Research on Successful Aging (ROSA) Paulin Straughan said that “we certainly should not be pitting one generation against the next”.

The sociologist made the comment at the Institute of Policy Studies' (IPS) flagship Singapore Perspectives 2023 conference, held on Jan. 16.

Together with fellow panellist David Chua, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the National Youth Council (NYC), they fielded a range of questions regarding the differing aspirations of young and not-so-young workers.

The importance of mutual respect

Straughan shared that the key to different generations getting along is mutual respect, even if they have different aspirations.

Using financial adequacy as an example of a shared aspiration, Straughan said that there will always be a question as to how much would be enough.

The professor also spoke of how the media uses pejorative labels to get certain groups of people up in arms.

She used the example of the term “strawberry”, usually meant to cast younger people in a negative light by saying they are fragile and easily bruised.

Calling these labels were “sexy for social media”, and used for the sake of headlines, she opined that they are not necessarily reflective of what the general public thinks, as they do not have a say in these labels.

As a result, a rift was formed as the youth felt misunderstood by older generations.

Chua agreed with Straughan’s points, saying that all Singaporeans could be an asset.

The best result, he said, would be to form intergenerational transfers and synergistic workplaces.

Straughan agreed, noting that she had learnt much from her own students, and that it was important to have healthy, respectful viewpoints, even if they do not align.

Work experience

These sentiments tied into her initial presentation for the panel, that the usual notion of intergenerational competition in the workplace did not have a place in the future.

Saying that such competition has traditionally taken on a "zero sum" aspect, that "when we don't get rid of the older guy, the younger kids cannot rise" in the workplace.

But saying that Singapore's demographic shift towards an older population would mean that there would be more older workers for longer, there was a need to ensure that both older and younger workers could exist in the same workplace.

She gave an example from her own workplace (ROSA), where young scholars were working with academics from the centre.

Straughan said that both younger scholars and older researchers had benefited substantially from working together, calling the intergenerational transfer "amazing".

Saying that mutual respect could be nurtured if coming from the right environment, it when "we highlight how each generation contributes to each other", and not "in conflict and contesting for limited resources".

More to life than work

A trend throughout the question and answer session was about attitudes towards work, and even the desirability of work, changed as people aged.

Paul Tambyah, infectious diseases expert from National University of Singapore, asked about whether it was wise for 70 year olds to still be working at jobs such as neurosurgeon or bus driver, saying there may have to a point when people could stop working, collect a pension, and pursue other interest.

Straughan felt the panel was not placed to speak about a national pension, but did opine that not all 70 year olds were in the same situation, saying that she did not like "pinning a chronological age to a stereotype".

While saying she did not believe that everyone in an age group should be treated the same way, she did agree that there had to be more to life than work.