

In praise of older workers

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IN RECENT years, there has been much discussion in Singapore about whether to raise the retirement age. Mr Lee Kuan Yew had suggested that we do away altogether with the concept of retirement. He also famously said that retirement equals death.

The practice in Singapore is for employers, both in the public and private sectors, to retire their employees at a certain age. This could be as young as 50 if they work in our police or armed forces. The Singapore Police Force and Singapore Armed Forces do, however, help their retirees to find second careers. The normal retirement age is 62. The Government has announced that the retirement age will be gradually raised from 62 to 67.

Another common practice in Singapore is for employers to rehire some of their employees after they reach retirement age, on half or a fraction of their previous pay and with reduced or no medical benefits.

My view is that it does not seem fair to do this if the employee does exactly the same work. Employees over 62 are not covered by the Retirement Age Act, which has just come into force, and the terms of their employment are determined by mutual agreement between them and their employers.

Another common practice is to reduce the contributions of the older worker and his employers to the Central Provident Fund. This is also a questionable practice.

All these practices are based upon the assumption that, by a certain age, a person is no longer able to perform his job as competently as he could when he was younger.

I want to question this assumption. I will do so by citing the examples of my dentist, tailor and optician, all of whom are in their 80s. If they were not self-employed, they would have been retired a long time ago. Singapore would have been deprived of their contributions. Isn't it irrational - to retire such competent and productive older persons when we are very short of manpower and import over a million foreign workers to work in Singapore?

My dentist is Dr Choo Teck Chuan, a partner at the dental practice Robertson Choo Oehlers Lee & Lye. He has served as the president of the Singapore Dental Association and was instrumental in bringing the World Dental Congress to Singapore in 1990. Dr Choo is 80 years old and has the energy and competence of a much younger man. Apart from his practice in Singapore, Dr Choo has also been an active volunteer abroad. He has shared his knowledge and experience with dentists in 17 countries, including China, India and Indonesia. He was recently honoured by the American Dental Association. He works 5 1/2 days a week.

My tailor is Mr Edward Kwan of Wai Cheong. Mr Kwan is a second-generation tailor and inherited his father's business. He has been working as a tailor for 64 years. He has many famous clients, at home and abroad, including former American president Bill Clinton. Mr Kwan's eyes are sharp and hands steady and he still cuts the fabric when you order a suit from him. He works six days a week. He is 80 years old.

My optician is Mr Leow Hock Chin of Star Optical. He has been working as an optician for 54 years. I have been a client of Mr Leow for many years. I find him competent and wise. He is 83 years old and works 5 1/2 days a week.

I don't think Dr Choo, Mr Kwan and Mr Leow are unique cases. Singaporeans now live much longer than they did a generation ago. If they are blessed with good health and are of sound mind and body, there is no reason to stop them from working or to downgrade them to a lower job or to reduce their pay and benefits. Given our manpower shortage, we should have a radical rethink about older workers and see them as assets and not liabilities. People should be judged on the basis of their ability and performance and not on age.

Those who wish to retire and can afford to do so, should, of course, be entitled to do so. But for others, who are fit and wish to continue to work, they should also be entitled to carry on.

I acknowledge that there is a tension between retaining older workers and recruiting young workers who are entering the labour market. We therefore need an economy which is growing and creating new jobs. We may also need to help some of our older workers undergo retraining so that they could work in sales or as caregivers, for example. The new trend is for individuals to have multi-careers in their lifetimes and to stop working only when they wish to and can afford to do so.

Work gives meaning to life. Work gives a person dignity and self-esteem. It is time for a mindset change. It is time to see our older workers in a new light. It is time for Singapore to recognise people like Dr Choo, Mr Kwan and Mr Leow as assets to our nation.

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