

## ‘Drive Productivity – Work Smarter’: Roundtable Report

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Can we raise productivity by working smarter? An IPS Roundtable on 28 February 2011 discussed strategies and prospects for improving productivity. Prof Ron Collard, Partner and Global Financial Services Human Resource Services Leader, and Mr Thorsten Barth, Director, Advisory, People and Change, from PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP, noted in their presentations that both policy makers and the private sector had shared responsibilities in raising labour productivity. Emphasising that talent management needs to be a critical priority for organisations and managers, Prof Collard raised key challenges such as an ageing workforce, which may require retention of critical staff past retirement age. Other challenges include handling “Generation Y” workers with distinctive characteristics such as “anti-commitment” and “boredom with routine”, dealing with the global mobility of labour, and

implementing successful strategies to put more women in the workplace.



Mr Ang Hin Kee, Chief Executive Officer of the Employment and Employability Institute (E2i), highlighted that new ways have to be found to eradicate “bottle necks” to productivity. In the drive towards productivity, some of the obstacles included “bad habits” such as over-reliance on foreign workers and acquisition of the cheapest services to save costs in the short run. An alternative approach could be incentivising the “right” employee behaviour such as working smarter, acquiring better industrial standard accreditations, promoting and giving recognition to skills certification.

Ms Iris Seet, Divisional Director for Curriculum and Educational Development, Institute of Technical Education (ITE), added that engaging with “Generation Y” is crucial because most students who

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### Millennials redefine future workforce models

Millennials display diverse characteristics from earlier generations of workforce. The way they work and operate influences the strategies that organisations adopt to attract and nurture tomorrow's leaders.

Tech-savvy	Civic-Minded	Connected 24/7	Educated
Entrepreneurial	Anti-Commitment	Self-Confident	Service-minded
Optimistic	Environmental	Bored by routine	Opinionated
Success-driven	Diverse	Lifestyle-centred	Goal oriented

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arrive at ITE are likely to deal with low self-esteem issues. If students are unmotivated and are not encouraged to be fully engaged with their jobs, their future productivity in the workplace would be affected. Ms Seet raised the service sector as a case in point since there are now more jobs in this sector, and workers' attitudes have a significant impact on their service delivery. In a rapidly changing economy, ITE focuses its attention on equipping students with core values and life skills that would allow them to manage transition to other sectors should their technical skills become redundant in future. She noted that events such as the Formula 1 Night Race in Singapore are weaved into the educational programmes to better engage with students.



In the discussion with participants, the panellists considered how the training for workers today can prepare them for jobs of tomorrow which are yet to be created. The objective was for these workers to remain relevant to the long term demands of the economy. To be adaptable, Mr Ang noted that some of the best innovations in productivity within companies do not come from bosses but from employees themselves. Employees also have the ability to take ownership of relevant skills upgrading because they should be familiar with the scope of skills required in their jobs. Companies can also work with government agencies on specific skill

requirements which are in demand. The government could co-fund and act as a co-investor into training programmes to develop these specific sectoral skills. Ms Seet added that core competencies such as effective communication skills in the customer service sector are always needed and these could be improved across the board.

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 Ensuring a pipeline of skilled workforce becomes critical



Source: PricewaterhouseCoopers Consulting, Global Productivity Report (2008)  
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How could companies manage workers with redundant skills? Ron Collard contended that companies have the responsibility of retaining their skilled workers in a talent-hungry world. They should ensure a better fit between the workers' skill sets and emerging employment opportunities.

However, small and medium-enterprises (SMEs) in Singapore, particularly those in the services sector may not be able to improve their productivity through increased automation. Producing goods and services by hand, and with a "human touch", may in fact be part of their branding. In addition, Mr Ang gave an example of demand for spa services – customers would want to be pampered by qualified personnel, not a machine. In this context, perhaps some services and hand-made products would have to charge a higher premium to reflect their "true" value and to attract skilled workers and maintain the quality of these traditional services or

products that could be considered part of our national heritage and identity.

In view of the rising cost of labour and a tightening supply of foreign labour, a change of consumer mindset might also have to be nurtured in terms of service expectations and promoting a do-it-yourself (DIY) mentality. In response to a question on the possible role of minimum wage in raising productivity, it was noted that no conclusive evidence is available to suggest a direct impact on productivity through this policy tool. While the discussion on productivity has centred on what the employees can do, a participant asked about the top three mistakes that managers often make in their approach to

improving productivity. Prof Collard noted that often, the value of the employees is not sufficiently recognised, management does not engage nor listen to their employees, and talent management is not a strategic priority at the senior leadership level. In his closing remarks, Roundtable Chairperson, Mr Manu Bhaskaran, IPS Adjunct Senior Research Fellow reminded the audience that raising productivity levels remains a complex issue and will likely require a multi-dimensional and multi-sectoral response.

*Presentation slides can be viewed [here](#).*

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