

**Singapore Perspectives 2023: Work**  
**Panel 8: The Meaning and Value of Work: Taking a Cross-Generational Perspective**

By Sakunika Wewalaarachchi and Elvin Xing

The Institute of Policy Studies’ annual flagship conference, Singapore Perspectives, seeks each year to engage thinking Singaporeans in a lively debate on the country’s policy challenges. The theme for this year was “Work”, with discussions focusing on how disruptions and trends in technology, socio-economic developments and Singapore’s demographics would shape the future of work.

In this discussion, Professor Paulin Straughan (Director, Centre for Research on Successful Ageing) and Mr David Chua (Chief Executive Officer, National Youth Council) tackle cross-generational perspectives at work. The ensuing Q&A session was moderated by Dr Teo Kay Key, Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies’ Social Lab..



*Caption for photo: Professor Paulin Straughan (left), Mr David Chua and Dr Teo Kay Key discussing the meaning and value of work at Panel 8 of the IPS Singapore Perspectives 2023 Conference.*

## Work Aspirations of Singaporean Youth

Mr David Chua referred to findings from multiple social-scientific studies conducted in Singapore to share six key insights on the work aspirations of Singapore's youth.

In his remarks, he attested that these six findings corroborate well with the findings of the recent IPS survey on the work aspirations of Singaporeans, titled "Future of Work Singaporeans Want":

*First key finding: The desire among youth for (a) personal growth, (b) learning new skills and (c) career success is consistently high*

- Data from the time-series *National Youth Survey* study conducted by the National Youth Council indicates that Singapore's youth have consistently ranked growth, learning and career success highly when considering their professional aspirations.

*Second key finding: Youth aspire to jobs that offer (a) development opportunities and (b) financial security*

- Findings from the *Youth STEPS Longitudinal Study* conducted by the Institute of Policy Studies further demonstrate that Singapore's youth aspire to land jobs that provide opportunities for advancement, job security and the meeting of immediate financial needs like "paying the bills" or, more simply, "keeping afloat".

*Third key finding: Youth have increasingly signalled the importance of (a) work-life balance and (b) a sense of meaning in their jobs*

- According to data from the longitudinal *Youth Sentiment Polls* conducted by the National Youth Council, youth have increasingly signalled the importance of having a work-life balance and a sense of meaning in their professional life.
- To elaborate, one in two have aspired to have jobs that offer work-life balance, while over three in five would not stay in their jobs if they did not find meaning in them.

*Fourth key finding: A sizable proportion of youths express career uncertainty resulting from the need to keep up with competition and insufficient opportunities to pursue jobs aligned to their interests and passions*

- Data from the *Youth Sentiment Polls* and the *Youth STEPS Longitudinal Study* show that 37 per cent of youths were uncertain about their career paths.
- Seven in 10 have indicated that they faced more competition from foreign talent while slightly over half have expressed an inability to keep up with the skills required in the "ever-changing nature" of work and the global economy.
- Furthermore, over two in five youths believe that there were insufficient opportunities to pursue jobs that are aligned with their interests and passions.

*Fifth key finding: Youths are open to re/up-skilling themselves as well as alternative pathways to improve their professional prospects*

- Survey analyses of the *Youth Sentiment Polls* and the *Youth STEPS Longitudinal Study* show that over one in three youths considered learning new skills or upgrading their skill-sets to improve their employability.
- In addition, one in five were open to explore employment opportunities in alternative industries whilst three in 10 felt there should be greater social acceptance to pursue alternative career pathways off the beaten track.

*Sixth key finding: Youths desire greater support in terms of career development, career guidance and navigating career switches*

- Findings from the *Youth Sentiment Polls* and the *Youth STEPS Longitudinal Study* indicated a desire for greater support when it comes to the themes of career development, career guidance and career switches.
- The top three areas to address in this respect include:
  1. the availability and accessibility of development opportunities to remain employable and relevant (cited by 36 per cent)
  2. career guidance, mentorship and support during the school-to-work transition and beyond (cited by 34 per cent)
  3. support for switching fields and or industries (cited by 30 per cent)

### **Reflections on the “Young Persons’ Dilemma”, States of Mind and Modes of Behaviours**

Mr Chua concluded by reflecting on the possible ways to better equip young people for success as they straddle the disjuncture between realising their aspirations and the practical realities of a professional life in Singapore.

He suggested that youths today are facing a dilemma. On the one hand, they aspire to a future of work and play in new industries, new markets and new ways of doing work. On the other hand, they are faced with practical challenges related to the costs of living and the difficulties of establishing a home and family.

On how this dilemma might be resolved, Mr Chua said it would not be enough for organisations to simply try to match the aspirations expressed by Singapore youths. The larger question for Singapore to consider is how a future workforce might be nurtured with the kinds of students now transiting into employment.

For Mr Chua, such an endeavour comes down to instilling suitable attributes, mindsets, behaviours and values in Singaporean youth by leveraging appropriate forms of mentorship. In particular, Mr Chua recommends a mindset of “discovery” where youth are inspired and empowered to expand their social capital, build professional networks and thrive when given free and unsupervised time. He clarified that this would better equip youths for success as they navigate the disjuncture between aspirations and reality.

### **Interrogating “Work” as a Social Construct**

Professor Straughan highlighted the multidimensional nature of “work” by discussing the tangible and intangible aspects of what it means to be a working member of society.

While tangible financial outcomes — like monetary value — are typically emphasised in mainstream definitions of work, sociological perspectives are shown to account for intangible outcomes, such as:

- social status (especially in capitalist societies);
- self-esteem;
- integration into broader social networks; and,
- a sense of psychological well-being from feeling connected to others with similar aspirations.

Thus, the state of retirement or unemployment is argued to have adverse psychological and social impacts in some cases, in the form of diminished self-worth or feelings of social isolation.

## Challenges Faced When Mature Workers Seek Re-Employment

In the second part of her presentation, Professor Straughan dove into the challenges faced by mature workers in their journey towards re-employment.

She drew on data from *The Singapore Life Panel* (SLP), a longitudinal panel study representative of older cohorts aged 55 to 75, to demonstrate that respondents faced certain disincentives and barriers to re-employment even though they, on average, wished to continue working until the age of 69.

Specific issues cited included re-employment conditions, which entailed:

- wage reductions (cited by 27.9 per cent)
- changes in the number of working hours (cited by 19.2 per cent)
- changes to duties and responsibilities (cited by 24.5 per cent),
- cuts to non-wage benefits such as leave benefits, corporate discounts and medical insurance coverage (cited by 30.5 per cent)

Positive work engagements were also linked to the holistic well-being of *SLP* respondents and Professor Straughan posited that it would be in Singapore's national interest to maintain a high level of well-being amongst older cohorts through the facilitation of such engagements. She contended that it will be critical for Singapore to empower mature workers who wish to return to the labour force.

## Leveraging Extended Life Expectancies

Professor Straughan outlined four key strategies to leverage the extended life expectancies of Singaporeans and support those seeking re-employment as mature workers.

First, she recommended bridging the gap between health adjusted life expectancy and life expectancy, so that older persons are no longer stereotyped as “liabilities” or “dependents” based on their numerical age alone.

Second, Professor Straughan urged the curation of new roles and responsibilities that take into account the value of mature workers as socio-cultural assets and repositories of rich lived experiences.

The third strategy involved maximising the advantages of flexi-work arrangements to provide mature workers with robust work conditions.

Lastly, the fourth strategy entailed the development of alternative forms of work — like volunteerism — for older adults who can no longer engage in traditional forms of paid work but can continue to gain from social involvement.

## Nurturing Inter-Generational Transfers

Wrapping up her presentation, Professor Straughan emphasised the importance of nurturing inter-generational transfers. She argued that such transfers, in the context of the workplace, are capable of benefiting employees of all ages with a healthier work-life balance through the involvement of mature workers.

As such, she cautioned that mature workers should not be written off by employers simply by virtue of age. Instead, different generations could contribute to one another's well-being and enable the reaping of mutual gains both in the workplace and beyond.

## Question-and-Answer Session

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**Q:** How should organisations put structures in place to build respect between the young and old workers?

**A:** Mr Chua suggested that organisations steward the growth of their employees and allow for intergenerational transfers of knowledge to take place between younger and older workers. He stressed that such practices could create synergistic workplaces where everyone is able to contribute and perceive value in the work they do, regardless of what the official retirement age may be. He asserted that communication channels could be facilitated by union leaders who may play the role of neutral negotiators to create amenable outcomes for all parties. This would require time, or what he termed as “strategic patience”, for positive changes to take root.

In terms of bridging intergenerational differences, Professor Straughan reinforced the need for having mutual respect and working to find common landing points instead of resorting to labels and pitting the young against the old. She echoed Mr Chua’s point on the significance of intergenerational transfers of knowledge and experience as these would allow citizens to cultivate a healthy respect for each other, despite having differing viewpoints.

**Q:** Who would be comfortable being operated on by a 70-year-old, or driven by a 70-year-old bus driver? There has to be a point in time where we can stop work and enjoy the rest of our lives. Why can’t we set aside our income into a pooled pension, or are there other ways to allow people to achieve this ideal?

**A:** While the speakers noted that analyses of pension structures were out of their remit, Mr Chua shared that we should consider how we ascribe value to older workers in the workplace. He highlighted that organisations should examine innovative ways to allow older workers to contribute in different ways.

Professor Straughan pointed to the problem of reducing a chronological age to a stereotype and called for a rethink on how Singapore can engage citizens to live productive lives. In her view, this undertaking should involve valuing contributions from older generations whether in the form of paid or unpaid work.

**Q:** How can we nudge the Human Resources (HR) industry to encourage workers to find meaning in their jobs? How can we ensure fair wages and conditions without exploiting meaning?

**A:** When considering the issue of ensuring fair wages, Professor Straughan cautioned that flexible modes of work are dependent on output-based evaluations rather than “face time” or being physically present. She noted that a fair system of remuneration would inspire confidence in employees who would know that their contributions would be recognised even when working from home.

Mr Chua emphasised the role of HR and the responsibility that employers have to set clear work expectations and communicate these effectively to their employees. He further highlighted that unions could further enhance their role by showing themselves to be a neutral mediator. This could make organisations more open to participate in negotiations in the first place and work towards better outcomes for all who are involved.

**Q:** For intermediaries in the space, those doing the job of career and job matching, how adequate are they in our current employment landscape, and what policies or programmes need to be put in place to strengthen the competencies of this group of people?

**A:** Professor Straughan drew attention to the role of HR personnel and how they may serve as advisors and curators of new office cultures and frameworks. In particular, she attested that

HR policies could be augmented to help workers to rise to their fullest potential as each generation of workers would enter the workplace with their own set of aspirations. According to Professor Straughan, such an endeavour would require organisations to go beyond a fixation on academic qualifications when hiring and appreciate, instead, the holistic talent and passion that each person can bring.

With regard to the role of intermediaries, Professor Straughan asserted that recruiters and placement officers have the power to advise employers in their search talent and advise potential applicants on where to invest their careers. She said this puts intermediaries in a unique position to advocate for the people they work with and the employers that they work for. She further emphasised the importance of looking beyond paper qualifications to identify the talents and passions of prospective employees.

Mr Chua shared that younger workers are indeed looking for mentorship and coaching in their careers. However, he cautioned that organisations should create a formal space to train mentors and allow fluidity in the mentorship process to achieve effective mentoring.

**Q:** How should we define which jobs are meaningful? This is especially important given that some less meaningful jobs are more well compensated than those which might be more meaningful.

**A:** Mr Chua suggested that youths could gain new perspectives by meeting and talking to people on the ground. However, he said that for many of these youths, there is an unavoidable tension between one's self-worth and value, and what society at large perceives to be valuable. In navigating this tension, Mr Chua pointed out that there are trade-offs and not all aspirations can be achieved at one go. Hence, he called for youths to be patient and prioritise their aspirations according to the season of life they are in.

**Q:** Current findings show that the retirement age will increase. Will this also be true for the younger generation, such as Millennials and Generation Z?

**A:** Professor Straughan argued that aspirations are social constructs and that aspirations are products of socialisation and one's agency. As such, she attested that every generation would have their own notions of work aspirations and that a stock take of these aspirations would be useful. She shared that meaningful aspirations of work can be developed at the individual level by considering how one's aspirations can benefit others. Professor Straughan clarified that this would help people to view work as a curated form of productive engagement that goes beyond paid work and one that is inclusive of intrinsic contributions, such as care work.

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