

Singapore Perspectives 2024: Youth Panel 4: Youth & Work

By Mindy Chong

The Singapore Perspectives conference seeks to engage thinking Singaporeans in a lively debate on the country's policy challenges. The theme for this year was "Youth", with discussions focusing on the multitude of obstacles faced by young Singaporeans in the face of a rapidly evolving society, and how youths can tackle the uncertain terrain ahead of them.

At the start of the panel titled "Youth & Work", the audience was shown a compilation of video interviews of young Singaporeans from all walks of life talking about their careers and goals for the future. With professions in industries ranging from food delivery to tech to healthcare, these interviewees shared what work meant to them, the challenges they faced in their employment journeys, and how policy changes can aid in improving employment experiences for Singaporean youths.

This panel featured Ms Thian Wen Li, journalist for *The Straits Times* at SPH Media Trust; Professor Sam Yam, Provost's Chair Professor of Management and Head of the Department of Management and Organisation at the National University of Singapore Business School; and Ms Natasha Choy, Acting Director (Youth Development) at the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC). The panellists expanded on the facets of youth and work touched upon in the video through their areas of expertise, and their sharing was followed by a dynamic Q&A session moderated by Dr Laurel Teo, Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS).



Caption for photo: (From right to left) Dr Laurel Teo, Ms Thian Wen Li, Professor Sam Yam and Ms Natasha Choy discussing the working environment for young Singaporeans.

Understanding Young Workers Through Gig Work

Ms Thian Wen Li gave a riveting anecdote about being one of the few young Singaporeans working in a meat-packing factory, which sparked her interest in ethnographic work on young Singaporeans in blue-collar jobs. As pointed out by Ms Thian, Singaporeans working in blue-collar jobs are typically older, so “where are the young workers?”

Given the entrepreneurial spirit, perceived fairness and flexibility of gig work — as shared by the food delivery riders Ms Thian interacted with during her ethnographic research at her previous job in IPS — it is understandable for gig work to be one of the more popular blue-collar industries amongst younger Singaporeans. There seemed to be a belief amongst young gig workers that hard work translated to better pay, making gig work more attractive for young workers tired of the rigidity and lack of upward mobility of other jobs

However, one of the interviewees in the pre-panel video who worked as a food delivery rider said his income from gig work was not very high and the work was often physically demanding. Ms Thian’s research mirrored the worries of the interviewee; the median salary from food delivery riding was found to be about \$1,900, and those who earned \$5,000 and above had to resort to working extremely long hours or in dangerous conditions. Ms Thian also found that gig workers often relied on horizontal mobility — an additional occupation that does not alter their overall social standing — to bolster their incomes, but the arduous nature of these jobs meant that they were unsustainable in the long run. She also highlighted the precarity of their working conditions, for instance with work injuries or accidents affecting their ability to continue earning through gig work, which is further compounded by the lack of employment benefits.

It was not all doom and gloom, as Ms Thian brought up the benefits of gig work. Even if remuneration from gig work has been steadily declining, the gig work economy will always be readily accessible and therefore can be used as a safety net for many young workers. Gig work can also help to fund young Singaporeans’ passions, which might not pay enough for a living. Ms Thian also said that gig work can help non-graduates address the large gap between their salaries and graduates’ salaries.

Generational Differences at Work

To encourage young Singaporeans in the audience to pursue their goals, Professor Sam Yam first introduced the psychological concept of affective forecasting where people erroneously predict the extent of their feelings in the future. Professor Yam's advice for youths was to bravely chase after their dreams despite the possibility of failure, because the negative feelings that accompany failure would not be as overwhelming as expected.

Professor Yam then segued into his presentation by questioning what causes the differences in how different generations think and act in the workplace, to which he attributed to the different ways each generation interacted with technology. The younger generation that grew up with social media saw the world through lenses personally curated for them through algorithms created by technological companies, thus each individual lived in "their own little bubble of their own mediated reality".

He next introduced his research on how Artificial Intelligence (AI) affected the perception of hard work. His study found that, due to the reduced perceived uniqueness of the work they produced, participants who used AI to complete tasks indicated that hard work was less useful to them in life, as compared to participants who did not use AI. Additionally, the study found that blind raters gave a higher score to AI-assisted work than work produced solely by human writers. This study demonstrated how technology could affect the work behaviours and values of youths.

Youth Taskforce Engagement

Through her yearlong effort of engaging youths through the NTUC Youth Taskforce, to understand how to better support and enable youths entering the workforce, Ms Natasha Choy found similar findings as shared by interviewees in the pre-panel video. Ms Choy and her team uncovered the three most prominent concerns youths had upon entering the workforce: 1) achieving work-life balance, 2) the ability to adapt to work and 3) deciding on their career prospects without being limited by others' expectations.

Interacting and engaging with youths, Ms Choy noted a generation gap in communication, which she believed could pose a challenge for the multigenerational workforce. Thus it is important for different stakeholders in the workforce to gain a better understanding of the work-life aspirations of young Singaporeans.

The Youth Taskforce engagement sessions proved fruitful in determining the common goals of young Singaporeans entering the workforce. Ms Choy shared that youths desired connecting and collaborating with others, especially through mentorship programmes to help them gain real-world insights and a better understanding of the workplace. Youths also seemed to want a workplace that could allow them to build their professional portfolios and explore career progression opportunities. Finally, youths wished for a flexible workplace that involved them in the decision-making process and focused on purpose-driven practices.

Ms Choy rounded off the panellists' sharing by emphasising the importance of the workplace adapting to the needs and goals of young workers, as well as working alongside youths to ensure that their contributions are valued, their potential is nurtured, and their voices are heard.

Question-and-Answer Session

Q: Could the increase in gig jobs possibly be because youths do not want to have a normal sit-down job, but something more interesting?

A: While Ms Thian agreed that gig work might appeal to youths averse to traditional 9-to-5 office jobs, she also acknowledged that gig work is attractive to youths due to their greater willingness to take risks and seek new experiences. This phenomenon does not occur only in the gig work industry, but also in the larger freelancing and creative economy, as these jobs have unique appeal to youths. Nevertheless, Ms Thian re-emphasised the unsustainability of gig work and questioned its long-term viability as workers age. Professor Yam, through his experience in teaching undergraduates, noted that few of his students wanted to enter the gig economy. Instead, he attributed the popularity of gig work amongst young Singaporeans to a lack of guidance and an absence of a clear sense of direction for their career. He also reiterated Ms Thian's point of the unsustainability of gig work and encouraged young gig workers to discover where their passions truly lie and to seek more fulfilling employment outside of gig work. For the youths Ms Choy interacted with through the Youth Taskforce, gig work helped to build their professional portfolios, and they valued gig work for its flexibility, which enabled them to pursue their passions on the side.

Q: Do the panellists think that it is important to attract younger Singaporeans to blue-collar jobs? Will raising salaries help; if not, what would it take?

A: Professor Yam said that although increasing salaries might make blue-collar jobs more attractive for youths in Singapore, the labour market structure in Singapore meant that a salary increase is unlikely. Aside from salary, which she believed will be unlikely to increase as well, Ms Thian underscored the importance of destigmatising blue-collar jobs, given that many of these jobs are crucial to the workings of society. Ms Choy highlighted the diversity in the career aspirations of youths and urged employers to improve on skills progressions and compensation packages for young workers. Ms Choy also brought up NTUC's Career Starter Lab where youths can undergo structured trainings and mentorships; this can serve as a way for youths to explore different career pathways and better understand their future careers, including jobs in blue-collar industries.

Q: How much does social status factor in people's considerations when they take up jobs, and how do you drive important jobs towards securing social status?

A: Professor Yam said research has shown that for many in high-paying white-collar jobs, the actual value of salary increases, in terms of life satisfaction and happiness, is near zero. Instead, other than passion, Professor Yam proposed status as another main factor that pushes workers in high-paying white-collar jobs to do better at work.

Q: What do you think about youths' expectations of their workplace, especially when small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) can afford fewer resources as compared to multinational corporations (MNCs)? How do we get youths to adjust their expectations and accept that their jobs might not be as glamorous as others, in terms of salary, benefits, workplace facilities, etc.?

A: Ms Choy replied that most youths are clear about the skills they wish to gain from their internships or jobs and how they wish to build up their professional portfolios, thus SMEs with fewer resources can attract candidates who might be the “right fit” by being clearer about skills the company can impart on young workers should they choose to accept the job. Ms Thian built on Ms Choy’s point by reasoning that regardless of the glamour of the job, youths can view each job as an experience to gain new skills and figure out what they enjoy in work.

Q: What do you think schools and universities should be teaching to help prepare people better for the workforce in the present?

A: Aside from quantifiable skill sets, such as those taught in currently popular AI and technology courses, Professor Yam emphasised the timelessness of people management skills like negotiation and leadership, particularly since these skills can never be outsourced to others. Ms Choy believed it important to help youths build up their resilience and adaptability, as well as to inculcate a mindset of lifelong learning. Both Ms Choy and Ms Thian agreed with Professor Yam about the importance of soft skills, with Ms Thian explaining that soft skills like knowing how to network can help youths enter the workforce seamlessly regardless of the next up-and-coming industry. Ms Thian also added that youths should have a focused understanding of what they want to do and work towards it, and that youths should be open to learning and new experiences.

Q: With the volatility of the creative industry, is an expanded role of the NTUC feasible to protect workers in the industry, especially since gig workers and freelancers make up the bulk of the labour force?

A: Ms Choy explained that there is a Freelancers & Self-Employed Unit (U FSE) at NTUC that is currently working on representation for freelancers, and expressed that NTUC could do more in career guidance for freelancers to help them better understand their rights and contracts, and in directing them to avenues for where they can address their concerns.

Q: Given a recent incident where a company ignored the unions in retrenching staff, how can NTUC engage better with youths to understand their workplace rights and responsibilities?

A: Visiting Institutes of Higher Learning (IHLs) has helped Ms Choy understand youths’ anxieties about the workplace as well as educate youths about unions they can go to once they step into the workforce should they encounter workplace disputes. Ms Choy also acknowledged that NTUC could do more to afford youths more information and assistance concerning matters outside of protection, such as work prospects and future placements. Beyond giving talks, Ms Choy hoped for NTUC to help youths better understand how to interpret their contracts.

Q: As reported in a CNBC article, “work-life balance matters less to those that earn more”, as the cost of living increases, will there be a conflict between wanting to do more work, and achieving work-life balance?

A: Professor Yam suggested that individuals in high-paying jobs most likely place less importance on work-life balance due to their inherent passion for their work rather than simply being workaholics. Ms Choy stated that youths should recognise that their career trajectory is long and that they will have time to pursue their dreams. Therefore, as Ms Choy explained,

work-life balance does not have to take place at a specific role and time, and instead should be looked at through the lens of their broader career life. Ms Thian acknowledged that passion may not be able to sustain young workers due to the demanding nature of certain jobs; therefore how much work-life balance they are willing to sacrifice depends on their priorities at each given stage of their career life.

Q: Given that Professor Yam's research shows that AI-assisted work is rated higher, should there be a point where proficiency in using AI tools like ChatGPT be recognised as a proper skill? How should AI assistance be integrated into academic and professional settings?

A: Professor Yam replied that he believed proficiency in using AI tools should eventually be recognised as a skill. Professor Yam responded to the second part of the question by stating that he often encouraged his students to use AI to better understand the topics he taught in class, and hoped that other educators could use AI to enhance the quality of education.

Q: Can youths fit in gig work or blue-collar jobs into their professional portfolio and help propel them to gain better job opportunities?

A: Ms Choy affirmed that gig work and blue-collar jobs could most definitely fit into professional portfolios, and suggested that youths should be provided with guidance as to how to design their portfolios such that these experiences can fit into their career aspirations. Ms Choy continued by encouraging youths to embark on a mentorship programme to gain clarity in building towards their career goals. Ms Thian added that even if these jobs do not fit perfectly in youths' resumes, the distinctiveness of these experiences can help youths grow and develop unique skills, which could propel them further in their professional lives.

Q: How should youths find their true areas of interest for future careers?

A: While most people believe that interests will show up unexpectedly, Professor Yam opined that interests and passions are developed, and that talent and passion are not always mutually inclusive. Professor Yam also shared his personal experience of having mentors help guide his career trajectory. Ms Choy advised youths to take their time to discover their passions by going out of their comfort zones and trying new things, which can help them expand their worldview. Drawing from her personal experience, Ms Thian agreed with Professor Yam and advocated for youths to turn what they like into what they are good at.

Q: Youths wish to gain meaning from their work to help ameliorate the feelings of helplessness in the face of societal issues; how can employers make every job meaningful for youths?

A: Professor Yam addressed the tendency for youths to feel powerless about societal issues like climate change and inequality by countering with the reality of the progress humankind has made, and encouraged youths to be more hopeful about the future. Ms Choy proposed for companies to clearly articulate the impact of the company on larger issues, as well as draw relevance between the individual strengths of young workers to the impact of the company to keep young workers entering the company in minor roles motivated and ensure that young workers feel they are adding value to the company. Ms Thian expressed her belief that work is not the only avenue for youths to find meaning.

[Mindy Chong](#) is a Research Assistant at the Institute of Policy Studies' Social Lab.

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