

Are Singaporean workers... expensive & entitled?

These are the charges some employers have levelled against locals in a recent debate over wages and skills. Robin Chan investigates.

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A YOUNG university graduate walks into his first job interview at a shipping firm waving a salary survey his school provided for him and demands a starting salary above \$4,000.

But that is what a more senior employee gets only after three to four years on the job.

Another, applying for an analyst position at an investment bank, asks if he will have his own office and secretary.

There are others: Singaporean professionals turning down overseas postings, job-hopping with a vengeance or wanting more benefits and less work.

These stories of professionals behaving badly have emerged in the wake of a Sunday Times commentary last month in which a multinational corporation (MNC) boss asked: "Do Singaporeans deserve the salaries they are paid?"

They lack the skills, and the hunger, he observed.

The article sparked much discussion, with readers writing in worried that the new generation might be too soft and lack the skills to keep up in the global contest of talent.

Others empathised with the plight of the Singaporean worker, saying salaries need to rise faster to keep up with the high cost of living.

There does seem a growing perception that the Singaporean employee is getting more demanding and less deserving of his pay. But are the criticisms justified? Or are these Singaporeans just misunderstood?

Common complaints

CERTAINLY, there is no lack of gripes about the Singaporean worker. The more than 10 employers, headhunters and human resource experts The Straits Times spoke to mostly agreed that some of the criticisms are deserved.

Mr Chan Chong Beng, president of the Association of Small and Medium Enterprises (Asme) and the founder of interior design firm Goodrich Global, says he finds foreign professionals much more motivated at work.

"The foreigner is worried that you don't give him work," he says. "The Singaporean is worried that he has too much work! The foreigners are also actually more committed to their work, that is the general consensus within my company."

Mr V. S. Kumar, managing director of local courier company Network Express Courier Services, says Singaporean workers only seem motivated just to do enough and have no qualms about dropping everything and leaving on the dot at 5.30pm every day.

However, his staff from India, the Philippines and Vietnam are keen to stay back after office hours to learn new skills.

Others criticised Singaporeans for lacking communication skills.

One consultant from the United States says his Singaporean team members tend to be more quiet during team meetings and conference calls with clients.

Mr Na Boon Chong, managing director at HR consultancy Aon Hewitt, says: "If you're talking about the ability to present their ideas, to communicate, then, in general, local PMETs are behind their Western counterparts. The differences might be down to culture and the respective education systems."

When they do speak up, however, it is to demand things such as more work-life balance and faster promotions.

Mr Asothan Samynathan, general manager of Ark Vision Spare and Engineering, a distributor of marine equipment, says: "Singaporeans are quite impatient and want to become managers and above in a short time."

In MNCs where overseas assignments and postings are common, Singaporeans have also tended to be more resistant to being moved, the employers say.

Mr Peter Baker, director of human resources at shipping firm Maersk Line in the Asia-Pacific region, says: "People from countries like Vietnam, China, Indonesia or Australia are more willing to move away, whereas Singaporeans, historically, have been less willing to move outside of Singapore."

What do employees think about all this?

Some found the criticisms unfounded or an over-generalisation. National University of Singapore (NUS) student Claudio Chock, 24, who is set to graduate with an arts degree, says: "It is very subjective. There may be some who lack communication skills, but there are others, too, who do have the soft skills."

Others say Singapore workers may be falling behind foreign co-workers. An assistant manager at OCBC bank, Mr Gary Hoon, 25, says there "is a basis of truth" that it has been relatively easier for Singaporeans in the past five to 10 years.

But he says a bit of perspective is needed: "Comparing the entire Singaporean workforce with this small select group of employees who left their home country to make it into another country to work here, naturally they would be more driven."

Another, who gave his name only as Mr Toh, 34, and is now self-employed after leaving a job in sales at an MNC, feels it is only fair that a salary should reflect the amount of work put into the job.

But he adds Singaporeans probably want more out of a job than before: "I also look at opportunities for personal growth and good mentorship. If a company can't give me what I am looking for, then I'll find a better job."

Generation misaligned?

PERHAPS Singapore has become a victim of its own success.

The much-celebrated rapid economic growth and first-class education has led to a better quality of life for the majority of Singaporeans very quickly.

Just over the last decade, Singapore's per capita gross domestic product rose from \$38,865 in 2002 to \$65,048 last year.

According to the World Bank, this makes Singapore, on a per head basis, wealthier than Hong Kong and the United States.

The number of degree and diploma holders has surged from 31 per cent of the labour force in 2002 to 48 per cent last year.

Could this affect the hunger and competitive drive?

Indeed, former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew once observed: "The spurs are not stuck on the hinds (of Singaporeans). They are part of the herd - why go faster? But when you're lagging behind, you must go faster to catch up with the herd."

With this economic and educational progress has come higher expectations from Singaporeans for a certain quality of life.

Says Mr Toby Fowlston, managing director at recruitment firm Robert Walters Singapore: "Good academic qualifications are not a rite of passage, especially given the ever-increasing numbers of graduates who are hitting high academic standards."

Aon Hewitt's Mr Na, too, has noticed a distinct change in attitude to work: "Where I'm seeing change is in these workers wanting work-life balance instead of just focusing on career progression, the more qualitative aspects.

"The PMET (professionals, managers, executives and technicians) is becoming more assertive about what he or she wants and is more comfortable voicing these concerns. It is very different from 10 to 15 years ago."

Better work-life balance has been a major topic in the Our Singapore Conversation.

A recent survey of 6,000 university students here by consultancy Universum found that the main thing they want from their careers is work-life balance, beating job security, intellectual challenge and an international career.

In the last decade, unemployment has also been remarkably low here, so finding a job or switching jobs has not been difficult.

More than nine in 10 polytechnic and university graduates who entered the job market last year were able to get a job within six months of graduating.

The impact of a tight labour market has also created "an employee's market", says Mr Victor Tay, chief operating officer of the Singapore Business Federation.

"Workers can be a lot choosier, not just with salary, but also the job scope, exposure they will receive and even the location of their offices," he says.

The shortage of workers has also led to a situation where people are prematurely promoted before they reach the necessary performance level, he adds.

A tight labour market - getting tighter with more restrictions on foreign workers - has also inflated wages in some sectors. Salaries do not reflect real productivity-driven growth - straining companies' costs, while further raising expectations of employees.

Dr Richard Arvey, head of the Department of Management and Organisation at NUS Business School, says: "When unemployment is so low that people can hop jobs, that puts pressures on companies to maintain or raise the salaries and it raises expectations of many of the people here."

The latest unemployment rate is 1.9 per cent, and among residents it is 2.9 per cent, both much lower than in the United States and Britain where unemployment has soared. Even compared to other competitive Asian economies such as Hong Kong, where unemployment is 3.4 per cent, and South Korea, where it is 3.2 per cent, it holds up well.

This has been supported by new growth drivers in the form of the integrated resorts, as well as government intervention by way of the Jobs Credit Scheme during the financial crisis, which prompts employers like Goodrich Global's Mr Chan to bemoan that the Singaporean worker is "overprotected" by the Government, leading to a stronger sense of entitlement among workers.

"How will they react when the economy really gets bad?" he wonders.

At the same time, the pursuit of higher salaries is partly because Singaporeans are increasingly worried about maintaining social mobility and their living standards.

Property prices have soared, fuelled by low interest rates and easy money. An influx of foreigners to boost the economy has put a squeeze on resources.

A survey of 1,000 white collar workers in Singapore by recruitment firm Michael Page found their most pressing concern this year to be meeting their growing cost of living with their current salary.

Sociologist Tan Ern Ser at the Institute of Policy Studies says that a younger generation entering the workforce is finding it much more difficult to achieve their aspirations compared to their parents, creating a "misalignment" of expectations with reality when they start to work.

"With rising competition for jobs and rising costs of the big ticket items, they feel that the goal posts have shifted further away," he says.

Regaining its mojo

THERE is no quick fix to helping the Singaporean white-collar worker recover his edge. The answer lies with employers, employees and schools and the need for them to adapt to changing economic circumstances and societal expectations.

In the workplace, HR practices need to evolve to get the best out of the new generation workforce, and retain and develop individuals better, say the experts.

OCBC bank has changed its HR programmes across different generations to allow for leadership development, there are job rotations internationally and any employee who has worked for five years in the company is entitled to a three-month unpaid break, no questions asked, says Ms Jacinta Low, head of HR planning at the bank.

As for improving communication skills and critical thinking, schools could start honing these skills at an earlier age.

More project work at schools that requires teamwork and problem-solving, and public speaking and presentations to build up confidence are all needed, employers suggest.

Schools and employers need to also emphasise and better reward technical skills rather than just academic ones, they say, to encourage Singaporeans to place more emphasis on these abilities.

Many employers also point to overseas experience as doing wonders to a person's development, especially at an early age.

This requires support from schools, parents and a mindset change among Singaporeans themselves.

Improving commuting to workplaces outside the CBD such as Tuas will also help make it easier to attract and retain Singaporeans in a larger variety of sectors.

But all that cannot replace what is perhaps the biggest factor - self-motivation and pride to continually get better.

As living standards and aspirations rise, it is even more of an imperative for the individual Singaporean to strive to improve, to compete and stay relevant.

"You feel the stress of competition, but it is fair game. In this day and age it is unavoidable, and it should spur you on to greater heights," says bank assistant manager Mr Hoon.