

Be more connected to Asean to remain competitive: Panel

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The need to understand Asean to seize the region's geographical advantage and stay ahead appears lost on many Singaporeans, and this is a concern for Economic Development Board managing director Chng Kai Fong.

He noted yesterday that many students go abroad for exchange programmes and internships, but the interest is in going to places like Stanford University in the United States or universities in Europe, rather than those in Jakarta or Ho Chi Minh City.

The preference to work in certain cities even had a regional company's chief executive declaring that he had given up on hiring Singaporeans as management trainees, turning to Malaysians instead because they are more enthusiastic, and willing to accept lower wages and take on assignments to places with tougher living conditions, such as Africa and South America.

Recounting the remark, CapitalLand group chief executive Lee Chee Koon said he felt sad when he heard it.

Both men were on a panel discussing Singapore's international economics position, during a session moderated by the Ministry of Communications and Information permanent secretary Gabriel Lim.

The session was part of the Institute of Policy Studies' Singapore Perspectives 2019 conference.

Explaining the importance of Asean, Mr Chng said: "We need to get to know Asean better because that's how we're going to make our living, by facilitating the connections in Asean."

But Mr Lee lamented that it was not easy to convince Singaporeans to work in less popular countries, even though being more globally aware and connected will help them stay competitive in the job market.

"There's no way we can teach hunger, but what we can do is to continue to instil among Singaporeans the concept of being competitive, to encourage them to take the road less travelled, to deal with uncertainty," he said.

One way to help them understand the challenge is to bring in more "global talent" with skill sets and experiences that will push Singaporeans "to evolve, to innovate and to improve", he added.

There are four other areas Singapore has to work on to continue staying ahead, said Mr Chng.

These include understanding the opportunities digital technology brings to industries here and ensuring new jobs facilitate the building of an inclusive society.

Despite global uncertainties, he is "cautiously optimistic" about Singapore's prospects, owing partly to its advantageous position in Asean, a region that promises to be the fastest-growing market in the world.