

Bosses say Staff with NS obligations Not an Issue Firms won't turn to foreigners just because of this, say HR experts

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Fears that companies here would rather hire people without NS commitments are unfounded, say bosses and human resource analysts.

This should give comfort to a substantial number of employees, who indicated this concern in an Institute of Policy Studies survey published on Tuesday.

While almost nine in 10 employed national servicemen believe that their employers are or were supportive of their NS commitments, two out of five of them still worry that employers would rather hire workers free from NS obligations.

When waiter Saiful Nizam failed his IPPT (Individual Physical Proficiency Test) some years back, he had to leave work early for a few weeks to attend remedial training. "My boss at that time wasn't happy. He kept asking me: 'You're leaving early again?' He let me go, but I was scared he'd fire me," said the 32-year-old.

But for most employers, the survey findings came as a surprise. They told *The Straits Times* that NS is the norm in Singapore and they have found ways to cope with employees going for in-camp training (ICT) exercises lasting weeks, such as using buddy systems or temporary workers.

"I don't see an issue employing people actively serving ICT. It's part and parcel of life," said Mr Jeffrey Chow, a financial service director who oversees around 60 employees, 15 of whom are NSmen.

Some companies even go the extra mile to support the NSmen on their payroll, doling out incentives to workers for serving their NS commitments.

Amos International, a marine and offshore company, and City Developments Limited (CDL) both match dollar for dollar the monetary awards that servicemen get for doing well in the IPPT. CDL also gives employees half-days off to recuperate after ICT.

Companies with a slim workforce, however, admit to feeling helpless at times.

Mr Elango Subramanian, director of Raffles Corporate Advisory Services, which employs 25 workers, said that he has been forced to adjust by hiring those liable for NS to fill less critical positions. The other posts go to older workers. "It's for a practical reason. We have to make money and we have to pay salaries," he said.

But HR analysts say companies are unlikely to turn to foreigners just because they are free from NS commitments.

Foreigners also come with their own set of "baggage", said Mr Martin Gabriel from HRMatters21. When hiring them, companies have to consider home leave, and support for their family and housing.

Experts also say some NSmen's fear of being replaced usually stems from insecurity - even with supportive bosses.

Mr Josh Goh, assistant director of corporate services at HR consultancy The GMP Group, said that in times of economic crisis, companies would first unload unproductive workers.

"NSmen may fear that their bosses might perceive their absence from work for (meeting their) NS commitments as being unproductive," he explained.

Still, at many workplaces, the camaraderie among colleagues brings peace of mind to NSmen when they don their uniforms.

When 37-year-old Alvin Ng leaves for ICT, his colleagues automatically work together to pick up the slack. "I never have to log in to my laptop or send e-mail," said Mr Ng, who works in logistics. "I can just focus on national service."

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