

## **Call for employers to shake off bias and hire, train mature workers**

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Employers in Singapore still harbour a bias against mature workers, Senior Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam said yesterday.

He called on employers to "take the high road" and make use of government schemes to hire and train such workers.

This will benefit both workers and companies, given the tight labour market, Mr Tharman said at a forum on jobs and skills at the Singapore Perspectives conference organised by the Institute of Policy Studies.

"We are not going to loosen up our foreign worker policy - quite the opposite," he said.

"So, make the most of our Singapore workforce."

On the panel with Mr Tharman were American economics professor Tyler Cowen and OCBC Bank chief economist Selena Ling.

Asked about the challenges that younger and older job seekers face when entering the workforce, Mr Tharman said the issues faced by mature workers are not limited to a mismatch in skills.

On their part, employers should be willing to hire, reskill and upskill such workers, who already have significant skills.

"In general, you hire someone, you train them up, and they have to adapt. It can be done."

Singapore has people with experience, a willingness to work hard and a willingness to learn, said Mr Tharman, who is also Coordinating Minister for Social Policies.

He added that this is why the Government has slanted incentives such as the Jobs Growth Incentive towards mature workers.

The scheme gives higher wage subsidies to companies that hire local workers aged 40 and above.

But such schemes require some change of attitude on the part of employers as well as "some new heart towards our mature workers", he noted.

Ms Ling said older workers will benefit from surrounding themselves with younger colleagues and keeping abreast of the latest developments.

"Being on your toes all the time, trying to learn what is forefront in terms of the winds of change in your industry helps," she added.

For young job seekers, Ms Ling stressed the importance of internships and real-life experience to help them get a sense of what employers are looking for.

Mr Tharman noted that certain cohorts may enter the workforce at the wrong time - like during a financial crisis - but have managed to bounce back.

The important thing is to have a system in which everyone keeps adapting and learning, he said.

The speakers also briefly addressed the topic of the gig economy. One potential pitfall is that those in the gig economy may not have very good career ladders, Professor Cowen pointed out.

"Who is your mentor? Who is training you on the job?" he asked. "My biggest worry about temporary labour is that our imagined vision of where those jobs lead is too short-term.

"I get that the gig economy is necessary. We need many of those jobs. But I don't think it is actually, by and large, the answer to our labour market problem."

The panellists also spoke on entrepreneurship, and whether Singapore's recipe for talent will ever produce the next Elon Musk or Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook.

For Prof Cowen, this outcome seems unlikely. "He is not your style," he said of the Tesla chief executive.

"I think Singaporean society is in some ways much too conformist to be the land of Mark Zuckerberg, much less Elon Musk."

Instead, Singapore's strength lies in its people's ability to work in teams and boost each other's ability, with plenty of top talent going into government, he said.

"The core Singaporean start-up is the Singaporean state, which has the most talented, most cohesive civil service in the world," Prof Cowen added.

"No one else has created anything like that. It was a phenomenal and ongoing act of entrepreneurship.

"If you think of it in those terms, you will realise there is no entrepreneurial deficit in Singapore right now."

Responding to Prof Cowen, Mr Tharman voiced his belief that there is scope for more individual exceptionalism in Singapore.

"That individual exceptionalism is needed for the future, to complement that system exceptionalism that we have, that system entrepreneurship that Singapore is well known for," he said.