

Call to ensure workers retain dignity and identity as jobs transform in changing world

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The Straits Times, 5 January 2023

SINGAPORE – The increasing focus on sustainability will affect blue- and white-collar workers in every industry and require them to learn new skills.

As jobs transform, it is important to find a way to make sure they still give employees dignity and a sense of identity, said Ms Winnie Tan, senior vice-president of sustainability at insurance firm Great Eastern.

She was speaking on Thursday at a panel discussion that took place during the Institute of Policy Studies' (IPS) Singapore Perspectives 2023 conference.

This year, the focus is on work and the panel discussion was titled *Transiting To The Digital, Green And Care Economies: How To Succeed In The Jobs Ahead*.

“We need to think about the purpose and dignity of work, not just for white-collar executives, but also for production line workers... When jobs start to look different, how might we help shape (the jobs) so they can perform,” said Ms Tan.

The online panel discussion was moderated by Dr Carol Soon, IPS senior research fellow and head of its society and culture department.

The other panellists were Dr Ng Wai Chong, founder and chief executive officer of aged-care consultancy NWC Longevity Practice, and Dr Ong Chen Hui, assistant CEO of the BizTech Group at the Infocomm Media Development Authority.

Giving the example of how the European Union is banning the sale of new cars that run on petrol or diesel from 2035, Ms Tan said shifts towards sustainability like this will need workers to quickly pick up new skills, making retraining essential.

She said: “You could be standing in a production line or be a sales or finance executive in the automobile industry... You need to start factoring things like carbon taxes into your financial reporting... how might you acquire these skills?”

Ms Tan said one way forward may be to understand “adjacency of skills”, or how the new skills a worker needs relate to the ones he already has. Workers must also be supported by policies that enable learning and give enough resources to members of the public to allow them to learn new skills.

She said: “It is about creating an equal playing field.”

Dr Ng and Dr Ong spoke about how caretaking jobs, such as nurses and maids for the elderly, and traditional roles like bank tellers were transforming, and how workers can keep up with the changes.

The three panellists also took questions from an online audience of about 580.

Dr Ong from BizTech, which encompasses several organisations including Trust Tech Engineering and the Smart Systems Research Programme Office, said that while various training programmes and schemes are available, it is still up to the individual to take charge and plan his own way forward.

A separate panel discussion, moderated by IPS senior research fellow Faizal Yahya, featured topics including how workers might feel the pressure to upskill and the need for them to acquire soft skills alongside technical skills.

Dr Gog Soon Joo, chief skills officer at SkillsFuture Singapore, acknowledged that changes and the “never-ending learning” required can be overwhelming for workers.

She suggested that individuals take small steps by exploring short modular courses before moving on to fuller programmes.

“Not all skills and not all jobs will expire very quickly,” she said, adding that soft skills are enduring. Soft skills include thinking, communication and problem-solving skills.

Agreeing, Mr Indranil Roy, executive director of consulting firm Deloitte Consulting South-east Asia, said the ability to solve problems is critical in helping workers to be open to learning and adapting.

When employees attempt to solve a problem, it forces them to learn new skills and gain better perspectives, he said. This also forces them to pick up skills that are important in the modern world, he added.

During the session, Ms Low Khah Gek, chief executive of the Institute of Technical Education (ITE), made a pitch for employers to go beyond degree requirements and assess the skills of candidates when recruiting.

ITE graduates have high potential for technology-related jobs but are often excluded from jobs that require degree qualifications, she said.

Some companies in the infocommunication technology sector make use of performance tasks to assess candidates instead of relying solely on paper qualifications, she added.

“To their surprise... among (the shortlisted), there is a mix of different qualifications,” she said.