

Greater effort needed to end workplace discrimination Age, race and gender workplace biases are just as critical an issue as foreigners displacing locals unfairly

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The Straits Times, 3 February 2020

Workplace discrimination has come to the fore, with the Government announcing tougher penalties against it. Independent research data by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) indicates the range and scale of the issue, and that more effort is needed outside of the Government to make Singapore's meritocracy real.

The Ministry of Manpower (MOM) revealed recently that from 2014 to 2018, it and the Tripartite Alliance for Fair Employment Practices (Tafep) followed up on more than 2,000 complaints, taking action against employers in 680 cases, with 280 resulting in debarment from hiring new foreign workers as punishment. While half of the cases were for discrimination on the basis of nationality, the other half were for that on the basis of age, race and gender.

Political parties have raised questions about whether Singaporean workers receive fair consideration in hiring practices and Manpower Minister Josephine Teo has stated that while the reported incidence of discriminatory practices was falling, the Government was determined to "weed out the minority" of employers which disregard fair employment guidelines.

Such firms will face an even longer minimum debarment period for applying for the renewal of work passes and new ones than before. People who falsely declare they had given Singaporeans workers fair consideration before hiring foreigners can now be prosecuted.

The foreign-local form of discrimination is perhaps easiest to address, since hiring takes an organisation through the government licensing regime, which makes it easier to monitor and call out.

Not so with other forms of discrimination, say on the basis of age, race and gender - but these have just as critical an effect on the livelihoods of Singaporean workers and their families.

So what is the scale of the problem?

On gender discrimination, MOM also recently revealed that Singapore's gender pay gap - not adjusted for age, education, occupation, industry or hours worked - was close to 16 per cent.

To provide perspective, estimates published by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development last year indicated that the pay gap in South Korea was close to 35 per cent, and 25 per cent in Japan. If the gap was adjusted to compare salaries with males of the same worker profile, that gap fell to 6 per cent, down from 9 per cent in 2002. Clearly, recent advocacy on this issue has paid off.

What about trends in racial discrimination?

IPS surveys in 2013 and 2018, of about 4,000 Singapore residents each time, indicated that the perceived level of workplace racial discrimination among minorities in hiring and promotions had risen slightly.

Overall perceptions of racial discrimination among Malay and Indian respondents in 2018 were three times higher than among the Chinese; the perception of discrimination specifically in relation to applying for a job was four times higher for the minorities than for the Chinese, and more than three times higher among the minorities than the Chinese, when seeking a promotion.

Close to 50 per cent of Malay respondents said they perceived discrimination sometimes or very often in applying for a job, while 47 per cent of the Indians said the same. Also, 50 per cent of Malay respondents said they perceived discrimination sometimes or very often in seeking a job promotion, while 45 per cent of Indian respondents said the same.

How about age discrimination? In an end-2017 IPS survey of 2,000 Singapore residents, 66 per cent disagreed with the statement that "older workers do not face age discrimination when looking for work".

Of course, not all the problems of getting hired and promoted and workplace relations are a result of discrimination, but even if perceptions recorded in the survey were discounted by half, the data suggests that employers, managers and their human resource (HR) professionals have a long way to go in addressing the issue.

What is the solution?

What more can and should be done? A whole-of-Singapore approach is needed because these are "subterranean" problems.

While the Government has its force of policy, legislation, enforcement and penalties, it is only part of the solution.

Tafep, the tripartite body with representation from the Government, the National Trades Union Congress and the Singapore National Employers Federation, receives complaints and persuades errant employers to provide redress for individual cases of discrimination. But it is likely that only the severe cases are raised by those who are willing to pay the price for it - the animosity engendered by lodging the complaint, if it is not through anonymous whistle-blowing, would make it untenable for the complainant to remain in the organisation.

While the guidelines and toughened penalties do provide a deterrence, HR professionals perform a key role in self-policing their organisations and being guardians of diversity, inclusion and fair employment practices.

Far from being disrupted by emerging HR management apps that deliver functions that can be routinised - calculations of performance, leave, compensation and so on - HR managers can deliver business and social value by implementing fair employment practices and designing intelligent ways to accommodate diversity in their organisations. They have to

encircle the "bad hats" among them and their employers, and snuff out discrimination decisively.

The leaders of the HR profession should explore what more they can do - in training, accreditation and discipline - to upskill their peers and infuse them with that sense of social mission.

By upholding principles of inclusion and equity in organisations large and small, HR managers ensure we have peaceful labour relations in traditional workplaces and a fair deal for self-employed people selling their services to platform-based firms.

In a labour-lean situation, with the tightening cap on foreign workforce growth, it is smart human resource and business strategy to tap the full productive capacity of Singaporean workers, regardless of race, age, gender, disability and family background.

The Government could add further traction by screening for-profit and not-for-profit organisations dependent on its continued support for their adherence to the national fair employment framework. Promising local enterprises nurtured by various state agencies, statutory bodies, restructured hospitals and universities that benefit from the public purse should declare their commitment to this cause and act accordingly.

More work, by those who are on the ground, is needed to make us the multiracial, multicultural meritocracy-in-action we in Singapore can truly be proud of.

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