

Look beyond domestic market, rethink approach to local, foreign labour: S'pore business leaders at IPS conference

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Singapore must get its people and businesses to look beyond local borders while rethinking its approach to upskilling home-grown workers as well as its relationship with foreign labour.

This was a way forward in a post-Covid-19 pandemic world outlined by business leaders on Monday (Jan 25) at the Singapore Perspectives conference, organised by the Institute of Policy Studies.

From engagement with the younger generation, one gets the sense that people get too comfortable in Singapore, said Mr Ang Yuit, founder and managing director of digital agency Inginim.

While venturing beyond local shores might be "tough and a bit painful", Singapore should instil a spirit of enterprise such that businesses are designed and engineered to a regional or even global scale, he added.

"That's one of the things that holds back Singapore businesses," said Mr Ang, who is also vice-president of strategies, development and digitalisation at the Association of Small and Medium Enterprises (ASME).

He was part of a panel with Ms Aw Kah Peng, chairman of Shell Companies in Singapore; Mr Louis Lim, chief operating officer of Keppel Land; and moderator Mr Christopher Gee, IPS' head of governance and economy.

Mr Lim noted that an important question for Singapore businesses is how to reduce reliance on foreign labour.

"It's a fact that most employees will not want to do a slew of jobs that foreign workers do - I think that is the crux of it," he said.

Both Mr Lim and Ms Aw pointed to how the ongoing pandemic has further raised awareness of the situation - and what has and what has not worked in Singapore's approach to foreign labour, across the spectrum from high-earning to low-wage workers.

For the latter group in particular, Ms Aw said Singapore is now at a juncture where it is important to start an open conversation on ensuring such employees are better cared for.

"Now is the time to do it. We can't wait," said the former civil servant and chief executive of the Singapore Tourism Board.

Mr Ang said this is an opportunity to re-orientate or transform businesses to achieve more optimal utilisation of manpower, set against what is sustainable for Singapore. He added that many SMEs are now outsourcing work abroad, a trend accelerated by the rise of telecommuting in recent times.

He also observed that for the local workforce, one major challenge is the "regimental and siloed" way that Singapore approaches skills-upgrading, through government agencies like SkillsFuture and Workforce Singapore.

Citing the disbursement of grants as an example, Mr Ang said this could be hindered by overly strict procedures, compelling companies to find ways to fit the entire process of skills upgrading and training into their operations - rather than having this training meet their pressing needs.

Introducing more flexibility would help businesses proceed with skills upgrading and for Singapore to move forward as an economy, he added.