

## **Ministerial Committee set up to guide digital adoption, create jobs in digital economy**

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SINGAPORE - A high-level committee has been set up to create jobs for Singaporeans in the digital economy, help small businesses go online and ensure no citizen is left behind by technology.

The Ministerial Committee for Digital Transformation will guide efforts to accelerate Singapore's adoption of digital technology, which has taken on greater urgency as Covid-19 forces huge changes to how people work and live and how businesses operate.

Its key focus is to work with companies and the labour movement to create jobs in the information and technology (ICT) sector and to place Singaporeans in these jobs, Communications and Information Minister S. Iswaran said in an interview.

And with small and medium enterprises employing some 65 per cent of the workforce here, one of the committee's prime aims is to help them survive and thrive through the use of technology.

The badly hit retail and food and beverage sectors will get special attention, for a start.

Another area of focus is to ensure all segments of the population benefit from the digitalisation push, starting with hawkers and seniors.

Setting out these priorities, Mr Iswaran, who chairs the committee with Trade and Industry Minister Chan Chun Sing, said the current situation has presented an opportunity for Singapore to double down on its push towards a digital future.

The committee will oversee the execution of policies, and coordinate the work of the many agencies and groups involved.

"We have very clear plans and targets in place, but execution is going to be key - how we get this done," he said, adding the committee has begun its work.

Singapore's economy could suffer its worst contraction since independence with the economy forecast to shrink by as much as 7 per cent this year. The ICT sector has been a bright spot, expanding by 3.5 per cent from January to March and creating 1,100 jobs, though companies are more cautious on hiring.

Mr Iswaran pledged the Government will not "spare any effort", and will work closely with employers and unions to create new openings, and provide the training mid-career professionals and fresh graduates need to take on these roles.

"It is going to be a challenging task because of the environment that we are in, and I think we have to be realistic about it," he said.

The Government has set a goal of creating 5,500 ICT jobs over the next two to three years through its TechSkills Accelerator programmes, which train workers and match them to ICT jobs. Not all of the jobs will require deep technical skills such as coding or data analytics, and there will also be "tech lite" roles, said Mr Iswaran.

He added: "Every sector will need a digital dimension brought into it... that trend was already happening even before Covid-19."

To encourage high-growth deep tech companies, such as those in cyber security, artificial intelligence and big data, to set up shop here, the Government has allowed them to hire skilled foreigners to take on roles that Singaporeans cannot fill.

They will continue to be allowed to have a "judicious component of the foreign talent" to complement the local talent base, while Singaporeans are being trained to bridge the skills gap, said Mr Iswaran.

"If we can do that, then it is beneficial for all of us overall, because it enables a company to pursue more opportunities, and that in turn is going to aggregate more opportunities for all of us," he added.

The Government's focus is to create jobs for Singaporeans, he said.

"Where we can, we will do our utmost to place Singaporeans in these jobs. That has to be the priority, that is the priority, and that will be the priority going forward," he said.

Observers said the committee could give digitalisation efforts a push and ensure that different segments of society are included.

Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Carol Soon said Covid-19 has highlighted the gaps in people's competencies in harnessing technology fully, and suggested the committee could develop a comprehensive framework to address the different levels of needs among different segments of the population.

Added media professor and Nominated MP Lim Sun Sun: "Efforts that could otherwise run independently of each other can potentially be more well integrated."