

Workplace Happiness: S'pore has Much to Do

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Singapore — When it comes to happiness and contentment at the workplace, employees in Singapore have some way to go, a new survey conducted here has found.

The nation's overall workplace happiness index is 59 out of a score of 100, well below the "happy" band of 68 points and above, said Singapore Human Resources Institute (SHRI), which represents about 3,000 HR professionals and works with other organisations such as the labour movement on workplace issues here.

Findings from the survey, the first by the SHRI, comes on the back of other surveys that have found Singaporeans to be among the less happy citizens of the world.

In 2011, Singaporeans topped a Gallup poll for being the unhappiest and most emotionless people in the world. In the Happy Planet Index 2012, Singapore placed a lowly 90th. Last year, the Republic was ranked 30th in the United Nations' World Happiness Report.

The inaugural National Workplace Happiness Survey, led by SHRI and consulting firm Align Group, is meant to set a national benchmark — rooted in science — on workplace standards and will be conducted annually.

About 5,600 respondents — 94 per cent of them Singaporeans and permanent residents — took part in the online survey, which was conducted between April and August this year.

Twenty-eight factors were measured, among them people's assessment of hope, achievement, resilience, learning and growth, trust in management and salary. Respondents were asked to rate statements linked to these factors, such as "I have a bright future at work", "I am treated fairly at work" and "I have the authority to make decisions at work".

The factors of hope, salary and benefits, and culture were ranked most poorly, with scores of 48, 47 and 42, respectively — which fall in the "Unhappy" band.

On the other end of the spectrum, employees were satisfied with factors such as self-efficacy, resilience and interpersonal relations, with scores of 74, 72 and 71 respectively.

Sharing the results of the survey at a human development conference yesterday, SHRI president Erman Tan said the survey sprung from a need to better understand changing demographics.

"We want to learn to manage this spectrum," he said. "From a human resource perspective, the survey gives us a better understanding of workplace happiness drivers. These are areas in which employers can take the lead. At the same time, they can put in mentorship programmes and on-the-job training to ensure their employees are properly guided."

Align Group's managing director Low Boon Seong said the results were largely consistent with previous research.

A surprise finding was the level of job satisfaction that employees of local small and medium enterprises (SMEs) felt.

Local SMEs chalked a score of 60.3 on the overall workplace happiness index — ahead of other types of companies such as public services (60.2), foreign SMEs (58.1) and multinational corporations (57.1), but below voluntary welfare organisations (64.6).

Mr Tan explained that this could be due to the empowerment that SME employees feel. “They participate more in decision-making. This participative approach (at the company) is critical, in the sense that it gives people purpose, direction and self-worth,” he said.

Younger workers were unhappier than their Baby Boomer — aged 50 and over — peers. Generation X workers (born in 1964 to 1980) and Generation Y workers (born after 1980) had an overall happiness score of 58 and 58.5 respectively. Boomers, on the other hand, had a score of 64.4.

Commenting on the survey findings, Associate Professor Tan Ern Ser, a sociologist at the National University of Singapore’s Institute of Policy Studies, said there are various reasons behind the general lack of happiness at the workplace. For one, there could be a gap between one’s expectations and reality. He felt that most employees would prefer a less hierarchical office, with greater flexibility and more affirmation.

He also said that baby boomers may no longer give priority to career advancement.

“Some have achieved what they wanted. Others could have learned to have a work life not tied to pursuing career advancement,” he said.

“Generation X could be still struggling for position and power, and Generation Y are probably somewhat impatient to do well in their career, even as both continue to believe in work-life balance.”

Asked whether the recent spate of surveys depicting a less-than-happy Singapore was worrying, Associate Professor Tan said: “We shouldn’t depend on one survey to tell us what the situation is in Singapore. Results show we’re neither up there nor at the bottom. They sound quite plausible but we need to look at other surveys ... Having said that, maybe this is a reflection of the fact that we’re stressed and need to do a lot of balancing of family and work.”