

## **Are we looking at a future Singapore with Singaporeans being the minority in the workforce?**

*The Online Citizen*, 31 January 2017

### **Finding ways to adapt to shifts in tech skills**

I refer to the article "[Finding ways to adapt to shifts in tech, skills](#)" (Straits Times, Jan 31). The article gives a scenerio of Singapore in the future, "It is 2020 and Singaporeans have wholeheartedly embraced artificial intelligence and innovation."

### **What will 2026 look like**

"This dystopian scenario, where the adoption of artificial intelligence negatively impacts societies, is one of 12 imagined by a Singapore think-tank of various situations the country might encounter over the next decade, till 2026."

### **To prepare Singapore for the future**

Through this exercise, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) hopes to spark discussion on how Singapore can prepare itself for the future.

### **Scenario-planning**

"About 100 academics, civil servants and private-sector leaders took part in scenario-planning workshops last August and September to discuss how trends in skills, innovation and longevity could impact Singapore. Their scenarios, and strategies to tackle them, were compiled into an Action Plan Singapore report put together by IPS and made available to the media last week."

### **Missing the "obvious" question & scenario issues?**

Why is it that, arguably, such an extensive study may seem to have missed the obvious question and scenario issues that many Singaporeans have been talking about – i.e. the huge influx of foreigners and the projected mix of foreign workers to Singaporean workers in the future?

### **Job growth next 10 years: 186,500 foreigners vs 57,000 locals?**

If the employment change in the last two years, from 2015 to 2016, continues into the future – by 2016 – the number of foreign workers to Singaporean workers added to the workforce may be about **186,500** (**37,300 in 2015-16 x 5**) foreign workers and **57,000** (**11,400 in 2015-26 x 5**) local workers (Singaporeans and permanent resident (PRs)).

This may translate into a mix of 2,314,600 (2016 – 2,257,600 + 57,000) local workers to 1,601,700 (2016 – 1,415,200 + 186,500) foreign workers.

## **1 Singaporean to 1 foreign worker?**

As there is no breakdown of the local workforce into Singaporeans and PRs in the MOM labour reports – assuming the estimated percentage of PRs to be say about 15 per cent – the number of Singaporean workers may be about 1,967,410 (85% of 2,314,600) and non-Singaporean workers (foreigners and PRs) about 1,948,890 (1,601,700 foreigners + 347,190 PRs (15% of 2,314,600)).

This would work out to a ratio of almost one Singaporean to one non-Singaporean worker.

## **Next 10 years: 300,000 new PRs, 200,000 new citizens?**

However, with an average of about 30,000 new PRs and 20,000 new citizens granted annually – there be may another 300,000 (30,000 x 10 years) new PRs and 200,000 (20,000 x 10 years) new citizens in the next 10 years to 2016.

## **Minority in our own country?**

So, if we adjust for new PRs and new citizens in the next 10 years – Singaporeans may become a minority of the workers in our own country.

As to “One way to avoid the above dystopian scenario from playing out is to commission a comprehensive review across industries, looking at the positive and negative impact of new technologies, the report said.

Findings can be used to craft programmes and policies to mitigate downsides, while playing up the advantages. To ensure workers are not completely replaced by artificial intelligence, ad-hoc training programmes can be replaced with mandatory industry-specific courses, under what the IPS has termed a Stay Ahead Scheme.

It also suggested that jobs and skill sets most likely to be displaced by artificial intelligence should be publicised, so that the Government and industries can target specific groups of workers to reskill them.

IPS senior research fellow Faizal Yahya said: “We have a scenario now where a degree doesn’t guarantee you a job. Employers are looking at skills relevant for their companies, for the future.”

It is necessary to have a framework to support displaced workers as such situations will become more commonplace as new technologies are developed, said Dr Faizal, who led discussions with participants on how innovation will affect Singapore’s social landscape.

Apart from coming up with future scenarios, participants also thought of strategies to help Singapore deal with the trends. IPS research fellows Christopher Gee and Teng Siao See led discussions on Singapore's ageing population, as well as skill sets of Singaporeans.

One pertinent issue concerning the skill sets of employees is the difference between content taught in educational institutions and the skills required in the workplace.

### **How to compete in an unlevel playing field?**

"Also suggested was an index to measure if an employee has the necessary capabilities for an industry. This way, employers have a better idea of what they are getting and workers are motivated to reskill themselves to remain relevant" – anecdotally, perhaps arguably, the greatest challenge that Singaporean workers may have been facing in recent years, may not so much be technological change, but having to compete with foreign workers from all over the world, who can come as tourists to look for jobs and then stay in Singapore, which no amount of skills upgrading or educational experience can match, as foreigners generally may be able to work for lower pay, at lower costs (no CPF contribution), no turnover problems for employers because they are typically on two-year contracts, no national service reservist leave for males, no maternity leave for females (foreign work permit holders), etc.

### **Will S'poreans ever get to see the "obvious"?**

With regard to "Participants who have suggested specific strategies will meet again this year to talk about how their ideas can be implemented. The outcomes will be presented at an IPS conference in November" – will Singaporeans get to see the above "obvious" question and related scenario issues by November?