

**Committee on the Future Economy report**

Strategy 2: Acquire and utilise deep skills

# Panel suggests more modular courses to help workers reskill

Joanna Seow

As their jobs change, workers will constantly need new and deeper skills to cope. Modular courses could be one of the ways to enable them to keep pace as they enter a future that requires lifelong learning.

Helping workers acquire and use deep skills was one of the seven strategies spelt out by the Committee on the Future Economy (CFE) yesterday to prepare Singaporeans for upcoming challenges.

As technologies and jobs are likely to change at a faster pace, “we must go beyond the pursuit of the highest possible academic qualifications early in life, to seek knowledge, experience and skills throughout life”, said its report.

The deep skills should also be relevant to workers’ jobs, the CFE noted,

while making a set of suggestions on how these could be acquired.

It acknowledged that there would be a challenge in acquiring such skills, as working adults would have to balance personal development with other priorities such as family and career. That is where modular courses could play a key role.

These courses are broken down into segments, making it easier for workers to learn at their own pace, hence offering greater flexibility to those juggling work and reskilling.

The panel wants the Government to work with training providers and institutes of higher learning to roll out more of such courses.

These programmes should be endorsed by companies and approved by the Education Ministry, and be accessible online, it said.

Skills training under different qualification frameworks should

also be more integrated. For example, graduates of SkillsFuture Earn and Learn programmes could progress to applied degrees with relevant modules exempted.

Another set of recommendations the CFE made was on encouraging employers to develop staff.

The report highlighted the SkillsFuture TechSkills Accelerator, which helps infocomm technology professionals deepen their skills and workers from other industries pick up digital skills. It gets employers involved to offer on-the-job training and secondments, which ensure trainees pick up skills that are relevant to their work.

The committee suggested implementing parts of this model in other sectors. In the urban solutions growth cluster, for example, Singaporeans could take up place-and-train positions in law firms, engi-

neering consultancies and multilateral development banks. They could later be given project structuring roles in these banks and in advisory firms.

The committee also recommended improving companies’ leadership and human resource management capabilities.

The Government could even give companies preferential treatment for some schemes if they use skills- and competency-based HR systems to hire and promote staff.

Finally, the committee highlighted the need to support workers.

Job seekers with the right skills may still miss good opportunities because of a lack of information.

To minimise this, the Government should make the National Jobs Bank more useful and user-friendly, the report said.

New opportunities for contract

and freelance workers should be embraced as part of an innovative and entrepreneurial economy, and these workers should be supported in their retirement adequacy.

People who have been unemployed for a long time, older workers and people with disabilities could also use more help. “Everyone has a role to play, but we should pay special attention to workers who may face more challenges in this environment,” the report said.

The committee recommended having more professional conversion programmes to enable older job seekers to pick up new skills and switch to growth sectors, appointing more institutions to provide job-matching services, and improving support schemes for low-wage workers.

Minister for Finance and CFE co-chairman Heng Swee Keat said at a press conference yesterday that developing Singapore’s workforce will help the country stay relevant to the world. He said: “This has just been ignited with SkillsFuture to support lifelong learning.”

“The CFE recommendations take it further, to also focus on skills utilisation, meaning it is not just about acquiring skills, but also using those skills on the job effectively.”

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## Lo & Behold, a believer in staff training, development

While many food and beverage companies were struggling a few years ago to find enough workers to stay afloat, The Lo & Behold Group opened a new learning and development department to help its staff advance their careers.

Staff attend training courses during work hours, and chief operating officer Andrew Ing will attend external courses to personally evaluate them before recommending them to the staff.

Another focus is on giving its workers new assignments and projects so that they can keep learning, said Mr Ing. “We want to have an engaged workforce that is motivated and sees a long and healthy career with us,” he said.

The group, which runs restaurants and bars such as The White Rabbit and Loof, has an average annual training budget of about \$1,500 for each full-time employee. It has about 300 full-time and 150 part-time workers.

Although Mr Ing admits that one downside of investing a lot in its workers is the risk of firms poaching them, he believes that if his company culture is good, they will return.

“It is also important to build a pipeline of good people coming in,” he said.

The firm’s managers also work with employees during appraisals to discuss goals for professional development. He said: “I tell the staff that development is the responsibility of the individual. You have to set goals and see how to achieve them, and we can support you.”

For example, staff who love coffee and want to be a barista can take a certain pathway that the company would recommend, with train-



ing courses and books to read.

Every five years, staff can also take a month-long sabbatical to pursue any interest, on company time.

One employee who tapped the company’s training budget is Ms Betty Wong, 44.

The company covered some of

the course fees for an advanced management programme in hospitality administration and management that she wanted to attend two years ago. The four-week course was split between Nanyang Technological University in Singapore and Cornell University in New York.

Ms Wong was then general manager of restaurant operations. Now, she is director of operations systems. She said the course taught her strategic marketing and finance skills, and gave her a better understanding of hotel operation systems. She contributed to the launch of

the group’s first hotel, The Warehouse Hotel, last month.

“I also got to meet a lot of people from the industry and built valuable contacts that I occasionally lean on for advice,” she said.

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Mr Ing (far right) with staff of The Lo & Behold Group (from left) Ms Wong, Ms Deborah Theseira, Mr Allan Shieh, Ms Tania Chan and Ms Hamazia Kasban. Ms Wong, now the director of operations systems, tapped the firm’s training budget to upgrade herself. ST PHOTO: LIM SIN THAI

### Correspondent’s Take

## Workers must play leading role in economic transformation



**Toh Yong Chuan**

Manpower Correspondent

The Committee on the Future Economy report devoted a whole chapter to workers and skills upgrading.

At first glance, there is nothing

new in its battery of more than 10 recommendations on how workers can acquire what it calls “deep skills”.

Take this proposal, for example: Singaporeans should be better equipped to make sound career choices, based on their interests, education and training.

This has been said many times. In fact, nothing jumps out even after repeated readings.

But before one dismisses the section on skills upgrading as a rehash of old ideas and a collection of broad statements, consider this: The significance of the chapter is not whether the recommendations

are new. Rather, it is a reminder that workers, like companies, are at the centre of the economic transformation, and they too have an important role to play in the future economy.

In other words, the transformation is not just a matter for the Government or employers. Workers must play a leading part.

Or take this statement in the report: “Our workers will need to continuously deepen and refresh their skills in order to stay relevant.”

It might sound like the Government is repeating itself, or even sound like nagging.

But it does not make the

statement any less true.

Besides spelling out the measures to help workers acquire skills that they will need to do well in the future, it was heartening to see that the committee recognises that some workers will need more help.

It singled out four groups – older workers, low-wage workers, those with disabilities and those who lose their jobs.

To help these vulnerable workers, the committee urged the Government to beef up its social safety net, such as wage subsidies through Workfare.

This is the right direction. There will always be those who

find it harder to keep up as the economy shifts gears. As the pace of change accelerates, more may find themselves left behind. For these workers, it is the social help that will provide a lifeline, not just economic help.

It is a pity that the social safety net for vulnerable workers was not discussed more fully in the report. Granted the report was primarily an economic blueprint, but more deliberation on this area would have given more assurance to these workers that help will always be at hand.

Another area that the report could have been more precise on

was in spelling out what the committee meant by “deep skills”.

I asked a newsroom colleague what she thought, and she jested: “I have the normal skills to write the news report, but you have the deep skills to write the news analysis.”

This is going to be a burning question in every worker’s mind: What kinds of skills do I need, and how deep should they be?

The report does not provide the answers. Let us hope that the ensuing discussions led by the Government, company and union circles will.

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