

Budget watch

Help for firms to transform, upskill staff

Joanna Seow

Companies can now tap on a new initiative by the Singapore National Employers Federation (SNEF) to transform the way they work and deepen the skills of their workers.

Five consultancy programmes, covering areas such as integrating older workers, encouraging lifelong learning and implementing technol-

ogy, will be offered by the SNEF Agency for Productivity Practices, Human Resource and Industrial Relations (Sapphire).

The outfit was launched by Manpower Minister Lim Swee Say yesterday and is supported by Workforce Singapore (WSG).

So far, 20 companies have signed up and SNEF aims to have 100 on board within the first year.

Mr Lim said Singapore can learn

from the Silicon Valley mindset of innovating repeatedly – using technology to constantly come up with useful products and services, and delivering them to customers in borderless markets.

As an export-oriented economy, Singapore faces a greater risk of losing its competitive advantage if competitors make better and faster use of technology and open markets, he told some 560 employers at

a forum at Marina Bay Sands.

“With a workforce that is growing slower, we face a greater risk of running out of growth capacity if we are not able to break our manpower bottleneck with pervasive innovation,” Mr Lim said.

SNEF president Robert Yap said Sapphire is also a response to the call by the Committee on the Future Economy for business associations to play a bigger role in

helping companies transform.

At the forum, business leaders shared how they had transformed their companies over the years.

CYC International director Dan Chua described how the company introduced robots to do chemical and oil tank cleaning work, so workers can move on to safer and more productive roles. The Boston Consulting Group chairman Hans-Paul Burkner said companies that fail to transform often have bosses that deny the need to change their business model or do not have the courage to make major changes.

Logistics company Shalom Mov-

ers has signed up for a programme and chief executive Gideon Lam said he wants to redesign jobs to better support mature workers.

“Many (workers) have been with the company for 10 years to 15 years. We want to transform jobs to take care of them and encourage lifelong learning,” he said.

A Sapphire programme for companies costs \$3,210 for up to 100 hours, after a 70 per cent WSG subsidy.

Companies can e-mail sapphire@snef.org.sg for more information.

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Polys, unis to run more modular courses

Bite-size programmes offer flexibility to working adults seeking higher qualifications

Calvin Yang

Hoping to stay competitive in his job despite various commitments and a busy schedule, engineer Mohamed Johannes Wahid took up a modular course in maritime and offshore operations two years ago.

The 36-year-old, who learnt about the various activities carried out in the oil and gas industry and the financial and safety requirements, completed the short course at Singapore Polytechnic (SP) last April, after about five months. He now applies what he learnt in the classroom to his job in a subsea services company.

Mr Johannes, who has two children and is expecting a third, said: “I believe lifelong learning is better in short courses as working adults... may not be able to commit to

long-term programmes.”

Singaporeans hoping to stay relevant in a fast-evolving economy can look forward to more bite-sized courses which make it easier for them to learn at their own pace.

These skill-based modular courses, aimed at working adults, may be stacked up towards qualifications such as diplomas and degrees.

There were 513 modular courses last year, up from 338 in 2015. On average, these courses, offered at polytechnics and universities, can be completed in three to six months.

The Ministry of Education (MOE) will work with institutions to offer more of such courses this year. It said such courses offer flexibility to those juggling their desire to upgrade themselves with personal and work commitments.

“Enrolment is... steadily rising,” MOE added. “Beyond modularity, it



Despite having family commitments and a busy work schedule, engineer Mr Johannes managed to upgrade himself by completing a five-month modular course in maritime and offshore operations two years ago. ST PHOTO: LIM SIN THAI

is more important the courses meet industry needs,” it said.

The ministry noted institutions need to keep abreast of industry changes and rope in practitioners to help them develop relevant courses.

Institutes of higher learning are seeing growing demand for these courses. Some institutions, such as SP, National University of Singapore and Nanyang Polytechnic, said that short courses which can count towards diplomas or degrees are an in-

centive for workers to keep learning.

Others, such as the Singapore Management University, Republic Polytechnic and the Singapore Institute of Technology, said the flexibility these options offer is a draw.

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

As jobs are likely to change at a faster pace, “we must go beyond the pur-

suit of the highest possible academic qualifications early in life, to seek knowledge, experience and skills throughout life”, said its report.

It admitted that there would be a challenge in acquiring such skills as working adults would have to balance personal development with other priorities. That is where modular courses could be one of the ways to enable them to get up to speed in a world of constant disruptions.

Several institutions, such as SIM

University and Ngee Ann Polytechnic, explained that a fast-changing economy means new jobs and new competencies are needed.

Mr John Leong, director of Temasek Polytechnic’s Temasek SkillsFuture Academy, said modular courses offer options for workers to undergo targeted training. “Individuals customise a learning pathway that best suits their needs.”

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SkillsFuture Credit take-up promising

With only about 5 per cent of those eligible signing up in the first year, the response to the SkillsFuture Credit scheme may seem lukewarm, but observers say that the numbers show promise.

The government programme, rolled out last January for about 2.5 million people, is meant to spur individuals to pick up skills and gives every Singaporean aged 25 and older \$500 credit to pay for courses. More than 126,000 Singaporeans used it in its first year.

National University of Singapore economics lecturer Kelvin Seah said: “Far from being a poor response, I actually think the take-up rate is encouraging.

“It shows that Singaporeans are not rushing to use the credits in an imprudent manner, but are looking to use them only when the need for skills acquisition arises.

“Most are likely still waiting out. They know that they can choose from an expanded list of courses.”

Courses eligible for the scheme rose from over 10,000 at its launch

to over 18,000 today. They range from computer programming and big data analytics to baking bread and offering advice on wine.

Attending such courses also takes up precious time, Dr Seah said.

“They’ll have to spend time away from work, which might mean forgoing income from work if they are self-employed or applying for leave if they are employed workers.”

Dr Timothy Chan, director of SIM Global Education’s academic division, has another take on the numbers – that they may not tell the whole story. He said there are professionals in fast-changing industries, such as infocomm technology, who may not attend courses, but “crowd-source new skills on demand” – via social networks like YouTube, self-teaching, peer learning or reading books.

“These people may not be included in the reported numbers, but they are acquiring new skills to stay relevant,” he explained.

SkillsFuture Singapore (SSG) chief executive Ng Cher Pong said

this month that “there is really no rush to use it”, explaining that the scheme was designed such that the credits do not expire and will be topped up at regular intervals.

He urged Singaporeans to think carefully and not spend them on any course that comes to mind.

In an update last month, SSG said about 63 per cent of those who tapped on the credits last year were aged 40 and older.

Information and communications technology was the most popular training area across all age groups.

Other popular areas included languages, security and investigation, and productivity and innovation.

Besides the SkillsFuture Credit, there is a plethora of initiatives under the SkillsFuture umbrella.

These include the Earn and Learn programme to encourage fresh polytechnic and Institute of Technical Education graduates to work and gain qualifications at the same time, and the SkillsFuture Study Awards for early- and mid-career workers.

Mr Ng said a priority is to continue finding ways to drive a mindset change among Singaporeans.

Education experts believe this lifelong learning attitude can be further encouraged.

To achieve this, employers’ buy-in is important, said Dr Chan. He noted that they can tweak employment practices, such as setting aside time for staff to study, providing awards and recognition, and creating job opportunities for them to apply their newly acquired skills.

“They should acknowledge that the investment of time and resources in staff will ultimately benefit the organisation and the industry through a more skilful workforce.”

Dr Seah noted Singaporeans are “quite receptive” to upgrading: “There is a recognition among us that we have to constantly evolve our skills because Singapore is such a small and open economy and economic conditions here sway with what happens globally.”

Calvin Yang



CHANGING MINDSETS

Mindset change is not easy to measure, and it certainly won’t change overnight.



MR NG CHER PONG, SkillsFuture Singapore chief executive.



EMPLOYERS ARE KEY

Employers play a key role in cultivating their staff’s mindset of continual learning.



DR TIMOTHY CHAN, director of SIM Global Education’s academic division.



Ms Hafizah is pursuing a master’s in applied psychology and hopes to be an education psychologist after she graduates. ST PHOTO: JONATHAN CHOO

Ex-teacher a firm believer in lifelong learning

Looking to make a mid-career switch, former teacher Noor Hafizah Wahianuar took up a master’s degree course in applied psychology at the National Institute of Education two years ago.

The former English and mathematics teacher, who left CHIJ Katong Convent in December 2015 after more than five years there, plans to keep upgrading herself.

“I’ve always felt lifelong learning is important. It is definitely important to upgrade to keep myself and my skills relevant in the field I am working in. I would say the same of some of my peers.

“However, some are still hesitant as they cannot afford the time to upgrade their skills due to personal and job commitments,” she added.

The 30-year-old’s SkillsFuture Credit of \$500 went towards paying her fees, which are esti-

mated to be \$32,000.

Ms Hafizah is one of more than 126,000 Singaporeans aged 25 and older who utilised the SkillsFuture Credit last year.

Some tapped it to upgrade their job skills or prepare for a career change, while others used it to try out new interests.

Ms Hafizah said: “I think most people are either unaware of the scheme or are not sure of the types of courses that they can use the credits for. Perhaps with more information and accessibility to the scheme, more will start to use it.”

She hopes to pursue a career as an education psychologist after graduating this year. “I want to be able to give more specific support for teachers and students, especially those with special learning needs,” she said.

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Budget 2017

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