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MAINTAINING WORKPLACE HARMONY

**You're the boss
today - ready to
join the rank and
file tomorrow?**

By YAP KOON HONG
Senior Writer

WHEN veteran employer Bob Tan visited Japan on a mission recently to assess the impact of a new law aimed at retaining workers into their 60s, he was surprised by the reaction of its union leaders.

The law offered three options to Japanese firms to hire their workers for five more years when staff reach the mandatory retirement age of 60, raise the retirement age to 65, or remove it altogether.

These are also the options Singapore is considering when it introduces similar legislation in five years to extend the retirement age from 62 to 65.

Logically, the last option seemed the best for employees. Yet, the Japanese unionists did not pursue the open-retirement option.

The union leaders said they couldn't sell this option to the younger workers, who did not want to have older people working in the company, says Mr Tan, chairman of Jurong Engineering. They did not want to work with the older people.

Mr Tan serves in several public service bodies, including as chairman of the Institute of Technical Education, vice-president of the Singapore National Employers Federation, co-chairman of a tripartite body on fair employment practices comprising Government, unions and employers, and treasurer of the Singapore Business Federation.

He cited the position taken by the Japanese unions as an example of the challenges companies must consider in keeping staff who are well into their 60s.

Sometimes when people talk about companies, they think that it's like a non-human entity, he says, adding that companies are a community of relationships.

If you are a CEO or manager in a company, you are still an employee, although you are an employer at the same time because you hire staff and lead the company.

So the human dimension, such as preparing and motivating staff and ensuring harmony, should be phased in first.

You have to try and create a culture where the old and the young can and want to work well together, he says.

Companies must create an environment where the older people are welcomed, respected and accepted as part of the social fabric.

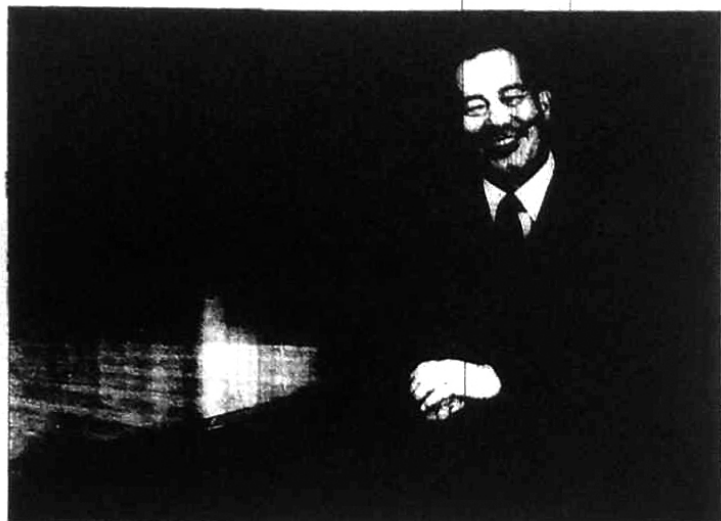
He refers to this as the "software" aspect of getting workers in their 60s stay productive.

Second, firms must convince workers, especially those now in their mid-40s and early 50s, that the jobs they do in their 60s will change.

He cites this age range because these are the people likely to be the most affected by jarring changes in the business environment.

When they started working 20 to 25 years ago, career progression was largely foreseeable and companies were generally stable.

There was a predictable sense of structure and future employment, he explains.



ST PHOTO: CHEW SENG KIM

CREATING A WELCOMING ENVIRONMENT

"Sometimes when people talk about companies, they think that it's like a non-human entity...Companies must create an environment where the older people are welcomed, respected and accepted as part of the social fabric."

MR BOB TAN (above), chairman of Jurong Engineering

Globalisation, technology and ceaseless competition have fractured this straight line structure. Unsettled firms have been forced to change and adapt quickly.

The skills of these mid-life workers became obsolete far more swiftly. Many are now caught in a career warp, likely to be redundant at a time when they should be nearing their peak.

Employers should prepare workers for a new structure, one that travels in a circle rather than a straight line.

A boss today should know well beforehand that he himself may be redesignated to a job that may see him revert to being a worker when he is in his 60s, says Mr Tan.

For the change to succeed, workers too must welcome their former boss into their midst as a colleague, without loss of face.

The third step is to alert the worker to his new role early. "Companies can't have a situation where they address the workers' job redesign or re-training when staff reach 62," he says.

The shock to the system - telling someone that their pay will be halved or that their skills are redundant at 62 - is irreconcilable.

If you plan in advance, workers will know, for instance, that a person may be his boss now, but come 60 or 62, he no longer will be, although he will still be working in the company," he says.

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ST PHOTO: EDWIN KOO

RECOGNISING THE VALUE OF EXPERIENCE

"More than 1,000 of our 6,400 staff are 50 years old or older...We have a year-to-year re-employment policy. On average, re-employed staff work from four to five years more."

MS JACLYN LEE (above), senior vice-president at Certis Cisco and who heads the company's human resource division

**Younger bosses,
older charges?
No problem
at Certis Cisco**

SENIOR Inspector Max Tan joined Certis Cisco three years ago, and the 31-year-old has grown used to leading men much older than him.

Senior Staff Sergeant Wee Peng Soon is 54, and for most of the two decades he has been with the company, his superiors were always a lot younger than him.

Welcome to the world of Singapore's largest company providing security services, where the bosses in uniform are often younger than their charges. Certis Cisco was known as Cisco until it was re-named last month.

Senior Insp Tan, a former Singapore Armed Forces lieutenant, says half the 250 men under his command are older than him.

"At least a third are aged 50 or older," he adds.

Senior vice-president Jaclyn Lee, who heads the company's human resource division, points to the company's legacy of re-employment which was rare when it was formed some 10 years ago.

Re-hiring its retired staff remains part of its recruitment policy. "More than 1,000 of our 6,400 staff are 50 years old or older," she says.

This, despite the fact that the retirement age for the company's auxiliary police officers - who form the bulk of its staff - is 55, by law.

Those who are fit and healthy and want to continue upon retirement usually get their wish. The policy extends to non-uniformed staff as well.

"We have a year-to-year re-employment policy. On average, re-employed staff work from four to five years more."

Why does it work in Certis Cisco better than elsewhere?

For one thing, it is the uniformed services culture, where one's rank or job title supercedes age in recognising authority.

"When I meet the men under my command, they accept me readily because they recognise my rank and not my age," says Senior Insp Tan.

Senior Staff Sgt Wee offers another reason. "I like younger superior officers because they work very fast. If you have a problem, you raise it with them and they settle it there and then."

His colleague, Sergeant S. Vellathurai, 42, agrees.

"They are fresh and enthusiastic," says Sgt Vellathurai, who has logged 20 years' service.

A second reason is the nature of Cisco's business, where experience and judgment are a premium.

Senior Insp Tan, a university graduate, cites the current project he is heading as an example.

The company recently won the contract to provide security at Changi Airport's three terminals and he is involved in supervising the project.

"We treasure older officers, especially in big projects like these," he says.

Their experience, maturity and measured responses are vital in an open, busy and yet security-sensitive environment like the airport.

The project has also called for hiring a big group of younger officers.

"We need experienced officers to guide and mentor them," says Senior Insp Tan.

Also, unlike guarding commercial buildings, there are a variety of duties officers must operate in the airport.

They will have to communicate with the public regularly, supervise new staff and understand foreigners and travelling behaviour.

At the airport, the officers must also deal with a greater, more sophisticated variety of security processes such as colour-coded name tags to indicate a staff's level of access, and machines like scanners.

"So we need officers who have a lot of experience on the ground and who remain calm, helpful and are problem-solvers," he says.

"Older staff are much more valuable in this respect."

YAP KOON HONG



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