USING TECHNOLOGY AND DESIGN THINKING
TO EMPOWER EMPLOYEES TO IMPROVE PRODUCTIVITY AND BUSINESS PROCESSES

By Dr Jaclyn Lee

Employee engagement and finding the right balance between technology and people are two key ways of improving productivity in this day and age in Singapore. Having worked in a large security company which employs about 10,000 staff, I can understand and appreciate the challenges in raising productivity in such a labor intensive environment.

You will always have a shortfall in manpower as a result of more demand versus the supply in the market. For example, instead of having 20 staff managing security in a customer's premise, you can use technology to bridge the gap without having to compromise on the security of the premises. In finding technology as a solution, there are also other bridges to climb. One has to ensure that staff are well trained to manage technology to help them with their jobs. When you train, it is also important to impart to staff all the necessary technical, on-the-job skills to help them manage the job function. In addition, during training, you have to show employees that they are an important part of the company and you are ready to empower them. Only when they feel empowered, they will be able to contribute great ideas to help improve productivity.

Beyond this, achieving higher productivity in an organisation lies in the company getting its business processes right. Technology alongside sound business practices will enable an organisation to raise its productivity. As a case in point, I used to work as a HR Specialist in a US automotive manufacturing company in Singapore years ago. During the early 1990s, we had close to 2,000 staff delivering a certain amount of revenue. Today, that same company hires only 600 to 700 people and delivers almost double the revenue. A lot of this (higher productivity) is a result of improving business processes and embedding technology to help reduce the need for labor intensive work.

Turning to smaller businesses, I would advise that companies undertake more strategic thinking in terms of developing a better framework to deliver on performance. In this regard, they could re-think about their business processes through using tools such as design thinking to ideate, create and innovate a process, design or a product. In Action Design, we always start with identifying an organizational problem, provide intervention of the problem through design and re-design of the solution. The solution can be a computer software, new process flow or product that a company wants to launch to the market. We test out the solution or product in small bite sizes or user groups and use iterative prototyping to continuously refine the product, process or solution until we are satisfied with the outcome. This approach is low risk as it is a gradual iterative prototyping process. To prove this point, I would like to quote Tim Brown in his HBR article, "Design for Action, in which he says, "IDEO realized that no matter how deep the up-front understanding was, designers wouldn't really be able to predict users' reactions to the final product. So IDEO's designers began to reengage with the users sooner, going to them with a very low-resolution prototype to get early feedback. Then they kept repeating the process in short cycles, steadily improving the product until the user was delighted with it. When IDEO's client actually launched the product, it was an almost guaranteed success—a phenomenon that helped make rapid prototyping a best practice.