

READY FOR



## Skilled for 100?

Leveraging an older workforce in Singapore



Written by

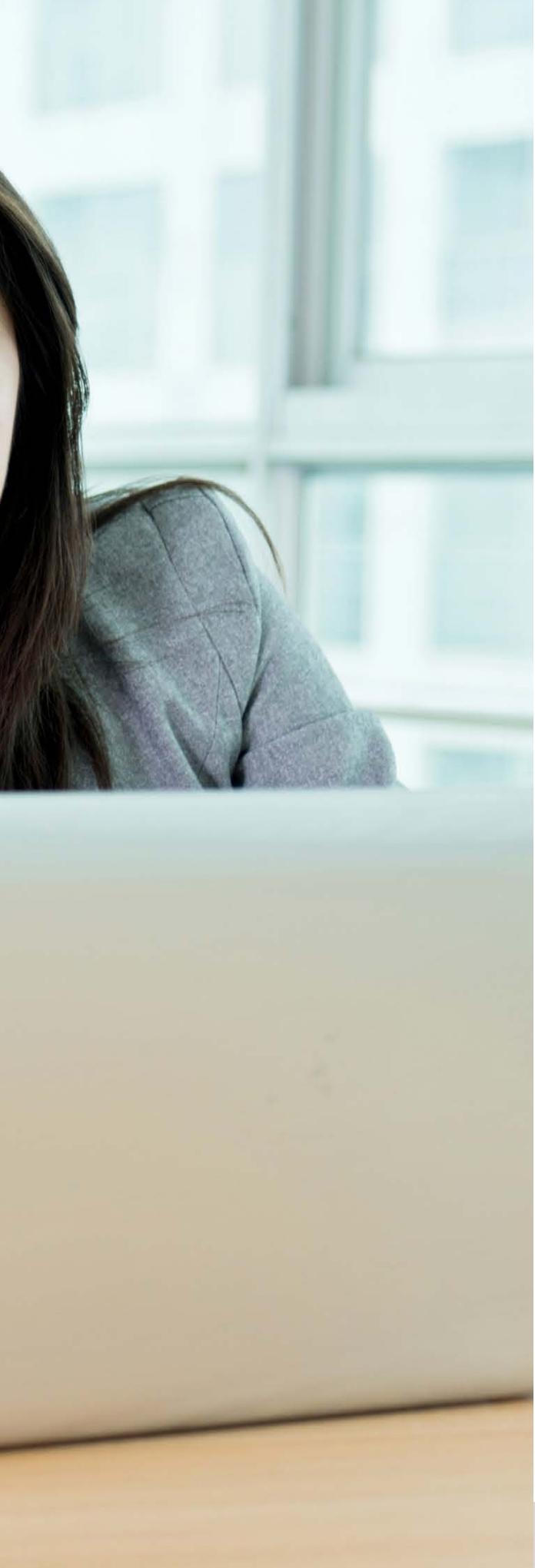
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A photograph of two women in a professional office environment. On the left, an older woman with short, wavy grey hair is wearing a black blazer over a light-colored top. She has her hands clasped together on a wooden desk and is wearing a gold watch with a black strap. On the right, a younger woman with long dark hair is wearing a grey blazer over a black top. They are both looking towards a laptop screen on the desk. The background is a bright, out-of-focus office space with windows.

*Singapore's workforce is visibly greying. If government policies aimed at extending careers are successful, that process could accelerate.*



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# Foreword

This year, Singapore clinches the top spot to become the country with the highest life expectancy in the world. This rising longevity, coupled with declining birth rate, means that by 2030, one in every four people will be above the age of 65. It also means there will be more older people in employment and businesses must be prepared for a greying workforce.

At Prudential Singapore, we are prepared for that future. Last October, we removed retirement age so our employees do not need to stop work as long as they continue to perform. We subsequently raised the Central Provident Fund contribution rates for employees above 55 to match that of their younger colleagues, in line with our belief that it is the performance, not age, that matters.

Building an age-friendly workplace is important to us at Prudential and core to our purpose of innovating to help everyone live well. This is why we commissioned the Economic Intelligence Unit (EIU) to research and write this report *Skilled for 100? Leveraging an older workforce in Singapore*. It explores the work-related challenges and opportunities that lie ahead for Singapore's residents, employers and government as people live and work for longer.

There are a number of key issues discussed in this report, including ageism. While employers

generally associate their older employees with loyalty and having strong work ethics, they perceive them to be lacking in creativity and the ability to master new technologies. Such views work against mature employees who aspire to extend their careers. Based on our *Ready for 100? Preparing for longevity in Singapore* study released last September, only 4 per cent of the respondents aged 55-64 indicated they wanted to retire as soon as possible.

With rising lifespan, it is clear that people will want and need to extend their work span. At an individual level, an extended career helps one to stay mentally healthy and to save for a bigger retirement nest-egg. At the national level, greater participation from the older generation of workers ensures sustained economic growth for the country.

Companies, and more importantly society, stand to lose if we do not retain mature talent and leverage their strengths. It will take a multi-stakeholder effort to change mindsets about older workers. We hope the conversations born from this research will inspire businesses to invest more in their senior cohorts of employees as we prepare to live to 100 and beyond.

**Wilf Blackburn**  
CEO, Prudential Singapore





# About the research

*Skilled for 100? Leveraging an older workforce in Singapore* is an Economist Intelligence Unit white paper, commissioned by Prudential Singapore. It is part of the *Ready for 100* programme of research, which examines the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead for Singapore's residents, employers and government as people live and remain healthy for longer. This report, which focusses on the work-related opportunities and challenges, is based upon two strands of research:

- In March 2018 The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) surveyed 200 executives of businesses and other organisations operating in Singapore. It was conducted in parallel with a survey of 1,214 Singapore residents, the results of which are presented and analysed in *Preparing for longevity in Singapore*.
- Half of the workplace survey respondents are human resources executives, and the other half are in general management, strategy or business development roles. The sample is distributed amongst 21 different sectors, with manufacturing (17%), IT and technology (12%), financial services (9%), and construction and real estate (9%) contributing the largest contingents. The companies they represent are a mix of large enterprises or multinationals (45%), small and midsize enterprises (SMEs) (43%), and start-ups (12%). Two-thirds (66%) of the respondents are between 25 and 44 years of age, 27% are between 45 and 54, and the remaining 7% are between ages 55 and 74.
- In addition to the survey, The Economist Intelligence Unit conducted a series of in-depth interviews with senior government officials, business executives and other experts. Our thanks are due to the following individuals (listed alphabetically by surname) for their time and insights:
  - Linda Eunson, founder, Eunique Solutions
  - Aliza Knox, head of APAC, Cloudflare
  - Koh Juan Kiat, executive director, Singapore National Employer Federation
  - Lee Pak Sing, divisional director, Workplace Policy and Strategy Division, Ministry of Manpower
  - Helen Lim, founding partner and CEO, Silver Spring
  - Stephen Sidebottom, former global head, CIB HR, Standard Chartered Bank
  - Sim Beng Khoon, director, Workplace Health and Outreach Division, Health Promotion Board
  - Kanwaljit Soin, orthopaedic and hand surgeon, Mount Elizabeth Hospital
  - Human resources director, midsize food company (anonymous)

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# Executive summary

Singapore's workforce is visibly greying. If government policies aimed at extending careers are successful, that process could accelerate. The reward, however, would be a greater contribution from older generations of workers to sustained economic growth for the city-state.

Singapore's older residents appear up for the challenge. The labour force participation rates of older age groups have been rising for several years. Indeed, no more than 5% of residents aged 55-64 surveyed by The Economist Intelligence Unit state the desire to retire soon.

Employer reluctance looks to be a bigger obstacle to realising the vision of a productive older workforce. This report finds that far from all Singapore organisations are proactive about retaining older employees. Relatively few (16%) respondents in our workplace survey believe their organisations adequately support the aspirations of employees looking to extend their careers into their 60s and 70s. Experts interviewed for this report suggest that many employers are merely paying lip service to the goal of extending careers.

Recognition of the need to change, however, is clear. Almost nine in 10 respondents (88%) believe their organisations must do more over the next decade to accommodate and leverage their senior cohorts of employees.

This study is based on a survey The Economist Intelligence Unit conducted of 200 executives of private and public-sector organisations in Singapore, as well as a series of in-depth

interviews with executives, government officials and other experts. Other findings from the research include the following:

*To get a clear picture of how organisations are looking to leverage older talent, we identified a leader group which isolated respondents in the survey whose firms are most receptive to employing older workers. The 104 members of the leader group (52% of the sample) all indicate that their firms devote resources specifically to retaining older employees.*

- **Leaders want their veterans' professionalism to rub off on younger hires.** They further view their senior employees' greatest strength to be their work ethic, including punctuality and attitude toward work. One HR director interviewed for the report says that the work ethic of its older employees considerably outshines that of its younger ones.
- **Longevity is associated with loyalty.** A large majority (88%) of leader group respondents believe that their older employees are more committed to the organisation than younger ones. In an age when labour mobility is growing and talent retention is getting tougher, loyalty is highly valued by employers.
- **Mentoring will feature prominently in re-designed roles.** Playing the role of mentor to younger employees is among

the most effective contributions veterans can make to the business, as cited by 64% of executives. Another is a role in training programmes, cited by 45%. Upholding company values and leveraging established networks of contacts are other important contributions, particularly for respondents from SMEs.

- **Older employees' creativity may be undervalued.** Little more than one-third (35%) of respondents in the overall sample perceive creativity to be among their oldest employees' strengths. Amongst leaders, however, the figure rises to 50%. Leaders similarly have a higher estimation than the wider group of their veteran workers' flexibility and receptivity to feedback. The majority (57%), however, have concerns about older workers' ability to master new technologies, but interviewees suggest such fears may be overstated.
- **More flexibility, rather than more money, is older employees' chief motivator.** Offering flexible work schedules and other means to foster a better work-life balance, along with re-training, are the chief measures leader organisations are taking to extend their older employees' careers. These are more common than offering financial benefits, and indeed jibe with the paramount importance Singapore residents themselves place on achieving a better work-life balance as they extend their careers.

# 1. The policy and business challenge

Like most developed countries in the world, Singapore faces stark challenges posed by an ageing population. Residents aged 65 and older accounted for 14% of the population in 2017, up from 9% in 2007<sup>1</sup>, and that figure is expected to continue rising as Singapore now has the highest life expectancy in the world at 84.8 years<sup>2</sup>. Keeping the economy expanding to support an older population requires a highly productive workforce. This will be all the more challenging as workforce growth is slowing. Koh Juan Kiat, executive director of the Singapore National Employer Federation (SNEF), expects flat workforce growth over the

next decade after a 1.9% annual increases in the previous one.

In this context, leveraging an older workforce is viewed by the government as a strategic challenge of the first magnitude. “Maximising the productive potential of an older workforce is a key priority in the context of an ageing workforce and stagnating workforce growth,” says Lee Pak Sing, director of the Workplace Policy and Strategy Division at the Ministry of Manpower.

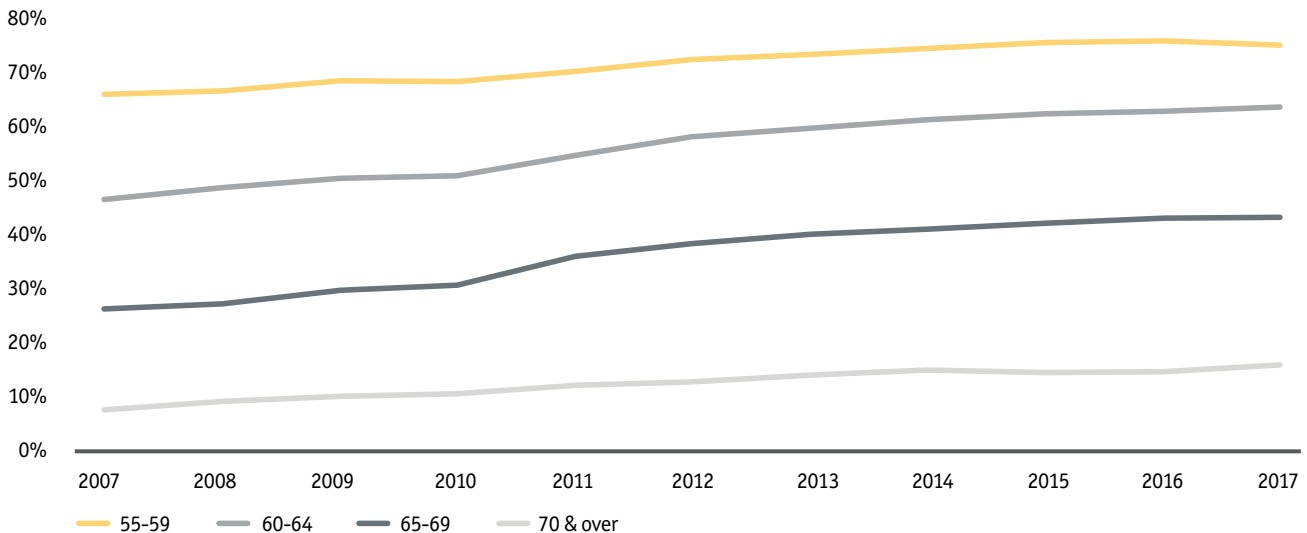
Consistent with this view, the government has been taking active policy measures to support

older residents who wish to continue working. Most recently in August 2019 Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced a nationwide gradual raise in retirement age from 62 to 65 and the re-employment age from 67 to 70, by 2030. Central Provident Fund (CPF) contribution rates will also be increased for workers aged 55 years and above to help encourage more financial independence as they extend their careers.

To encourage employers to facilitate this process, the government has pledged to provide “support packages” to businesses in the future so they can better adjust to these changes.

**Figure 1: Working hard**

Singapore labour force participation rate in older age groups, 2007-2017



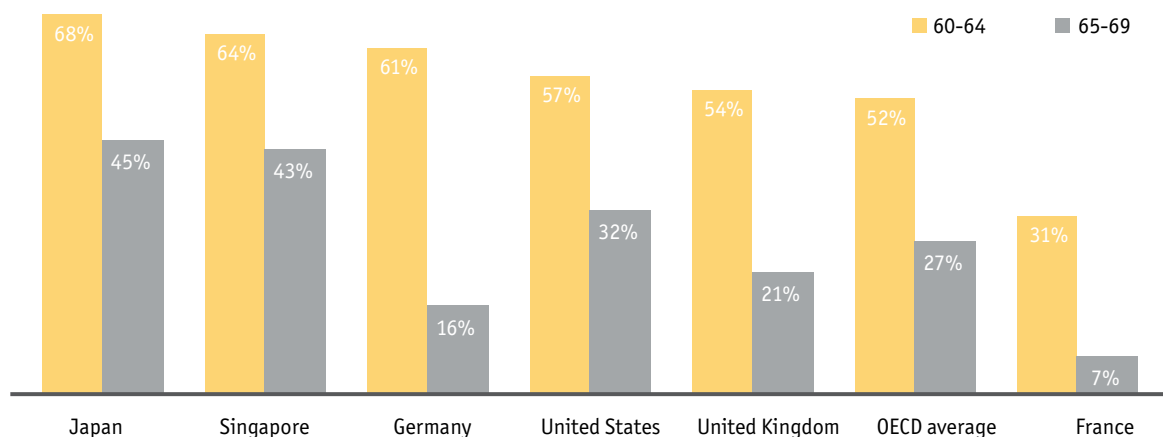
Source: Singapore Ministry of Manpower

<sup>1</sup> Data from the government's National Policy and Talent Division, cited in "Singapore ageing at faster pace than a decade ago", *The Straits Times*, September 28, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Singaporeans have world's longest life expectancy at 84.8 years", *The Straits Times*, June 20, 2019

**Figure 2: Leading the charge**

Singapore and OECD<sup>3</sup> labour force participation rates, selected age groups, 2016



Sources: OECD and Singapore Ministry of Manpower

The public sector will also lead by example and roll out the first raise in retirement and re-employment ages in 2021, instead of 2022.<sup>4</sup>

These policies may continue to be a factor in the rise in labour participation rates within older age group (Figure 1). Singapore's labour participation in older age groups is already among the highest in the developed world (Figure 2).

## Fertile soil

The government's policies have a receptive audience as far as individual residents are

concerned. In a survey of Singapore residents conducted for the first part of the *Ready for 100* study, no more than 5% of respondents in the 55-64 age group state the wish to retire as soon as possible. On the contrary, most profess to enjoy their work, and believe they have the skills needed to work as long as they want.<sup>5</sup>

This is no surprise to Stephen Sidebottom, who was previously the Singapore-based global head of HR for investment banking at Standard Chartered Bank. Singaporeans are not only living longer, they are also healthier for longer, and they of course have financial needs that must be met into older age. But

he also points to cultural values as a factor. "Part of it is the Confucian framework where elders are respected and valued, so there isn't any expectation that older people will become invisible," he says. "Elderly people here are visibly working and respected by their colleagues in a way that is not the case in some Western countries."

Kanwaljit Soin, who is a septuagenarian orthopaedic and hand surgeon at Mt Elizabeth Hospital, and a vocal advocate of measures to support the extension of careers into older age, points out that senior residents in Singapore are expected to be self-reliant. "The government has drilled this concept of

<sup>3</sup> OECD is often described as "a club of rich countries" by *The Economist* <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2017/07/05/what-is-the-oecd>

<sup>4</sup> "NDR 2019: New retirement, re-employment ages of 65 and 70 by 2030; higher CPF contributions for older workers", *Channel NewsAsia*, August 18 2019

<sup>5</sup> Preparing for Longevity in Singapore



## Policies to extend careers

Since 2011 the Singapore government has introduced a raft of measures aimed at smoothing older residents' pathways to work beyond retirement age. The following are some of the most prominent:

**Re-employment legislation.** The Retirement and Re-employment Act of 2012 requires employers to re-hire employees (on new contracts) who wish to work beyond the statutory retirement age of 62. During the 2019 National Day Rally, it was announced that the retirement and re-employment age

ceiling will be increased gradually, from 62 to 65 and 67 to 70 by 2030, respectively.

**WorkPro.** Introduced by the Ministry of Manpower in 2013, the scheme provides funding to employers to support the recruitment, training and retention of older workers. Grants up to S\$300,000 per company are made available to support firms in implementing age management practices, redesign workplaces and processes, and implement flexible work arrangements. Since the introduction of

the enhanced scheme in 2016, over 3,400 companies employing about 368,000 staff received WorkPro grants from 2013 to 2017<sup>6</sup>.

**Special Employment Credit.** Another Ministry of Manpower programme begun in 2011, offering credit to organisations that employ workers aged 50 and older who earn up to S\$4,000 per month. The wage-offset credit may be as high as 8% of the employee's wages, or 11% of wages of employees aged 65 or older.

self-reliance into our psyche, and many older people want to continue to work," she says. Despite the government's policy activism, however, older residents often find their path blocked by a persistent strain of ageism. Our research appears to confirm this on the part of many Singapore employers.

<sup>6</sup> Written Answer by Mrs Josephine Teo, Minister for Manpower, to Parliamentary Question on WorkPro grants <https://www.mom.gov.sg/newsroom/parliament-questions-and-replies/2018/0518-written-answer-by-mrs-josephine-teo-minister-for-manpower-to-parliamentary-question-on-workpro-grants>



*Keeping the economy expanding to support an older population requires a highly productive workforce.*

## 2. How ready are employers?

Far from all Singapore organisations, to judge by the survey results, are proactive about retaining older employees. Given the workforce demographic trends described above, this suggests a disconnect in many firms between management thinking and demographic reality.

Only half (52%) of executives say that their company devotes resources toward retaining older employees. Helen Lim, who is the founder and CEO of Silver Spring, a social enterprise that helps displaced workers find new employment, agrees there are examples of organisations making concerted efforts to redesign jobs, to retain their older employees and even to hire new ones who are over 62. Indeed, more than 50 companies have already voluntarily increased the retirement or re-employment age ceilings of their workers

beyond the current statutory requirements of 62 and 67 respectively.<sup>7</sup> She believes that most, however, are merely paying lip service to the goal of extending careers.

Ms Lim's view is partly supported by the fact that relatively few survey respondents (16%) believe that their organisations adequately support the unique aspirations of employees over 62 years of age. Double that amount say their firm adequately supports those of its youngest (aged 20 to 40) employees.

Linda Eunson, a consultant with long experience in Asia as a career coach and corporate HR executive, similarly observes that organisations are not very accommodating to extending older employees' careers, let alone hiring older employees. "The government is being

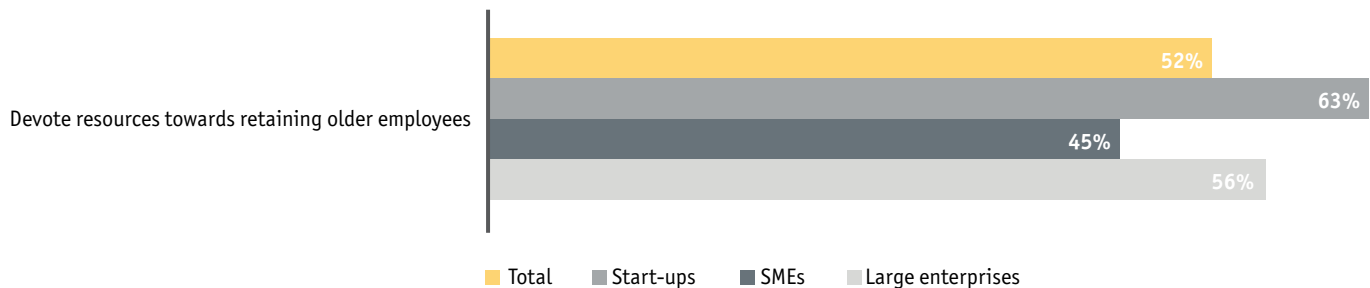
proactive but is having to nudge organisations along," she says. Mr Sidebottom believes it to be less a case of employer resistance to the government's initiatives, but rather of trying to work out what they mean for their organisation and what practical measures they should put in place.

### Different speeds

Not all sectors are the same. There are a few noteworthy differences between sectors when it comes to devoting resources to extending older employees' careers. More respondents employed in financial service and IT and technology firms indicate the allocation of such resources than those working in professional services and the government and public sector.

**Figure 3: Adding time**

Share of respondents' firms that devote resources toward retaining older employees



Source: The Economist Intelligence Unit

<sup>7</sup> More than 50 firms voluntarily raise retirement, re-employment ages: Ng Chee Meng", *Channel NewsAsia*, August 16 2019

Although not evident from the survey<sup>8</sup>, telling distinctions appear to exist between occupational categories. The government itself has tended to focus more of its attention on organisations that employ large numbers of “blue-collar” workers. This has been the case, for example, with the “mature workers” initiatives pushed by the Health Promotion Board (HPB). Beng Khoon Sim, the director of its Workplace Health and Outreach Division, says it pursues distinct initiatives for these occupations and for PMETs (professionals, managers, executives and technicians). Companies with more blue-collar workers received more attention at the outset, he says, mainly because wages are lower for older workers in this category and they don’t always have access to health and wellness programmes.

Mr Lee of the Ministry of Manpower notes that some sectors have a higher proportion of older workers in lower paying jobs. “This particularly applies to the cleaning, security and landscaping sectors where services are typically outsourced, and the prevalence of low-cost sourcing had led to stagnant wages,” he says. “We want to uplift their wages and improve their working conditions.” (In late 2018 the government approved mandatory wage increases for these three categories of workers<sup>9</sup>.)

At the other end of the scale, senior manager’s higher salaries and expensive

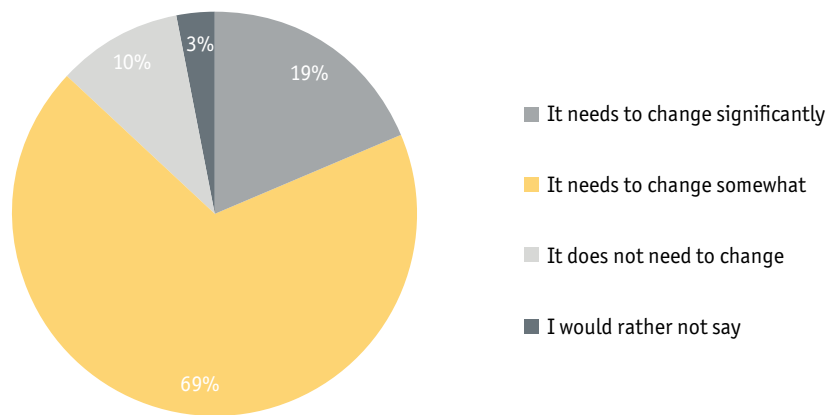
benefits packages may deter some employers from keeping these veterans employed into their 60s and 70s. Mr Sidebottom thinks such attitudes are counter-productive: “Having people with 20-30 years of experience who have worked through a number of cycles is incredibly valuable. In the financial industry we are acutely conscious about needing to retain that expertise. How do you deploy it? How

do you create roles that are appropriate and allow senior people with a great deal of experience to continue contributing?”

Although many employers have been dragging their feet on extending careers into older age, the vast majority of respondents are clear that their organisations must change over the next decade, to better accommodate older employees in their workforce.

**Figure 4: Looking ahead**

Does your organisation need to change to be able to better accommodate older employees in your workforce in the next ten years?



Source: The Economist Intelligence Unit. Note: Due to rounding, totals may not equal 100.

<sup>8</sup> Neither the resident nor employer survey controlled for respondent occupation.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/manpower/pay-rise-for-landscape-maintenance-workers>; <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/cleaners-get-wage-increases-and-bonus-least-two-weeks-pay-2020>





*Not all sectors are the same. There are a few noteworthy differences between sectors when it comes to devoting resources to extending older workers' careers*



### 3. Reality and myth: what seniors have to offer

Not surprisingly, the leaders (similar to the overall sample) value above all older employees’ accumulated experience, particularly compared to younger employees. The next two most highly valued attributes are related—the networks of professional relationship individuals have built over the years and the institutional or industry knowledge they have amassed. The others near the top of the list are not necessarily age-specific: technical skills, a commitment to work and problem solving abilities.

Asked separately about older employees’ strengths, employers put considerable emphasis on work values, including

punctuality and attitude toward work. The HR director of a midsize food company interviewed for this report says that the work ethic of the older workers in its employ considerably outshines that of its younger ones. As one concrete example, he reports that older employees take considerably less sick leave than younger colleagues do.

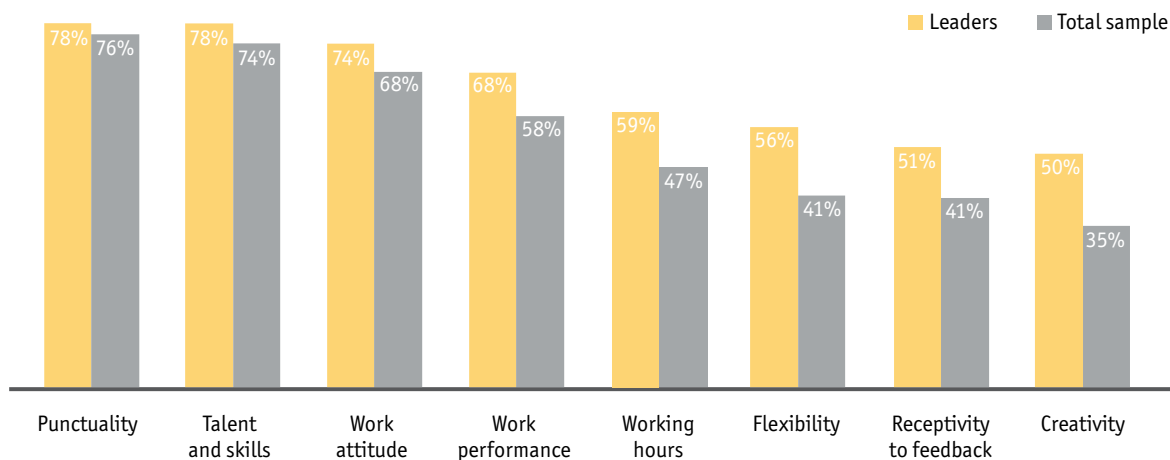
Mr Sim cites another intangible attribute that employers value highly: loyalty. This also comes through in the survey, where 88% of respondents in the leader group (84% overall) state the belief that older employees are more committed to the organisation than younger ones. There is similarly emphatic agreement

(by 78% of leaders and 76% overall) that younger employees can learn from older colleagues how to be better professionals.

Clearly, veterans have much to pass on to younger cohorts. 64% of leaders say that mentoring younger employees is one of the most effective contributions that older ones can make to the organisation. Another 45% cite their potential contributions to training. Considerably more large organisations point to mentoring and training as key roles for senior employees than do SMEs. More of the latter, by contrast, emphasise the value of veterans’ established networks of contacts, as well as their role in upholding company values.

**Figure 5: Differing perceptions**

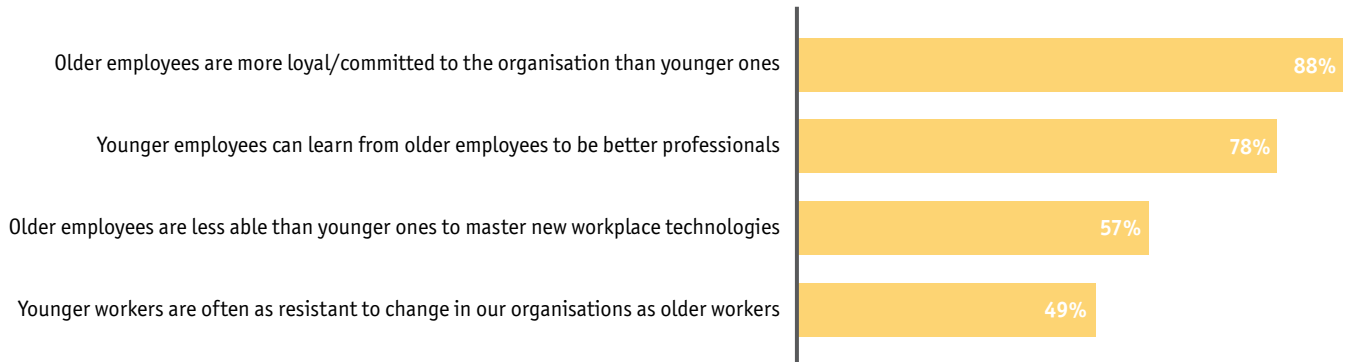
Perceived strengths of older workers (share of respondents rating them “strong” or “somewhat strong”)



Source: The Economist Intelligence Unit

## Figure 6: Comparative attitudes toward older and younger employees

Share of “leader” respondents who agree with the following statements



Source: The Economist Intelligence Unit

## Questioning stereotypes

Executives in the overall survey sample do not place great stock in older employees’ creativity, flexibility or receptivity to feedback (Figure 5). Considerably more in the leader group do, however. Half of the leaders, for example, believe older employees have something to offer in terms of creativity.

Dr Soin questions the view that older people are only good for mentoring and are not creative. “In my experience, if you put older and younger people together in a working group to come up with creative solutions, the older ones will generate just as many ideas as the others.”

Mr Sidebottom argues that there is no evidence to suggest that older workers are unable to innovate. “People who bring perspective into innovation offer something enormously valuable. I would expect senior, experienced people to be at the forefront of innovation and thinking about how markets develop, how to connect different parts of the organisation and what new ways there are of delivering value to clients.” He adds that older employees may not be digital natives, but innovation is not only about technology. “Many certainly have the ability to imagine the future.”

There is also a majority belief in the survey (even among the leaders) that older employees are less able than younger ones to

master new technologies. Ms Eunson attests to such attitudes: “This is culturally a very traditional society, and generation gaps are wide, especially between tech-savvy young people and those who are perceived to be digitally-challenged older employees.”

According to Mr Sim, the older employees that his agency works with are often uncomfortable with newer digital technologies. “But we see the gap narrowing,” he adds. “Many, for example, are using a health app that we’ve created for the smartphone and are pretty savvy with it.” The food industry HR director has also found that the firm’s older employees have been adept at mastering the workplace apps that the company has created.

Automation of work processes powered by intelligent technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) or robotics poses particular challenges for employees of all ages. Although economists disagree about the scale of the automation impact, most agree that significant numbers of workers in developed economies are likely to lose their jobs or have their jobs re-designed as their roles are taken over by automation technologies<sup>10</sup>. Some experts believe, however, that automation may create more jobs than it eliminates as unanticipated new roles emerge. Others maintain that individual tasks performed

manually by workers are more likely to be automated than entire roles<sup>11</sup>. This view jibes with another, that automation can lead to greater job satisfaction if it relieves employees of their most routine or physically demanding duties, thereby allowing them to focus on more rewarding and potentially higher value work.

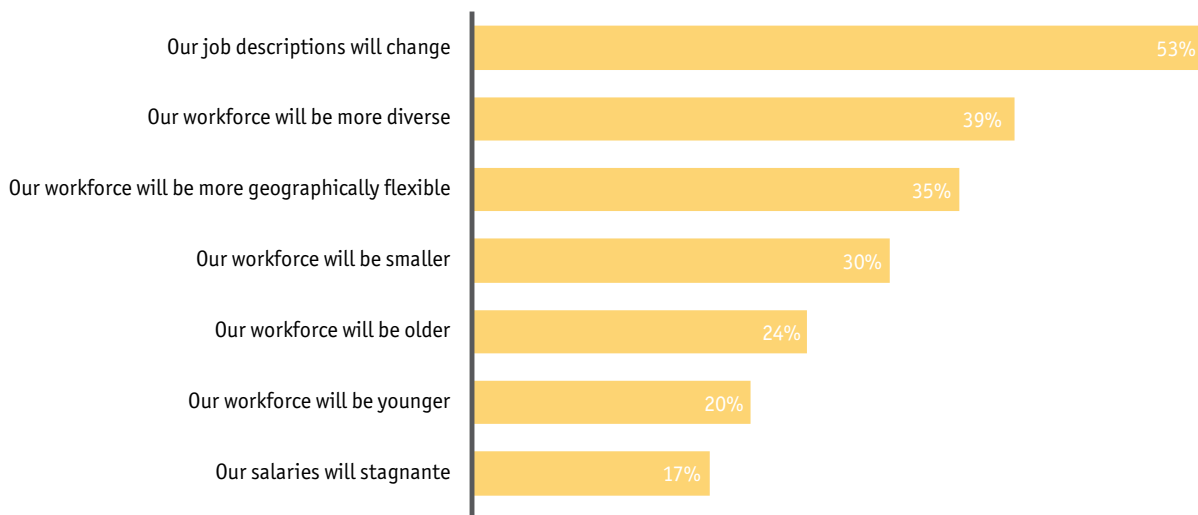
The introduction of advanced automation technologies into the workplace could thus prove a boon to older workers, particularly if it leads to changes in job descriptions (as the majority of survey respondents expect to happen—see Figure 7). Mr Lee

points out that around 95% of the WorkPro job-redesign projects that his ministry is assisting employers with involve technology-related enhancements. “These include the introduction of advanced software, machinery and systems to automate routine and physically demanding tasks,” he says.

Among other benefits, being relieved by automation of their most burdensome tasks can help older workers to focus on mentoring their younger colleagues, and sharing the experiences and insights they have accumulated over their careers.

### Figure 7: Technology’s impact

In the next five years, how do you anticipate technological developments, such as AI, will impact your workforce? (Share of top responses from total sample)



Source: The Economist Intelligence Unit

<sup>10</sup> Estimates of potential job losses range from about 9% in OECD countries to 47% in the US. For the OECD estimate, see Melanie Arntz, Terry Gregory and Ulrich Zierahn, “The Risk of Automation for Jobs in OECD Countries”, OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers No 189, 2016. The US figures are presented in Carl Benedikt Frey and Michael Osborne, “The future of employment: how susceptible are jobs to computerisation?”, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> For a recent discussion of the automation impact, see *The Automation Readiness Index: Who is ready for the coming wave of automation?*, The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2018.



*The most common measure adopted by leaders is to provide retraining opportunities to develop new skills.*



## 4. Strategies to extend careers

Asked what policies their employers could adopt to help extend careers, top of Singapore residents' list is enabling a better work-life balance. This even trumps better financial and retirement benefits. "More than anything else, older employees want flexible working hours," agrees Dr Soin. "Financial remuneration is secondary." She adds that many employers,

especially heads of smaller companies, fail to recognise this and miss the opportunity of fully engaging older employees in the pursuit of key business objectives.

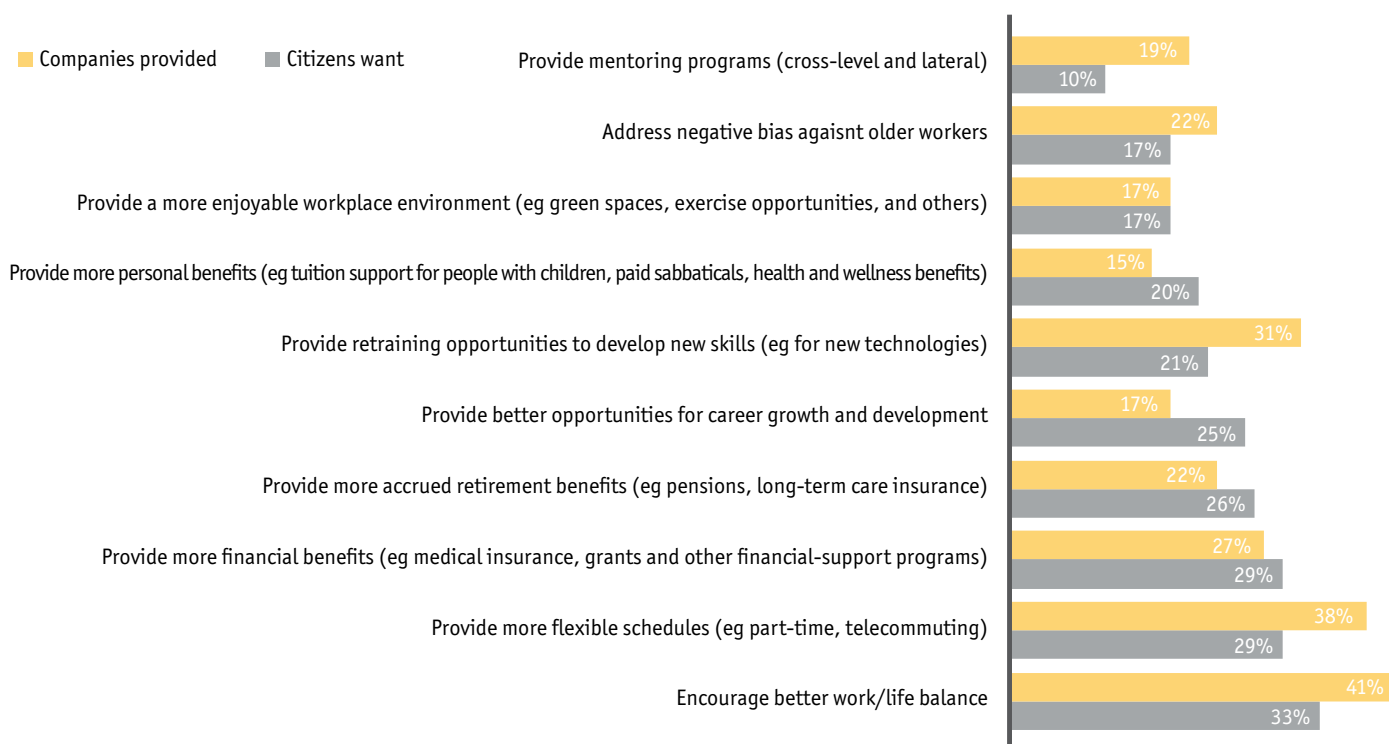
Current employer initiatives are broadly aligned with this wish list. The provision of flexible work schedules (including part-time

and contract work, and tele-commuting) and measures to foster a better work-life balance are the top two measures companies in the leader group are putting into place to help extend their older employees' careers.

The next most common measure adopted by leaders is to provide retraining opportunities

**Figure 8: Getting on the same page**

What policies could organisations adopt to help extend careers as employees get older?



Source: The Economist Intelligence Unit

to develop new skills. These are critical for older and younger workers alike, says Mr Lee: “Reducing job-skill mismatch will be critical in the future economy with a faster pace of transformation. As jobs are transformed through automation and AI, more workers will have to re-skill regularly to remain employable in the same profession or pursue new and different professions.” The government’s SkillsFuture programme is designed to help employees of all ages as well as employers to address this need (see “Policies to extend careers” on page 4).

Ms Lim of Silver Spring extols the virtues of the SkillsFuture programme for older people. Courses are on offer, she notes, on subjects ranging from interpersonal skills to the use of digital media to data analysis. A particular challenge for older people undergoing re-training, she believes, is skill retention. “After a few weeks of not using new skills, much of the knowledge gained is likely to lapse,” she says. She believes that greater efforts should be made to ensure employees are placed in new roles not long after they complete their training.

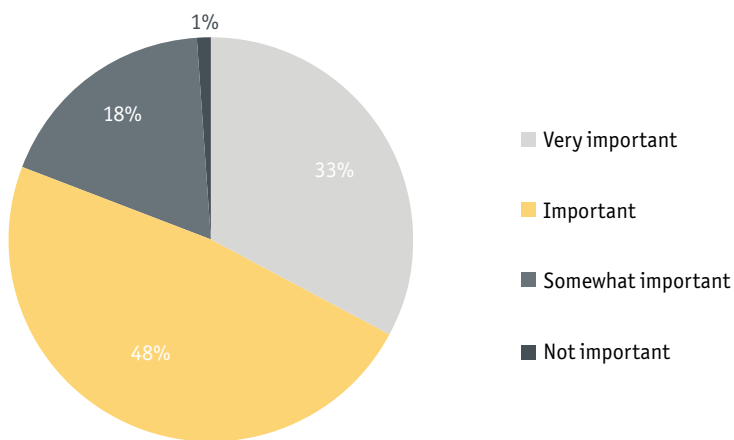
## Can ageism be defeated?

Asked what areas their organisation should focus on to better accommodate older employees, the survey respondents appeal not just for practical measures such as flexible working arrangements, training and financial benefits but also something that will probably be tougher to manage: dispelling negative perceptions about older employees (sought by 21% of leaders).

Ms Lim believes better on-boarding programmes would help to combat such attitudes. Ms Eunson advocates the pairing of younger and older employees in “buddy systems” where both advise each other on different issues over a period of time. Such measures will help, but bringing about cultural change in organisations is usually difficult and doesn’t happen overnight. It almost always requires strong and consistent messaging from senior management that to achieve the organisation’s mission, everyone must be in it together.

### Figure 9: Re-skilling

In the next five years, how important will employee re-skilling and re-training programmes be to your company’s success? (Share of leader respondents)



Source: The Economist Intelligence Unit

## Facilitating skills exchange between veterans and younger staff

Stephen Sidebottom has spent over 20 years in senior HR management roles in the financial industry, the last seven of them based in Singapore. For him, the goal of leveraging employees in their 60s and 70s must be treated in a strategic manner. “This is not stuff you make up as you go along,” he says. “Fundamentally it is a strategic issue in the context of people living to 100.”

Planning to use this asset first requires due diligence. “You need to have a real understanding of the generational dynamics in your workforce. What skilled experience do you have, and what do you value most? What does this mean in terms of the age

profile of your organisation, and how does that factor into succession?”

Multiple elements must then be put in place to implement the strategy. These should include the re-designing of job roles to feature a substantial amount of mentoring and coaching. To be particularly effective, the vehicles used for the latter should be two-directional: from young people up to older people and older people back down. For example, the younger employee might help the older to master some technology challenges while the older colleague provides advice about dealing with key customers or navigating

the corporate bureaucracy. Means should also be created to capture older employees’ institutional knowledge, especially of those who have been serving in senior managerial roles. Any “mature worker” strategy should also include the option of flexible working arrangements although, Mr Sidebottom points out, these are not uniquely relevant to older people.

Lastly, he recommends that the organisation creates a clear narrative about how value is created by having the entire workforce actively in play. “After all, the whole of the organisation must come together to deliver real, sustained value.”



*Means should be created to capture older employees' institutional knowledge, especially of those who have been serving in senior managerial roles.*





*Older employees, for their part, need to be open to re-skilling, not just to extend their careers but to deliver that contribution the economy needs.*





## Conclusion

The Singapore government knows that if productivity is to improve and the economic growth rates the country has become accustomed to are to be maintained, the older generations of workers will need to make a significant contribution. Thus, it continues to prod employers to re-design the jobs of older employees and, on the other hand, seeks to encourage older workers to acquire new skills. Older employees, for their part, need to be open to re-skilling, not just to extend their careers but to deliver that contribution the economy needs.

It is an endeavour worthy of global attention, given that many high- and middle-income countries face similar challenges. But Singapore's unique features mean that its success in extending careers will not be easily replicated elsewhere. The city-state's advantages in this context are not just its compact size, making policies easier to implement than in larger countries, but also the relatively good health and lengthening life span of its senior residents (supported by a good healthcare system), as well as cultural values which accord elders a high degree of respect.

Foreign companies will have a vested interest in the success of Singapore's efforts to leverage its older workforce. If the workforce begins to contract in size and labour shortages in various occupational categories grow, multinational firms could shift some operations to countries in the region where workforce demographics are more favourable. Singapore would lose some of its lustre as an investment destination, weakening what has been a key driver of its economic growth. In this context, the purpose of extending careers is not just to keep older residents active and happy for longer. It is a bid to ensure that Singapore's reputation as an economic success story does not grow old along with its workforce.

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