

## The Singapore worker: 20s go-getters, 30s & 40s in lower gear

Goh Chin Lian and Andrea Ong  
The Straits Times  
Tuesday, Aug 06, 2013



SINGAPORE'S young workers have been called the strawberry generation: easily bruised by work and life.

On the other hand, the older 30- to 40-somethings like to think of themselves as tough nuts who are hardworking and know what it is like to struggle for a job.

But a new survey commissioned by The Straits Times on job perceptions throws these assumptions out the window. The young are more rooted in reality and have more grit than the general perception would suggest.

The survey findings showed that - surprise, surprise - pay and benefits matter most to the 20-somethings in a good job, only then followed by the much-touted work-life balance.

They are also the most likely to value career advancement than other age groups. In the same vein, eight in 10 will work overseas compared with six in 10 for other age groups - the desire for personal growth is the strongest motivator.

As for those older workers - who often gripe about young workers' lack of commitment and tendency to job-hop - they are the most satisfied with their lot, with around seven in 10 saying they have a good job. Combined with their reluctance to work overseas, a question arises as to whether they are comfortable to the point of being complacent.

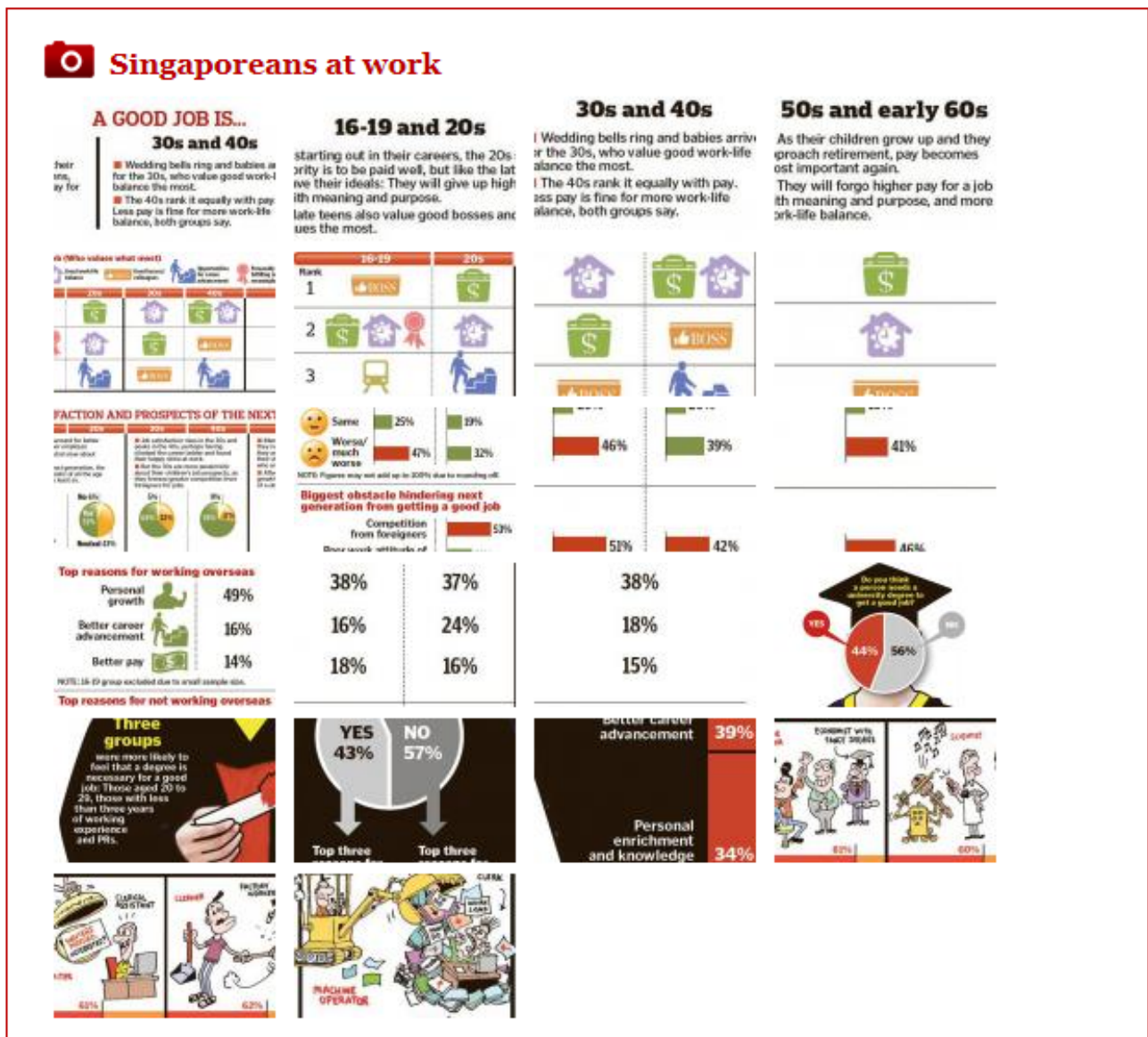
The survey of 501 Singaporean residents aged 16 to 62 covered what they value in a job and how they perceive the next generation's prospects, among other things.

Their responses in phone interviews by Degree Census Consultancy, from June 20 to July 2, provide snapshots of the Singapore worker's priorities and concerns as society wrestles

with the tensions of easing the stressful pace of life and staying ahead amid global competition. These are all issues that have surfaced in the Our Singapore Conversation.

The findings also come amid a recent debate sparked by commentaries in, and letters to, this newspaper, on whether Singapore workers deserve their fairly high wages.

Insight delves into the nitty-gritty of this new picture of the Singapore job landscape, and what it means for the future.



## Young go-getters

INCREASINGLY filling positions at work are the post-1980 generation known as Gen Y. Those aged 20 to 29 formed 17 per cent of the resident workforce last year, and made up a quarter of associate professionals and technicians.

The picture that emerges is one quite different from the strawberry analogy of cosseted youth with little experience of hardship.

Far from wanting to slack off or quit on a whim for greener pastures, half in their 20s are happy at work, with just 6 per cent saying they did not have a good job.

And their idea of work-life balance would give sneering mature workers set in their routine a pause. Take graduate Jason Ne Win, 26, who is clocking 12-hour days, six months into his first job as a recruitment consultant.

Work-life balance to him is not about working eight hours a day, which he feels cannot be achieved in his line of work. "But I don't take work home on weekends and I have enough annual leave to travel," he says. With 20 days of annual leave lined up, he has set his sights on a holiday in the Greek islands of Santorini.

Indeed, Gen Y are more educated than their predecessors, more tech-savvy and plugged into the world, and have more overseas exposure, from overseas school trips, university internships and study exchanges.

Leaving next Saturday to join Internet search giant Google in the United States as a software engineer, Mr Muhammad Mohsin, 30, recalls that it was a six-month exchange at Carnegie Mellon University in 2008 that led him to venture abroad.

Meeting many students at the American campus who had started their own companies inspired the Singapore Management University graduate to set up two start-ups developing iPhone and iPad applications, leading now to a job offer from Google.

This willingness to venture overseas for personal growth has been identified by other reports.

Sure, Gen Y appreciates a performance bonus. But an earlier study commissioned by the Tripartite Alliance for Fair Employment Practices (Tafep) of more than 3,500 people from 30 organisations here found the Gen Y bunch sees additional annual leave as important, such as for travel and other personal pursuits, while those who are older value extended medical coverage for themselves and family members.

Other surveys like the Kelly Global Workforce Index 2012 report found that when choosing between jobs, younger workers here placed importance on personal growth (41 per cent) and personal fulfilment (29 per cent).

Tafep's study also found that Gen Y ranks opportunities for career development and training higher than other generations.

One implication is that employers have to find ways to retain them, harness their strengths and gel them into a multi-generational workforce.

However, some still worry that the new generation of workers is turning soft and complacent, a product of the succession of good years and near-full employment Singapore has enjoyed.

This is reflected in how few ST survey respondents of all ages - but especially the 20s and below - put job security as a factor in a good job. The 20-somethings ranked it seventh out of nine factors; those aged 16 to 19, the last. The older groups placed it fifth or sixth in importance.

One worry, ironically, lies in the fact that the 20-somethings are the most optimistic about job prospects for the next generation. If good times are all that the emerging generation has experienced, their picture of their prospects may be too rosy.

Acting Manpower Minister Tan Chuan-Jin writes via e-mail: "While our labour market is tight, good jobs are available and it is a happy situation to be in as an employee. But, there are worries about how this impacts our work ethic and values for the longer term.

"Many employers have highlighted that job-hopping takes place, applicants are choosy and can be demanding in their salary expectations."

### **Gen O for Older**

HAVING reached senior positions or attained a level of seniority, older workers are at a different stage of the life cycle and have different requirements.

Those in their 40s were more likely than those in their 20s and 30s to rate good bosses and colleagues as important for a good job, the survey found. While it is understandable, the flip side is some may be coasting in their jobs and not raring for new challenges - probably to the frustration of the young bloods under them.

Some employers see those in their 40s as having more commitment to the company, but others say they may just be reluctant to take on new challenges.

Chemical Industries Employees' Union president Rajendran Govindarajoo says of the workers he knows: "Most of them in the 40s are already stable and don't want to quit. Even though the pay may not be so good, they're willing to work all the way. It's an easy-going life."

This bears out a finding in the survey that those in their 40s are just as likely as the 20s lot to disagree that they want to earn as much money as possible without needing to be happy in their jobs - seven in 10 in both groups say so.

And for those in their 40s and 50s who will not work overseas, family commitment is not the only reason. While that was the first reason given by those in their 50s, a significant 20 per cent said they also feel satisfied with where they are in their life.

Indeed, while the young generation looks driven now, observers say the odds are that their priorities will change as they age, especially in Singapore. Much of the drive is due to their life stage, starting out in their career and wanting to buy their first car or save up for their first house.

IT engineer Rahman Abdul, 37, recalls: "When you are young, all you think about is money and that with money, you can buy a lot of stuff."

His perspective changed three years ago when at 34, he wed Ms Rosita and Natasha arrived, now four months old. He clocks nine to 10 hours a day at work, leaving the office by 7pm. He says he would take a 10 per cent pay cut for more family time.

### **Dreams and realities**

AS THE 20-somethings settle down, will the stress of caring for their children and elderly parents blunt their drive, so they become complacent mature workers? Or will more stay single or have no children, retaining their original work priorities?

Sociologist Paulin Straughan thinks they will "very likely" go the way of the life cycle, but expects more people to remain single and delay marriage, with family size shrinking as a result.

"The danger here is that young adults believe that (they should) focus on work demands when they are young and single. So they over-invest in work, and neglect social relations."

But the need for more meaning in life is rearing its head. The ST survey found the 20-somethings in particular would give up higher pay for a job with meaning and purpose, with 67 per cent saying so.

The costs of not finding a good balance could mean emigration for some, disenfranchisement for others. A new normal that holds together these concerns will benefit society in many ways, as Ms Sim Chunhui, 29, discovered after slogging for 10 years in events planning and venue management, clocking 12-hour work days.

Not long after she married a business development manager, she quit her job last year and took a one-third pay cut - and made changes to her lifestyle, from shopping to dining out - to work as a programme executive for Habitat for Humanity Singapore.

The non-governmental organisation builds homes for the needy abroad and here, and organises clean-ups of houses of the elderly and families in need.

"What I want in a job has changed over time. At first, it was a lot about myself. But after a while, that felt hollow. But now I find the small changes I make for others more important than thinking about myself in a big way.

"The young people who volunteer with us sometimes say that this is the first time they know that one-room flats exist - I like the idea of changing the lives of the elderly living alone and at the same time getting the youth of today to think of something bigger than themselves."

Googler-to-be Mr Muhammad expects to find his "intrinsic motivation" from creating a product that has wide reach.

He says: "Previously, I thought I will like to make a game that's really successful - not in the financial sense but a lot of people playing and enjoying it. Now it's shifted to (creating) a product that affects the lives of a lot of people... like Gmail."



**Publication: AsiaOne**

**Date: 6 August 2013**

**Headline: The Singapore worker: 20s go-getters, 30s & 40s in lower gear**

But for the idealistic young, there is the harsh reality of the working world - one increasingly globalised. Like other age groups, the 20-somethings rated competition from foreigners as the biggest obstacle between the next generation and good jobs.

Also looming is competition from other countries. But significantly, only those in their 50s and up were more seized by the possibility of a slowdown in economic growth leading to fewer jobs, jobs created being too low-paying, and changing demands in the job market - all of which economists say are real threats.

Labour MP Patrick Tay says the older group may be more apprehensive because they have witnessed how jobs like typists and photo-laboratory technicians became obsolete, while jobs that did not exist a decade ago have appeared. In the face of global competition, some like Mr Tay advocate acquiring a second set of skills, say, in a different profession like counselling, where demand is likely to rise.

Whatever the future holds, one thing is clear from the survey - old stereotypes of the Singapore worker no longer exist, and the challenge is to meet the expectations of this new reality.

[chinlian@sph.com.sg](mailto:chinlian@sph.com.sg)

[andrea@sph.com.sg](mailto:andrea@sph.com.sg)