Many not keen on imposing test, citing current labour crunch in service industry

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Should there be an English entry test for foreign front-line staff? Opinions differ.

The idea of an entry test was mooted by a former director of the Singapore Tourism Board, David Low, who said that a test or a review of workers’ current abilities would ensure a standard of service to all customers.

"It is a serious issue that we have to worry about," he said. "We should have a system to make sure that front-line staff can at least communicate with customers in English."

But not everyone agrees. Some say that the idea could be impractical.

"I don’t think it’s feasible to have an entry test," said a director of a training company. "It would be too cumbersome and take too much time."

Another suggested that such a test could be unfair to workers from English-speaking countries.

"Why should we assume that all workers from English-speaking countries are competent in English?" he asked.

What industry insiders say

"There should be a minimum level of English proficiency that we can expect from our workers," said a director of a hospitality company. "But an entry test is not a viable option."

"The cost and time involved would be prohibitive," he said. "We need to look at other ways to ensure that our staff can communicate effectively with customers."

Some suggest that companies should conduct their own assessments of staff’s language abilities.

"It’s better for companies to have their own systems in place," said a director of a recruitment agency. "This way, they can tailor their training programs to their specific needs."

The Singapore Retailing Association (SRA) and the Singapore Management College (SMC) have introduced training programs to help foreign workers improve their language skills.

"We understand the concerns," said Mr David Tan, director of the SRA. "But we believe that such programs can help to bridge the gap and ensure that our customers are served well."

Mr Tan said that the SRA has seen an increase in the number of requests for such programs in recent years.

"We have noticed a trend among our members to invest more in language training," he said. "This is because they recognize the importance of being able to communicate effectively with customers."