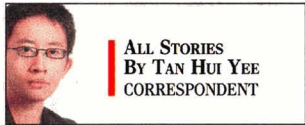


"I didn't realise that I would have to start worrying about my age at 30."

An applicant for a public relations job in a multinational company. She was told she was the oldest applicant, and asked if she was "mobile" enough to travel around Singapore

"Some clients don't take me too seriously."

Mr Jeremy Lauw (below, right), 59, a property agent, about his bald head. He shaved his head because his hairline started receding at the age of 40. He has an MBA and more than 20 years' experience in property sales



ageism (also agism) ► noun [mass noun] prejudice or discrimination on the grounds of a person's age.
- DERIVATIVES ageist (also agist) adjective & noun.

On the wrong side of a number

Singapore is fast ageing even as it becomes more ageist. The word "old" is still mentioned in the same breath as "dependent", "disregarded" and "useless". Surveys also show that Singaporeans think people are getting "old" at a far younger age these days. Why is there a disconnect between perception and demographic reality?

She was just 30 years old, young, confident and - she thought - at the prime of her life.

That was until she applied for a public relations job in a multinational company. First, she was told that she was the oldest applicant. The firm said it was looking for applicants in their 20s because "they have the legs". Then it asked if she was "mobile" enough to - get this - travel around Singapore.

"I didn't realise that I would have to start worrying about my age at 30," says the woman, who asked not to be named. She was not hired eventually and has since gone on to a marketing and communications job in another organisation.

Ageism lurks in all corners at all age levels even as Singapore fights to keep its older workers from being laid off in this current downturn.

It is no surprise that older workers are fairly way down on most companies' list of priorities.

A study conducted last year by the Singapore Human Resources Institute (SHRI) and Workforce Development Agency asked companies to rank eight priorities such as "talent management" and "restructuring wages and benefits" in order of importance. They put the task of "managing an ageing workforce" sixth, and the "re-employment of older workers aged 62 and above" seventh. Last on the list was "attracting women to rejoin the workforce".

"The word 'old' connotes negativity," says SHRI executive director David Ang. Employers often think that such workers are "not willing to change" or are "inflexible".

Trainer Leo Chen Ian, 35, who conducts workshops on ageism for Central Singapore Community Development Council, says it is common for Singaporeans to use words like "frail", "dependent" and "wrinkled" when asked to describe old people.

Singapore is shaping up to be one of the fastest ageing countries in the world, yet is becoming more ageist.

The demographic reality is that in 2007, 8.5 per cent of people here were aged 65 years and above. By 2030, that figure will hit 20 per cent.

Yet, Singaporeans think people are considered "old" at an increasingly younger age. According to the global 2005 AXA Retirement Scope survey, which polled about 300 working people here, old age started at 71. In the next survey, released in 2007, that benchmark dropped to 67. Last year, it slid to 66.

Among another 300 retirees polled, the benchmark also dropped - from 73 years to 70 years - showing the same paradigm shift.

The perception by working people here that old age begins at 66 compares unfavourably with countries like India, where "oldness" was reached at 67 years, or Australia, at 74, as well as the varying figures for Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Switzerland and the United States.

Why this disconnect between demographic perception and reality?

Dr Robyn Stone, a US-based researcher on ageing policy and executive director of the Institute for the Future of Ageing Services, suggests: "The closer a society gets to being old, the more frightened it becomes. The closer you get to a society that is getting older, the more there is a backlash against ageing, so there is interest in having a youth-oriented culture."

FEARING THE FUTURE

IT IS this same fear that drives people to try to look younger longer, smooth out their wrinkles and put the black back in their hair.

In the 2007 AXA survey, 61 per cent of working individuals and 64 per cent of retirees agreed with the statement "we should do everything to prevent ageing effects on our looks". Out of 16 developed and developing countries surveyed, Singapore had the second-highest proportion of working respondents agreeing with the statement. The highest was China.

The extent was such that those who resist looking young face subtle exclusion.

Ms Lena Lim, 71, the founding president of the Association of Women for Action and Research and former managing director of Select Books, noticed that strangers started treating her differently 15 years ago when she stopped dyeing her hair black.

She had started dyeing it in her 30s when her hair greyed around her crown



With a vital statistic of 56 (that's her age!), grandmother Pearl Read shows that she has got what it takes to turn men's heads as an underwear model. This was part of a nationwide campaign against age discrimination by the British charity Age Concern back in 1998. PHOTO: AGE CONCERN UK

awkwardly like a cap, but stopped when the greying evened out.

She says: "Nobody wants to engage you because they assume that you are no longer interesting. I feel this often at parties. Other than close friends and family, nobody wants to talk to you."

"I'm always the one initiating conversation. I will ask people about their work and their lives, and most of the answers are monosyllabic. Nobody turns around to ask me the same."

"Sometimes I get so incensed, I get very aggressive. For example, when I ask them: 'Do you travel a lot?', they say 'Oh, just once a month'. I say 'I do too - all the time - to international book fairs'. I tell them without waiting for them to ask me. Then I quickly talk to somebody else, to show that I am finished with them."

Meanwhile, property agent Jeremy Lauw, 59, who shaved his head because his hairline started receding at the age of 40, notices that some clients "don't take me too seriously". He has a master's degree in Business Administration from the University of Leicester and more than 20 years' experience in the sale of condomini-

ums and retail plazas, as well as property management, here and abroad.

He says: "Age is mind over matter; if you do not mind, it does not matter. But we can't help it if we are bald."

The fear and loathing extend to businesses, which remain wary of older consumers for fear of acquiring a dowdy image.

Mr Henry Quake, the chief executive of the Council for Third Age, had to spend six months sweet-talking companies to set up booths at the 50+ Singapore Expo, which drew crowds of over 68,000 in Suntec City last month.

He says: "If I take this product and say that it's a product for the old, the old won't buy it, because they won't acknowledge that they are old. And the young won't touch it too."

SEGREGATION OF GENERATIONS

EXPERTS say ageism used to be less of an issue in Asian societies, where respect is traditionally accorded to elders. But lifestyle changes here have sharply reduced the interaction needed to sustain that respect.



with those on the wrong side of a number falling by the wayside.

The Public Sector Leadership framework, for example, has fixed 10-year terms for permanent secretaries and chiefs of key statutory boards. This allows talented civil servants to take on top positions as early as in their 30s and 40s, but also means they could leave the organisation way before the official retirement age of 62.

In 2002, the People's Association required grassroots leaders to step down from key posts when they hit 65. One year later, it limited the chairmen of residents' and neighbourhood committees to three consecutive terms, or six years, prompting an allegation of ageism from Member of Parliament Charles Chong.

The ruling People's Action Party, meanwhile, prides itself on self-renewal. In 2004, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong - barely two weeks after he assumed the post - declared that one of his chief tasks was to launch a search for Singapore's next leader.

But perhaps one of the biggest factors at play here is the debate around paid work and specifically how older labour is valued.

Business-centric Singapore thrives on competitive labour laws, yet is eager to keep older workers employed for longer periods to reduce the strain they may place on the state's resources.

Over the years, the Government has systematically raised the retirement age - to 60 in 1993, then to 62 in 1999. There is now talk of moving the benchmark further, to 65.

But employers are allowed to cut the wage of a 60-year-old worker by up to 10 per cent to "help ease the cost burden of retaining employees", says the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) website. But the wage cut "must be based on reasonable factors other than age, such as changes in an employee's productivity, performance, duties and responsibilities".

Meanwhile, the national retirement savings plan is structured to reduce an employee's total income as he ages, to entice employers with seniority-based wage structures to hire older workers.

An employer need pay only 10.5 per cent of a worker's income into his Central Provident Fund savings once he reaches the age of 50 - which amounts to a 4 per cent point cut. This contribution rate drops by another 3 percentage points when the worker hits 55, and then by a further 2.5 percentage points from the age of 60.

Depending on employers, other benefits are also stripped from the older worker. At the health clusters Alexandra Health, National University Health System and SingHealth, staff continuing in their current role past the retirement age have their annual leave entitlements cut to the level a new employee would get.

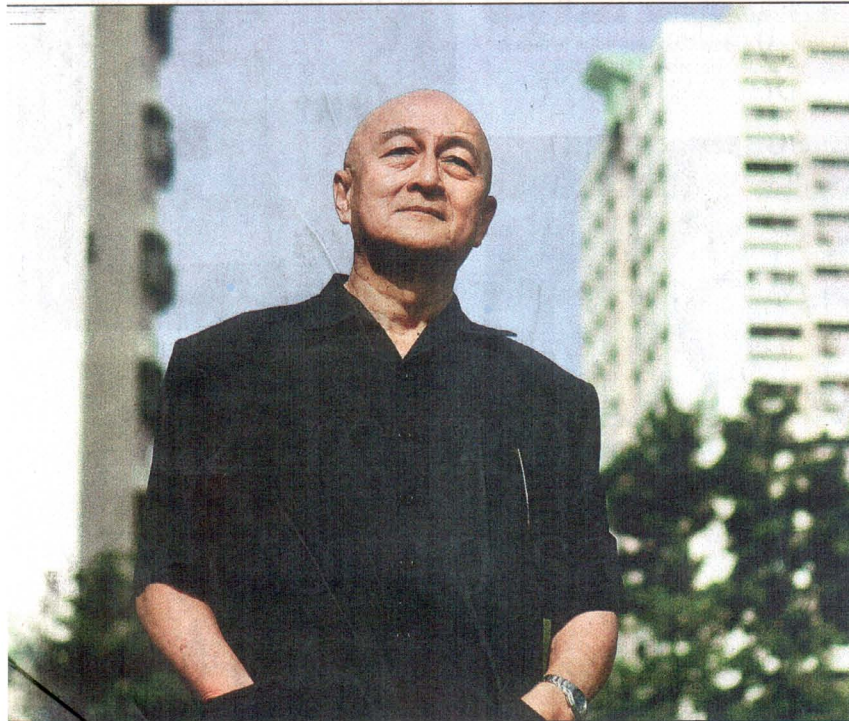
At the National Healthcare Group, "certain fringe benefits may be reviewed and withdrawn".

Other employers approached were less forthcoming about what lay in store for employees working in the same job past retirement age.

The National University of Singapore, for example, said "the remuneration package will be contingent on the scope of duty and the academic's contributions", while the Singapore Management University has maintained that its terms and conditions are "broadly similar" but declined to elaborate on the difference.

“Nobody wants to engage you because they assume that you are no longer interesting.”

Ms Lena Lim, 71, Aware founding president and former managing director of Select Books, about what happened at parties when her hair turned grey



ST PHOTO: LIM WUI LIANG

The Nanyang Technological University similarly said “those who have been re-appointed at the same level may be offered the same compensation terms and benefits”.

CHEAPER FOREIGN COMPETITION

OLDER workers pushed to lower-end jobs find their wages further depressed by the competition posed by younger and cheaper foreign labour. MOM figures

show that those aged between 50 and 59 formed 35 per cent – the largest proportion – of those working as cleaners and labourers, and in related jobs, in June 2007.

Madam Yong Kwai Chun, 54, for example, was laid off from her factory quality assurance job paying \$1,250 in 2006. When she applied for similar jobs elsewhere, she found no takers.

“The first question they always ask is: ‘How old are you?’ They said I was too

old, that my eyesight was not good. They only wanted people aged 45 and below.

“But my eyesight is good. I used to check all the tiny mobile phone parts in my old job,” she says. She eventually found a \$1,200 job as a cleaning supervisor after undergoing retraining through South West Community Development Council.

In a culture where someone’s self-worth is tied closely to his role in the economy, the “old” are deemed to hold reduced value.

Ageism trainer Mr Leo says his participants talk about “old people picking up empty cans or selling tissue paper” on the streets when they are asked to recall the image of an older person here. Other stereotypical old-age occupations that come to mind are cleaners, servers at fast-food outlets or petrol kiosk attendants.

Those working in these jobs voice low self-esteem despite, in many cases, enjoying their work.

McDonald’s server Susie Chin, 79, joined the fast-food outlet at East Coast Park 11 years ago, some time after she retired as a clerk. When asked if with her Standard Seven qualifications (the equivalent of secondary school), she considered any other job, she says: “We are so old, nobody wants us anyway.”

Mr Chen Ya Fa, 76, a cleaner for the past three years, adds in an equally deflated tone: “I didn’t try applying for other jobs. I’m so old already. Who would want to hire me?”

Petrol kiosk attendant Goh Soh Nge, 62, joined Caltex two years ago after he retired from his administrative job in JP-Morgan. He says: “I think people look down on us. People walk away and just ignore me sometimes when I try to talk to them. It’s quite a common problem among my friends who are working in other jobs as well.”

Perhaps one of the most sobering expressions of ageism came last year from Ms Janet Sng. The 74-year-old retired receptionist wrote to Lianhe Zaobao and The Straits Times to call for euthanasia to be legalised. She felt that seniors should have the choice of ending their lives with dignity and not be a “burden” to society.

When contacted by The



STEREOTYPICAL ‘OLD-AGE’ OCCUPATIONS: McDonald’s server Susie Chin, 79 (left), petrol kiosk attendant Goh Soh Nge, 62 (right) and cleaner Chen Ya Fa, 76 (below). Madam Chin joined the fast-food outlet at East Coast Park 11 years ago, some time after she retired as a clerk. Said Mr Goh: “I think people look down on us. People walk away and just ignore me sometimes when I try to talk to them. It’s quite a common problem among my friends who are working in other jobs as well.” ST PHOTOS: ALBERT SIM, ASHLEIGH SIM AND CAROLINE CHIA



Straits Times, she expounds her view that the elderly cannot depend on the Government for their needs. “The Government cannot be a Santa Claus. There are so many of us,” she says.

BABY BOOMERS

IN TIME, experts hope that Singapore’s ageing population will produce its own solution to ageism. This is because the older generation of tomorrow – the baby boomers born between 1947 and 1964 – is better-educated, more affluent and more vocal than its predecessors.

This generation, they say, is far less likely to take mistreatment lying down, and far more likely to challenge current notions of what it means to be “old”.

In the near future, says Prof Harper, the question of re-skilling older people for new jobs will cease to be an issue because everyone – regardless of age – will have to constantly retrain to keep pace with the new economy.

But the space between now and that future looms large, and the task of easing the fear and erasing the stigma remains.

It received a leg up when the Government formed the Council For Third Age in 2007. It has since organised annual grandparents’ days to honour their contri-

butions and carnivals to promote active ageing, and given out awards to “active agers” to raise the profile of senior citizens who backpack, climb mountains and do in-line skating, among other things.

But the problem, according to Mr Leo, is that these role models are too far removed from the experiences of the common older person to gain currency. “In Japan and China, I see old people doing daily stuff, using their electric scooters to shop at the supermarket. Here, mostly, the maids do the shopping for them.”

Hence, stories of 80-year-old mountain-climbing marathoners have little effect on the public psyche when pitted against common images that reduce older persons to hunched men with walking sticks or doddering, bespectacled women like the comedy character Liang Po Po, played by Jack Neo in the 1999 hit movie.

What Singapore needs to have, says Mr Leo, is more “ordinary” role models of older persons doing common everyday activities in a dignified, independent manner. “We don’t see the extraordinariness. Now, we only see the extraordinariness.”

This is where physical environment plays a part. National University of Singapore sociologist Paulin Straughan says: “We need to build a conducive environment so people can grow old gracefully. That means having structures that are

friendly to older persons, and letting them get from point A to point B on their own to continue to play their social role.”

Elderly friendly infrastructure includes lifts, which the Government is upgrading so that within the next five years, public housing blocks will have lifts that stop on every floor. Other age-friendly amenities include seats at street corners, ramps and aisles that are wide enough for wheelchairs or scooters, and clear lettering in signage.

Once such environmental obstacles are removed, more older persons will cease to be dependent on caregivers for their daily needs, and this will remove a big source of stigma surrounding ageing.

Perhaps it is also time to think about removing the retirement age altogether. The official retirement age, says Dr Straughan, sets up a mental divide between “young” and “old”.

“If we don’t have that kind of clear structural demarcation, it eliminates ageism. You have a more porous boundary.”

Countries like the United States and New Zealand do not have an official retirement age.

The individual, meanwhile, could do well to watch his words. “Stop saying ‘I am so old,’” says Dr Straughan.

“When we lapse in memory, we say ‘oh dear, we’re getting old’. When we can’t run too fast, we say, ‘Oh, we’re get-



ting old’.” But the common refrain exaggerates the real physical attributes of ageing and pokes fun at older persons.

“We are shooting ourselves in the foot. Everybody will age. When you grow old, how would you want to be perceived by those around you? You are actually laying the ground for yourself.”

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