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Extending Working Life: Individuals' Responses, Attitudes and Practices of Employers in Singapore

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Context

In 20 years, Singapore will see an unprecedented rise in the number of older adults. Older adults aged 50 and above constituted 14.5% in 1980. This will increase to 35.4% in 2020. Significantly, four out of ten older adults do not have the minimum sum of about S\$100,000 in their Central Provident Fund, a compulsory saving scheme for their retirement needs, upon reaching 55 years in 2004. For a society that subscribes firmly to the philosophy of self-reliance and personal responsibility, where financial support at a subsistence level will only be given by the State as a last resort, this is untenable. Hence in recent years, a slew of measures have been introduced to promote the employment and retention of older workers, to ensure adequate financial resources in their retirement. In particular, a re-employment legislation to raise the retirement age from 62 to 65 years by 2012.

Research Aim

The aim of this paper is to examine the responses of individuals with regards to what will make working in later years more attractive for them and compare these responses to what they and employers thought were offered to them. It scrutinizes the data from the Future of Retirement Survey and other studies and consider what these findings might mean for policy-makers, labour market planners and employers, in view of Singapore's plan to promote and extend employment of older adults.

Methodology

Data in this paper is drawn mainly from the Global Ageing Survey on the Future of Retirement 2006. The Survey interviewed more than 21,000 persons aged 18 and above, as well as 6,000 executives in charge of recruitment policy for private-sector employers, in 20 countries and territories across five continents. In Singapore, 1,000 persons aged 18 to 79 (494 males and 506 females) and 300 employers were interviewed.

Employers and individuals were asked questions on the factors that could contribute to making working in later life more attractive. The responses from these two groups were compared.

Employers were also asked the reasons why their companies did not do more to attract or retain older workers and whether they perceived older workers as more, less or about the same as younger workers in being expensive, productive, flexible, reliable, loyal etc.

Findings & Implications for Policies & Practice

This study revealed the following useful insights, with implications for policies and practice.

To make work more attractive in later years, individual respondents 50 to 59 years old felt that employers could provide much more of the following items than what they were offering: the ability to guide and teach young workers, the opportunity to learn new skills, the ability to undertake less physically demanding work, new kinds of work, an enjoyable and stimulating work place, the opportunity to work fewer hours, the ability to continue earning an income. The last two items were selected most frequently, indicating that those were the items that would make it most attractive for those in this age-group to remain in the workforce. However, many employers thought that they were offering much more than what individuals experienced, except for the opportunity to work fewer hours and the ability to undertake less physically demanding tasks. This could be a result of a genuine lack of awareness of employers, or employers giving socially desirable answers. This may imply a need for greater employer education to enhance awareness of the desires of individuals e.g. learn new skills, to promote employment and retention of older workers. It may also highlight the need to retool and re-design workplaces (so that they could undertake less physically demanding work).

The general perception that older workers are “less receptive to training and skills” may not be accurate, as seen from this Study. More research is needed on how older workers learn (methodologies/environment/format/timings) or wish to learn, and what could enhance training effectiveness and the desire to learn. The findings also suggest the need for better communication between employers and employees. The desire for part-time employment and flexible work arrangement was very evident and should not only be made more readily available, but be institutionalized, as part of the human resource policies of the government, as the largest employer, and companies.

The data further revealed that many stereotypical views of older workers persist, particularly amongst employers. This is supported by the findings of the National Survey on Senior Citizens, where nine in ten older workers reported that one of the difficulties they faced in job search is their age, out of over 90% who reported difficulties in job search. These are in spite of wide evidence that older workers can be as effective as younger workers. This underscores the need to create greater awareness through more public education, so that employers could harness the abilities, skills and experience of older adults more effectively, and older adults themselves

would recognize their own strengths and limitations and be able to optimize their strengths. These would likely enhance employers' willingness to employ older workers. While there is currently some evidence of such efforts, for example, by the Tripartite Alliance for Fair Employment Practices (TAFEP), these would have to be intensified.