The two competing ideologies on ageing

Ageing workers bring more experience, but potentially more health problems as well. Managing this tension in the workforce is critical.

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For The Straits Times

Modern culture holds two competing ideologies on ageing. One sees ageing as a decline into decrepitude and irrelevance. The other considers ageing as entering a richer phase of personal and intellectual vitality, which brings with it the greater liberty to pursue fulfillment.

Mr Thomas Coe, director of the McCourt Centre for Humanities and Ethics at Cornell University in the United States, was quoted as saying: “The culture’s problem is that we split ageing into good and bad. We’re unable to contain images of growing older that handle the tension between spiritual growth, the good, and physical decline, the bad.”

The same tension runs in the workplace safety and health (WSH) arena. The new wave of older workers wants to remain engaged and productive beyond the traditional retirement age, but they also face the ones among whom we see a higher prevalence of chronic diseases than previous generations.

This tension can be overcome by cultivating a culture where people pursue high levels of well-being from their youth to their older years, and providing the environment and tools to do that. Singapore’s new generation of older workers comprise the baby boomers, born between 1947 and 1964, who are now aged between 65 and 72. By 2030, all our baby boomers will be over 65 years old. In 2006, it was one in 12.

This generation of older Singaporeans is longer, fitter and better educated than previous ones. They expect to continue living independently and view age as an opportunity to spend more time with family and pursue activities of interest.

Their top reason for wishing to remain employed includes making an income, staying mentally active and physically active, and engaging in something meaningful. They do not associate ageing with checking out or feeling old, but see it as a phase in life that is full of potential for development and self-actualisation.

This is good news for Singapore and businesses. Singapore’s workforce is aging and shrinking. Close to 90 per cent are over 40, and 23.8 per cent of the workforce is aged between 55 and 64.

In 2014, the Government projected that by 2030, every person aged 65 years old would be replaced by only 0.7 person entering working age, or 1.9 persons. One old-age support ratio is projected to fall to 2.1 by 2030, which means a ratio of two working-age persons for every person aged 65 years and over; it was 4.8 in 2014.

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The divergence of various trends—an ageing population, restructured industry, digitalisation, reorganisation of the economy and the Fourth Industrial Revolution—influences the way of work.

The current 18-30 age group will be the first batch to experience this convergence in following. The Government and employers need to begin empowering younger Singaporeans to navigate future work, health and safety issues. A focus on cultivating this age group to value well-being as much as wealth, and developing their individual health literacy, will yield great dividends by reducing the need for more health services in the future. By playing on the strengths of their health and resilience, employers may plan for a future where the workforce is more resilient.

High levels of employee well-being translate to greater employee engagement and productivity. Providing employees with safe and healthy work environments, while supporting their personal and well-being, makes good business sense.

A trans-generational perspective has served Singapore well in its planning and policymaking. In the Ministry of Manpower’s latest WSH 2020 strategy, the same perspective is demonstrated in its commitment to prepare for the future of work and promote technology-enabled WSH.

We should approach the issue of an ageing workforce in the same way. We must not only look at the current wave of ageing workers, but also begin considering future generations of older workers, starting from those aged 16 to 30.

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