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# Stamp out ageism in the Singapore workforce now

By Victor Mills

**A**GEISM is alive and well everywhere, and very sadly so. That is part of the problem here in Singapore. The fact that ageism is so prevalent around the world is often the excuse for accepting it. "It's like that" – people will say in acquiescence.

Maybe businesses and society in big countries with large young populations can get away with that attitude. But businesses and society in small city-states like ours cannot.

Small city-states, and the businesses operating in these environments, need the maximum number of citizens to be economically active to innovate, grow and to stay sustainable. Businesses need teams to execute their strategies and to serve their clients. The state needs taxpayers to provide it with the funds necessary to keep citizens safe, facilitate business, provide education and social programmes.

As we have found out in the last decade, businesses in Singapore need to be prepared to tap all potential labour pools in a tight manpower market. And yet, there is still so much stereotyping and discrimination when it comes to mature

workers. There are two main reasons why this happens.

Firstly, there is very often the refusal to see the human first – and the potential of the human being. We used to have that problem with attitudes to race. Now, we have it with attitudes to age. It is not only mature workers who suffer from these discriminatory attitudes. Younger workers do too.

Far too many people are content to corral other people into generational boxes. This is a big mistake because it ignores the fact that human nature is the same whatever a person's age. It is a person's attitude, character, competencies, skills and potential that count, not their age.

Secondly, there seems to be a lot of insecure hiring attitudes about employing mature workers, based on untested stereotypes and a concern about perceived "fit", all of which translate into some of the most lazy recruiting practices anywhere, which serve no one's long-term interests.

Chief among these is an over-reliance on job titles when determining whether someone

should be interviewed. Companies and recruiters have convinced themselves they are too busy to take any other approach. For example, if you are looking to hire a vice-president of compliance in a bank, your last job had better have been VP of compliance at another bank. Otherwise, very few people will take the time and trouble to assess your attitude, character, competencies, skills and potential.

## A DIFFERENT APPROACH

A couple of years ago, the Chamber's Human Capital Interest Group developed an inclusive recruitment guide for employers and recruiters. When the Chamber spoke to recruiters, they wholeheartedly agreed with our approach, but pointed out, companies which hire their services do not. Because recruiters must abide by their paymasters' instructions, nothing much has changed.

Hence, more companies need to change, and this means leadership teams, HR partners and hiring managers must change their attitudes, hiring policies and practices, and their instruc-

tions to the recruiters they employ.

The current situation will not last. The demographics will force change as Singapore's population ages rapidly. So, too, will government policy. The lean-manpower economy is here to stay.

We are all accustomed to a lot of talk about the necessity for each business to transform itself to meet the demands of climate change, the resource constraints it will bring, its relevance to the market and the impact of technological change on jobs. While there is plenty of training going on to equip people with new skills, there is still not enough talk and certainly not nearly enough action about transforming ageist hiring policies and practices. No business can claim to have transformed itself if it has not stamped out outdated, wasteful, ageist HR policies and practices.

**The writer is the chief executive of the Singapore International Chamber of Commerce, which represents the voice of international/multinational corporation businesses operating in Singapore**

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