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SICC chairman: Over 99% of companies in Singapore 'hire fairly'



Amir Hussain · Senior Reporter

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The iconic Merlion statue is seen against the backdrop of Singapore's Central Business District in this 29 January 2020 photo. (PHOTO: Getty Images)

SINGAPORE — Amid widespread public calls for stronger regulation to better protect the Singaporean core of the workforce and for some employers to change their allegedly discriminatory hiring attitudes, leaders of Singapore's apex business chamber on Tuesday (19 January) reiterated that Singapore must remain open to global talent to ensure the country's competitiveness.

The business leaders, who were speaking to the media at the release of a [joint statement on fair hiring and employment practices](#) at the Singapore Business Federation (SBF) Centre, nonetheless acknowledged the importance of hiring fairly and inclusively, developing local talent and grooming them for leadership roles, and promoting positive workplace relations.

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The chairman of the Singapore International Chamber of Commerce, Per Magnusson, said, "We should remember that 99 per cent, or even more than 99 per cent, of all companies in Singapore actually do hire fairly. We should actually silently go after that very small minority who don't. And we...support the absolute majority who hire in a fair manner."

Asked by a reporter why errant employers shouldn't be publicly taken to task, Magnusson, who also sits on the SBF council, said, "When one does it publicly, I think everyone gets the wrong perception. Because one company penalised publicly gets all the media attention while we forget immediately that...it's definitely more than 99 per cent of all companies do it in a fair and equitable manner."

Warning against skewing the wrong public impression regarding employment practices, Magnusson said Singapore relies on having the best talent available and there is no reason to "amplify the media message".

Global talent crucial to Singapore

In his opening remarks at the event, SBF chairman Lim Ming Yan said, "Given the nature of global competition, it is imperative that Singapore stays open to global talent to complement the skills and capabilities of our local employees. The global talent will engender skill transfer that can further develop the local workforce."

Employers need to be committed to recruitment based on merit in compliance with the Fair Consideration Framework and the Tripartite Guidelines for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices, Lim said. They should also develop local talent and groom them for leadership roles with employers facilitating the transfer of niche or business-critical skills to local staff, he added.

Asked by a reporter why the joint statement was being issued now, Lim said, "Fair hiring has always been a topic at the top of the mind for many of the employers...having a strong workforce is a prerequisite to success at the company level."

He added that the pandemic has created a lot more pressure on the employment situation in Singapore and employers need to assure workers and Singaporeans that companies remain committed to fair hiring and providing them with good job opportunities.

President of the European Chamber of Commerce in Singapore, Federico T. Donato, noted that one key reason



behind Singapore's success over the decades was "the possibility of hiring and finding talent...because every investor local or foreign needs to find talent".

"Each company needs to find the right skills, and if the right skills are not available locally, we have to bring it from somewhere else," he said.

Donato, who also sits on the SBF council, used a major football competition as an analogy to underscore the mutually beneficial relationship between companies and workers. "When you want to win the Champions League, you have to have the best talent and keep having the best talent," he said.

Fair hiring in the spotlight

In August last year, the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) placed 47 employers on its Fair Consideration Framework watch list for potentially discriminatory hiring practices after the ministry found these companies to have exceptionally high shares of foreign professionals, managers, executives and technicians, when compared with their industry peers.

Another 240 firms were identified through data analytics for possible pre-selection of foreigners or not adhering to the spirit of the job advertising requirement under the framework, and would be further investigated, said MOM.

The same month the ministry made several policy announcements including increasing the monthly salary threshold for foreign PMEs holding Employment Passes to \$4,500. The ministry also said that it would for the first time set higher qualifying salaries for a specific sector, with the monthly salary threshold for EP applicants in the financial services sector raised to at least \$5,000 from 1 December. And it also extended the Fair Consideration Framework (FCF) job advertising requirement to S Pass applications from 1 October last year.

Speaking during the debate on the President's Address the same month, Labour MP Patrick Tay also urged MOM to do more to protect Singaporean PMEs. The assistant secretary-general of the National Trades Union Congress said that at least 20 PMEs had written to him over the past month, "sharing with me their loss of opportunities at taking on jobs and at our workplaces, to the extent of feeling discriminated against".

"I cannot help but wonder if, as a result of unchecked conscious and unconscious bias, there may still be instances



of nationality bias in hiring and promotion and in today's context, retrenchments?" he told Parliament.

He also urged stricter enforcement against companies that treat the FCF as "mere window dressing". The enforcement can come in the form of revealing or publishing the MOM's watchlist "so that the potential reputation loss would serve as a deterrent," he suggested.

Tay also proposed mandatory audits and penalties such as removing preferential tax and other benefits for any errant companies engaging in unfair hiring practices.

MP Ang Wei Neng, who also spoke at the debate, suggested setting up a National Human Resource Committee which could work with firms to share best practices for developing a Singaporean core at the middle and top management levels. He and several MPs have [called for publicly naming firms](#) that are placed on the FCF Watchlist.

Senior Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam last Tuesday said that Singapore still has some ways to go in having a job employment market that takes mature workers seriously.

Noting that half of the bottom 10 per cent of income earners in Singapore are aged above 55, he urged employers to "take the high road" and be willing to hire and re-skill someone who has significant skills amid a tight labour market caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The remarks echoed those he made in June last year during a national TV broadcast. Tharman, who is also Coordinating Minister for Social Policies, had called for a concerted national effort to help middle-aged and mature Singaporean workers and said that employers need to reorient their management philosophies and human resource practices.

"No Singaporean who is willing to learn should be 'too old' to hire. And no one who is willing to adapt should be viewed as 'overqualified'," he said.

Joint statement

A total of 29 trade associations and chambers (TACs) are behind the joint statement on fair hiring and employment practices. They represent companies across all industries, including MNCs, large local firms and SMEs.

"As businesses prepare for a recovery framework from disruption to transition and at a time of economic distress for businesses and their employees, the TACs encourage their member companies to remain committed to recruiting



deserving candidates fairly based on merit.” said the joint statement, which listed out core principles along three themes: promoting positive workplace relations; practising fair hiring; and providing developmental opportunities.

The SBF represents 27,200 companies as well as key local and foreign business chambers.

The joint statement can be found online [here](#).

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