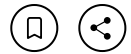


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Policies targeting LGBTQ+ employees are 'stupid'; workplace discrimination makes it harder to fill jobs amid ageing workforce, says HR veteran



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Nuria Ling/TODAY

Several panelists at symposium on diversity and inclusion spoke about the importance of organisations being equal opportunity employers

They said that Singapore's lack of human capital means that it is important to attract foreign talent to the country

However, they said having a work culture that discriminates against LGBTQ+ individuals could deter such talent from coming to Singapore

Moreover, companies could lose high-performing individuals as a result, and end up affecting their bottom line, said SHRI's president Low Peck Kem

SINGAPORE — Calling discriminatory workplace policies against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ+) employees "stupid", Singapore Human Resources Institute president Low Peck Kem said on Thursday (Jan 12) evening that organisations adopting such policies could ultimately end up hurting their bottom lines.

Ms Low, who has been the chief human resources officer for the Government's Public Service Division (PSD) for close to nine years, questioned how business leaders who want to carry out such policies against LGBTQ+ workers would enforce it.

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"You'll be questioned... about this stupid policy. How would you know what they're doing (in private)?" said Ms Low, who is also advisor of workforce development for the PSD.

She was responding to a question at the Diversity and Inclusion in the Workplace Symposium 2023 organised by talent acquisition agency Achieve Group and the Singapore International Chamber Of Commerce (SICC). It was held at the SICC's premises.

The moderator, SICC's chief executive Victor Mills, had asked Ms Low and two other panel speakers why the concept of equal opportunity for all, including LGBTQ+ people, is important for businesses today.

Thursday's symposium was framed around the results of the Singapore LGBTQ+ Workplace Audit 2022, which was released on the same day.

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The other panel members present were Mr Joshua Yim, the chief executive officer of Achieve Group, and Mr Alex Goh, an associate director at law firm Drew and Napier. Ms Low was present in her capacity as president of the Singapore Human Resources Institute.

Earlier in the discussion, Ms Low also spoke about Singapore's ageing workforce and the manpower shortages to come.

Because of Singapore's low birth rate, she foresees a shortage of young Singaporeans entering the workforce by 2030.

"Even if you have a baby now, it will take you another 18 to 20 years before (they) can come into the workforce," she said.

As such, she said it would be a shame to "discard" people just because of the labels put on them by society.

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“So what if you cannot see, or cannot hear, or you’re labelled LGBTQ+? If you can do the job and you have the competencies, you’re as valuable as anybody else,” she said.

THE SURVEY FINDINGS

The Diversity and Inclusion in the Workplace: Singapore LGBTQ+ Workplace Audit 2022 is the second edition of a survey conducted by talent acquisition agency Achieve Group. Its last survey was held in 2018.

The latest survey polled close to 200 human resources professionals and business leaders from November to December last year.

These are some of the key findings.

A majority of the respondents (64.4 per cent) said it is "very important" for an organisation to be regarded as an equal opportunity employer, up from 57 per cent

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ATTRACTING TALENT

In continuing the discussion about why the concept of equal opportunity for all is important for businesses today, the panellists highlighted Singapore’s limited human resource — in

However, Mr Yim said Singapore's Section 377A of the Penal Code had deterred many talented LGBTQ+ individuals from coming to Singapore.

While the law that criminalised sex between men was not enforced, he said the existence of the law made them feel insecure. This could have led to lost opportunities for Singapore.

Mr Yim asked rhetorically: "(Apple's chief executive officer) Tim Cook. Openly gay. Do you think he would have wanted to be a citizen in Singapore?"

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Parliament approved legislation to decriminalise sex between men and to amend the Constitution to protect the definition of marriage from legal challenges on Nov 29 last year after a two-day debate. Section 377A was officially struck off the books on Dec 27 after President Halimah Yacob assented to the Bill that proposed the repeal.

Giving his take on anti-discrimination legislation in Singapore, Mr Goh from Drew & Napier noted that the Government will soon [introduce laws against workplace discrimination](#).

"Discrimination issues in the workplace are going to assume a greater visibility (when such laws are introduced)," said Mr Goh, who specialises in dispute resolution.

Ms Low spoke about how companies can be equal opportunity employers by having a code of business conduct that helps prevent employees from behaving inappropriately.

However, she added that while it is important to have such policies in place, it is equally important that they are implemented by raising awareness through means such as diversity and inclusion training programmes.

"With the repeal approved, my job (as a human resources practitioner) is to tell (supervisors) where your boundaries are," said Ms Low.

After all, a supervisor who refuses to promote an employee because the latter came out as being gay puts the entire company at risk, she said.

"Is the employee going to sue the supervisor? No. They will sue the company."

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