



WHAT ARE THE TOP CONCERNS FOR SINGAPORE'S WORKFORCE?

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

Howie Lim: 00:08

Thanks for staying with us on Money FM 89.3, Singapore's first business and personal finance station and in Career 360, we take that 360 look at the manpower and labor landscape here, also your career and lifelong learning.

Now it's been several years since the launch of the national movement to enhance relevancy and employability of our workforce but has SkillsFuture done this so far? Has it impacted businesses today? Are they taking a different approach when it comes to hiring and retaining talent as a result?

We're speaking to Ng Wee Wei, Managing Director, Health and Public Service for ASEAN at Accenture to get her insights. Accenture is a global management consulting and professional services firm.

Wee Wei thanks so much for joining us today.

Ng Wee Wei: 00:47

Thank you for having me.

Howie Lim: 00:48

So what do you think the top workforce challenges are for us here in Singapore?

Ng Wee Wei: 00:53

I think the main thing is to prepare the workforce for the future work. And that's actually inseparable from digital business transformation. So we all hear and all read about, you know how algorithms today are able to match patterns or find anomalies from massive volume of data.

So one of the things that for example we did for a finance company was, we used algorithm to extract figures from graphs in PDF documents, from publicly available financial statements. And that can, imagine the past, it was people reading the financial statements and plucking out those data and putting it into Excel manually in order to do the analysis but now that can be done by machine. But this means it takes away the mundane work that people do and give us time to do new things, to come up with new services, new ideas, to collaborate with others, maybe outside the boundaries of our organisations.

So there are many, many opportunities but this requires us redesigning work, right? Accelerate the skills of our people, so that we can constantly look at how human and machines can work together.



Howie Lim: 01:59

The most common gripe I think, for some of my friends and myself, anecdotally is when we sift through the SkillsFuture website is, so what on earth should we be taking up? I don't even know what I lack. Because it's a case of you don't know what you don't know. There is a way to sort of figure out what we'd need for jobs in the future or even now.

Ng Wee Wei: 02:17

I think we look at rescaling in a couple of ways. First, I think we need to really allow our people to have time to learn. And then so, for example in Accenture we want to take away the time to learn, to move towards learning all the time. So the way we do, is that we make learning available in different formats.

So we have this thing called the Learning Board which is kind of like a Pinterest of learning things. So we assign subject matter experts, they will go out and curate whether it's internal or external content and make them available. So you can follow these people and then you can actually access it from your phone, from your desktop and that makes learning accessible and I think the other thing we try to do is actually to focus on the individuals.

Trying to understand the strengths of the individuals and as part of that, actually in 2015, we moved away from ranking individuals into this thing which we call a performance achievement, which is really focusing on each and everyone's strengths, and then allowing people to not just look past performance as evaluation criteria, but to focus on what this person can do, how we can maximise his or her performance based on his or her strengths and have a dialogue or feedback, so that we can maybe unlock that potential.

Howie Lim: 03:32

That sort of sounds like extra work for HR?

Ng Wee Wei: 03:34

That's actually done by the line. So it's the line people that spend the time and try to turn, you know what's a critical process into a development process.

Howie Lim: 03:45

Let's talk more about some of the challenges that the workforce might be facing. Competition's the thing that we hear about a lot, that businesses aren't able to say, hire the right people because there's a shortage and the competition for them is so high and then of course, the larger companies with the more financial muscle will be able to acquire them. What are some of the skills that they have that is making them so competitive?

Ng Wee Wei: 04:08

I think besides, you know the hard skills in the various domains that we all know we need to acquire, I think there is still a need to focus on soft skills.

Howie Lim: 04:19

That's harder to assess. How good a person is at soft skills, right?

Ng Wee Wei: 04:23

That's very true, so actually even in Accenture we are re-inventing the way we recruit a certain segment of our workforce. So in fact recently we ran, well we term it Elevate Summit, basically it's actually a full day session, where we already pre-select dozens of undergraduates and we invite them to come, we actually teach them our methodology, in terms of how to question, how to, you know, how to evaluate a problem statement and then we put a real problem on the table for them.

We put them into the groups and then they use a day to go and fact find, to interview people, to come up with their solution and then to present. In that process, we not only learn how they think but we also find out how they work with one another. We find out how they collaborate, their soft skills in terms of their curiosity, how they interact with people. So we have to have new ways to assess that too.

Howie Lim: 05:17

So you're saying that maybe interview processes will become full day things, in order to assess those kinds of things, it may take some time to watch them in action.



Ng Wee Wei: 05:27

Yes, exactly. Because I think the traditional one hour let's talk about your strengths is, it's probably too limiting for us to really find the right people to join us.

Howie Lim: 05:35

What are some of the priorities the workforce should have at this point?

Ng Wee Wei: 05:39

In my mind, they need to develop a curiosity to learn. Learning cannot stop in school anymore unfortunately. They need to learn how to be more flexible, more adaptable, and also they need to learn to collaborate because I think in the future work can be very distributed. But work can be done through maybe rapidly formed teams that could be multi-disciplinary, cross locations. So they need to learn how to work in that kind of environment. Work will no longer be done in isolation.

Howie Lim: 06:09

For the ones who have only experienced that, in the two decades that they've been in the workforce, now that feels like a challenging thing for them to get used to. What can they do then, to sort of adapt as you're saying?

Ng Wee Wei: 06:23

I think this is when mindset becomes quite important. So they, they need to, I guess, be ready to change and adopt a different mindset. What they learn, their experiences, they're still going to be relevant but they need to be open to new ideas and they need to be prepared to work in a multi-generational workforce.

Howie Lim: 06:45

That seems to be the norm these days, as well. That's coming to the fore anyway, as the millennials enter the workforce.

Ng Wee Wei: 06:51

Exactly.

Howie Lim: 06:51

They're the bunch who would be very familiar with cross location and being adaptive etc. because change is their constant. What though can they do in order to be able to work in a multi-generational workplace?

Ng Wee Wei: 07:05

I think the millennials also have some adjustment to do. Because working in a multi generation environment, I think will require them to understand how to tap into the expertise of the people who have been there, right? Their experience will count and they will be able to show the millennials how to do things in a shorter time but at the same time the millennials can teach the older generation new ideas, new ways of thinking. So I think both sides need to learn how to come together and work in an environment to create new ideas.

Howie Lim: 07:40

Are we making too big a deal of this, that the multi-generational workforce won't be able to get along, because this has been happening always, from the baby boomers to the X to the Y etc. it's not a new thing that millennials are entering the workforce. It'll happen eventually, organically.

Ng Wee Wei: 07:57

It may, but I think millennials as a proportion of workforce, is actually becoming quite a domineering force. So in Accenture for example, in my own work unit, I have about 80% of millennials. So it's no longer a, you know, it's slow, slow problem, that we have a chance to assimilate over time. It's an issue that we have to address here and now, how do we engage them? How do we get the most out of them? How do we help them develop? And at the same time, how do we integrate?

Howie Lim: 08:23

Would you say the millennials have more soft skills than say, workers from different generations? The other generations?

Ng Wee Wei: 08:29

I think that will be generalising.



Howie Lim: 08:31

Okay. First, help us out with the soft skills and what they are exactly. It sounds like cognitive thinking might be a thing because soft skills are important, right? For human capital development.

Ng Wee Wei: 08:42

Yes. So I listed a few, I talked about collaboration, I talked about flexibility, adaptiveness to change, I talked about curiosity. So I think all these are things that we need to continue to cultivate.

Howie Lim: 08:58

Why does it feel as though the older generation, myself included, might not have these. Is it just the way things have been done and what we've been doing at work that has caused us to maybe become a little bit more blunt in terms of those kinds of skills.

Ng Wee Wei: 09:12

Maybe it's the way work has been designed in the past, and how we see work needs to change in terms of the way we work with people, that way we work with machines, but I don't really think these are skills that you can't pick up. They're not, to me they're not innate, right? So it's not like if you're either born with it or you're not born with it. So to me, they are skills that we can learn and grow.

Howie Lim: 09:37

There are no characteristics in play here? Some people are characteristically a certain way.

Ng Wee Wei: 09:41

Perhaps, yes, yes

Howie Lim: 09:42

...prefer the square peg because I am square, for example. Yeah.

Ng Wee Wei: 09:46

Yes, yes, possible, possible, which is why we also look at strengths, right? So maybe not everyone's suitable for every job, but I don't believe that you can't learn to be more collaborative.

Howie Lim: 09:55

What do you think the biggest challenge for you in your position as a human capital developer?

Ng Wee Wei: 10:00

I think, what I struggle with everyday, it's really how do I engage that multi generation workforce? Because in my case, given that my workforce is 80% millennials, right? I also have to unlearn some of the things that used to motivate my generation and maybe learn new things in terms of how to communicate to the younger people, and how to bring along the younger people in, so that we can all be doing productive work together.

Howie Lim: 10:26

Let's go back to SkillsFuture then, it's been around for a few years as I mentioned. Do you think it's helped in this regard, say the soft skills department?

Ng Wee Wei: 10:35

Actually, specific for SkillsFuture, Accenture was one of the earliest participants in the ICT sector for the Earn and Learn Programme. What that means is that we actually brought in graduates from polytechnics and then we trained them in specific skills and then we put them in projects that will apply those skills and after that they get industry relevant certifications. So to us we did tap on that initiative, we're very supportive of the movement towards skills. And I think we are a beneficiary of this.

Howie Lim: 11:07

Do you think it's helped how businesses run today? Impacted them in a way that they, maybe take a different approach when it comes to hiring and retaining talent?



Ng Wee Wei: 11:16

I think it definitely encourages us to rethink, to not just place qualification as the only criteria, to look at recruitment, right? And to think broader and to also, to encourage our people to acquire skills along the way and to learn and grow all the time.

Howie Lim: 11:33

Here's the question Wee Wei, what did you use your SkillsFuture credit for?

Ng Wee Wei: 11:37

I haven't!

Howie Lim: 11:39

Oh no! Okay, you and I need to do this ASAP.

Ng Wee Wei: 11:42

Yes, together maybe.

Howie Lim: 11:43

Ng Wee Wei is Managing Director, Health and Public Service for ASEAN at Accenture.

Accenture is a global management consulting and professional services firm. According to Wee Wei, it's the soft skills that will get you hired or keep you hired in today's disruptive age. Wee Wei thank you so much for joining us today.

Ng Wee Wei: 12:00

Thank you.

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