

News Bulletin

BUDGET TO FOCUS ON INCREASING PRODUCTIVITY

Singapore - To increase workers' productivity, the government has announced a \$2.5 billion investment over the next five years for continuing education and training for Singaporeans. According to Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong, it was decided that the government wanted to "focus on the future...increase the wage level of Singaporeans and, better still, increase their capacity to earn more in the future." The goal is to achieve 2-3% annual productivity growth. However, the senior minister stressed that to be realistic, not everyone after retraining is able to get a job immediately.



EX-AIG VPs ALLEGE GENDER, AGE BIAS

U.S. - Two ex-AIG female vice presidents have filed a lawsuit against the insurer and its derivatives unit, claiming they were dismissed after complaining about a "boys club" atmosphere and alleging gender and age bias against older women. In a lawsuit filed in February, the women alleged that AIG had misled them about the existence of a salary cap and paid male employees and younger employees more for comparable work. The women added that the defendants "fostered a 'boys club' atmosphere" and that 96 of AIG's 108 vice presidents worldwide were men. AIG spokesperson, Mark Herr said that the company denied these allegations and that it "prohibits discrimination on the basis of age, sex or any other protected category".

AVIVA: JUSTIFY EXECUTIVE PAY

U.K. - Aviva Investors told 800 chairmen that companies are not showing enough control over the salaries of their key personnel. The chairmen needed to prove that the executive pay policy was independent while considering conditions for the rest of the workforce. According to the letter issued to companies, Aviva had made it clear that remuneration deals must be fully divulged in company reports and easy to understand. The insurance giant, who owns about 1.5% of every company on the FTSE All-share index, had voted against company remuneration reports on more than 800 occasions last year.



APPLE ADMITS TO USING CHILD LABOUR

U.S. - Apple has confessed that child labour was involved in some factories which produced its products. At least eleven 15 year-olds were discovered working in three of its factories in countries where the minimum age for employment is 16. The company, whose majority of goods is assembled in China, however, did not reveal the name of these factories or where these factories were based. It said that the child workers are no longer being employed, or are no longer underage.

The company also admitted that at least 55 of its 102 factories that manufactured their goods were ignoring Apple's rule that staff cannot work more than 60 hours a week. Apple has recently been under fire for engaging factories that abuse workers and have poor working conditions.



Feature Story

WOMEN POWER

Women are still the untapped workforce that employers often side-step - and need.



Women today have been described as the main driving force behind decades of growth. With technology and education within reach, women have infiltrated the gender barrier over the decades, and are now able to ascend the corporate ladder and start their own business ventures - previously male-dominated domains.

It is estimated that women account for more than half of the world's output. By 2025, the number of women in the workforce is expected to surpass men by 2:1. In the United States alone, women hold 49.1% of the nation's jobs, while in Asia, the female labour force participation has been growing steadily over the last five years.

Nonetheless, more can be done to encourage women, particularly those who have been out of the workforce, to come back to work.

Tapping onto the women workforce

Diversity in the workplace is key to maintaining competitive advantage of organisations. Research has shown that a diverse workforce not only promotes creativity, but different voices encourage critical analysis - helpful in improving company practices and services. The positive vibe will help to attract the best talents and develop the company's brand as an employer of choice.

Talent comes in all shapes and sizes and from various backgrounds and lifestyles - mothers and older women included - and such diversity can bring positive change to the organisation. For example, in a traditionally male-dominated industry, women can not only bring a refreshing change to the workplace but also present alternative perspectives. >>

WOMEN POWER



The top three reasons why women exit the workforce are family-centric: personal or family responsibilities, excessive work hours that prevented them from meeting familial obligations, and personal choice to be a stay-home wife or mother.

»With the current economic climate and widespread retrenchments, skill shortage are prevalent in some industries while those who have been spared the axe are faced with greatly increased workloads.

Women rejoining or entering the workforce, especially trained professionals who have been upgrading themselves, can help to bridge skills gaps.

But while many women are keen to enter or re-join the workforce, their fear of prejudice from employers is a cause for concern. Women who have been away from the workforce are also apprehensive of how their skills in raising children and managing the household can be translated to the corporate world.

In 2009, Singapore's Ministry of Manpower received 56 complaints involving pregnant employees, an increase from 26 cases in 2008.

The jump in complaints could be attributed to greater awareness of maternity protection and much publicity and enhancement of maternity leave benefits, but there could still be many complaints still unfilled.

The glass ceiling

According to a study by the University of Texas in the United States, the top three reasons why women exit the workforce are family-centric:

- personal or family responsibilities;
- excessive work hours that prevented them from meeting familial obligations; and
- personal choice to be a stay-home wife or mother.

Recessions will compel many women to enter or rejoin the workforce to supplement the household income. However, many of them will find themselves disadvantaged at the job market, primarily because they have been out of the workplace for some time and their skills are no longer relevant.

Furthermore, with employers' more stringent hiring requirements, these women face fierce competition from the retrenched, fresh graduates and mid-career switchers.

Additionally, women's obligations to family are also seen negatively by some employers who equate family priorities to lack of commitment. Such perceptions would also hamper women's opportunities to advance their careers.

Attracting & retaining the fairer sex

To attract and retain valuable women staff, there must be a paradigm shift where mindsets are concerned. Working mothers and older women can still contribute to the organisation, provided a supportive work environment to help them balance work and family commitments is available.

During tough economic times, flexibility can bring some of the best talent to the table to fill in the gaps, especially if hiring permanent employees is not an option. Studies have shown that organisations with high levels of flexibility reported strong job satisfaction.

For women who are keen on returning to the workforce full-time, part-time or flexi-work can also be implemented as a gradual transition to full-time work. For working mothers, flexible working arrangements can help them manage their familial obligations without compromising their responsibilities at work.

Additionally, career development or leadership programmes not only motivate working mothers, but also demonstrate how they are valued by their employers. Such practices will promote loyal staff while building up the employer brand.

With a supportive network and family-friendly environment, working women can more easily attend to their personal lives and individual career goals. Being more focused and committed at work would mean they are able to contribute to the organisation to their best abilities.



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