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The Singapore Job Market: Data vs. Discontent

By Priscilla Cabuyao

Synopsis

Despite official reports on Singapore's tight labour market where there are more available jobs than workers, citizens' complaints about employment struggles still exist. What can be done to close the gap in position between the government and the governed?

Commentary

THE MINISTRY of Manpower (MOM) recently released a report on vacancies in the Singapore job market for September 2014. According to the report, the number of available jobs rose to 67,400, the highest in six years.

This seems to be incongruent with the sentiments of Singaporeans regarding the job scene expressed in public discourse. Singaporeans complain about how some of them find a hard time getting employment as job openings are being filled by foreigners. What more can be done to make the government and the people see eye to eye?

The data

Data from MOM published in January 2015 showed that there is an 8.9 per cent increase in the total number of unfilled positions compared to the results for September 2013. Sliced by occupation, posts for professionals, managers, and executives make up 21.8 per cent (13,590 vacancies) of the vacancy pie while jobs for associate professionals and technicians account for a close 19.2 per cent (12,000 vacancies).

Top openings under the professionals, managers, executives, and technicians (PMET) umbrella include those for teaching professionals, management executives, sales and marketing managers, and registered and assistant nurses. Expectedly, non-PMET jobs which include vacancies for waiters, cleaners, security guards, and shop sales assistants are the most difficult to fill. The non-PMET share takes more than half of the total vacancy number at a whopping 57.2 per cent (35,690 vacancies).

Per the report, employers enumerated "unattractive pay, preference for a shorter workweek,

physically strenuous job nature, and shift work” as the reasons behind difficulty in finding locals to fill in job vacancies.

Indications

The report explained vacancies are “available for all educational levels, with more for both ends of the educational spectrum. Specifically, those requiring at least primary or lower (14,720 or 24%) and university degree qualifications (13,060 or 21%) were most in demand. There were also many openings requiring secondary (11,430 or 18%), diploma & professional qualifications, (11,400 or 18%), lower secondary (6,280 or 10%) and post-secondary qualifications (5,520 or 8.8%)”.

The data suggests it is possible for citizens from all walks of life to secure employment as employment opportunities are not limited to the highly educated but also available to the young seeking work while transitioning from secondary to tertiary education.

Of note, regarding the overall summation of the state of the current job market, MOM employed the term “hard to fill” pertaining to vacancies several times. The term captures Singapore’s tight labour market where there are more available jobs than workers.

Data and reality

Despite the favourable employment situation, it may be argued the problem for Singaporeans is not merely about the availability of jobs but non-PMET wages being too low for the high cost of living in Singapore. This situation may then explain why a large number of non-PMET jobs remain unfilled.

Statistics and findings are released often to inform people about the current state of play when it comes to important issues such as employment. However, is this sufficient to make the government and the governed agree? Through the years, while reports and articles about Singapore’s relatively low unemployment rate and companies’ difficulty in filling positions have been released, discontent towards the labour environment persists.

If statistics do not match the lived experience, what more can be done?

In July 2014, the government has taken a step to connect hiring companies to job seekers by launching Jobs Bank, a free service which facilitates online job matching between Singapore-registered companies and locals (citizens and permanent residents). Registered individuals receive email alerts on job openings based on their preferences. Perhaps more publicity and promotion for the service is needed so that more Singaporeans can make use of the service.

It might also be useful for citizens to post detailed accounts of their employment struggles on official platforms such as REACH, the government’s e-engagement platform launched in January 2009. Providing real names and contact details instead of just posting as ‘Guest’ or using aliases could possibly pave the way for providing intervention and direct assistance to job seekers.

Punishing abusive firms

In December 2014, MOM announced that it has penalised a company for replacing 13 Singaporeans with foreigners. Per the Fair Consideration Framework (FCF), MOM “expects all firms to consider Singaporeans fairly for jobs, based on merit”. Members of the public are encouraged to report incidents of non-compliance to FCF.

When this story was published in news websites, some netizens still voiced their dissatisfaction. Some argue that this is just a ploy to show that the government is doing something and that there must be more than one company deserving of firm action from the authorities.

Perhaps more victims should come out and file their complaints so that more abusive companies can be punished. Hopefully, this would make citizens feel that the government is actually addressing employment grievances. As long as anxieties related to employment exist regardless of official reports indicating Singapore’s low unemployment rate and rising job vacancies, the question of which side is correct will remain a conundrum.

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