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National Trades Union Congress

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REFLECT • REIMAGINE • RESTRATEGISE

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**02**     **PREFACE**

**RESEARCH ARTICLES**

- 06**     Mobilising Workers via Digital Means: Reinventing Trade Unions for the Digital Age
- 20**     Continuing Education and Training: Looking Through the Lens of Business Leaders in Singapore

**BRIEF REPORT**

- 38**     Power to Participate: Building Young Voices, Choices, and Experiences

**PRACTITIONERS' INSIGHTS**

- 48**     National Trades Union Congress (NTUC)'s Changing Role in Shaping Singapore's Evolving Work Compact
- 56**     The Journey of Engaging and Organising Workers Through Digital Means
- 63**     Supporting Workforce and Company Transformation Through the Labour Movement: Company Training Committees and Training and Placement Ecosystem
- 71**     Can We Do More to Help SMEs Overcome Disruption and Discrimination in the Next Normal?
- 78**     Supporting Youth to Realise Their Aspirations and Address Their Needs

**84**     **ADVISORY BOARD MEMBERS**

**86**     **EDITORIAL BOARD MEMBERS**

**90**     **EDITORIAL TEAM**

# PREFACE

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The Singapore National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) has played an important role in Singapore's growth through the decades. NTUC underwent modernisation and transformation over the years to remain relevant. Throughout, our core mission remains steadfast — to protect and advance our workers' interests, uplifting all. Our workforce today faces a world fraught with uncertainties. In response, NTUC has been conducting labour research studies to ensure that our efforts to champion workers' interests are bolstered by actionable recommendations and appropriate strategies that are evidence-based. The launch of this Singapore Labour Journal is a natural expansion of the work we do to help our workers secure better wages, welfare and work prospects.

Through the Journal, we want to initiate discussions, promote debates and advance the understanding of labour issues. We hope the compendium of diverse and significant work will serve to invigorate thought and shape the policies, programmes and legislation affecting workers both in Singapore and globally because every worker matters.



This Journal, unlike many others, incorporates practitioners' insights and positions them on an equal footing with peer-reviewed empirical studies. This integration is borne from our belief that academic research without practical relevance is akin to strategising at 30,000-foot view with minimal impact on the ground. The findings put forth in this Journal by the academics will be complemented with industry practitioners' inputs and sharing of practical knowledge — forging a unique perspective from our Labour Movement.

Each article in this inaugural issue is an embodiment of the theme: "Reflect-Reimagine-Restrategise." It is a representation of the collective journey, with tripartite practitioners and academics, as we reflect on the current and future labour issues and challenges; reimagine new approaches and perspectives to value create; and restrategise the way forward to value capture. This is how our Labour Movement has kept pace with the changes for over 60 years and will continue to do so, as we confront the complexities ahead.

This first issue is a reflection of the changing times. Within these pages, we explored the rise of digital tools as a means of organising workers. We discussed the growing desire among youth for the power to participate. We further delved into the Continuing Education and Training landscape, through the lenses of business leaders. These are matters close to our hearts, with implications for Labour Movements around the world. The latter half of this Journal showcases NTUC's response and ongoing efforts to these emerging trends. It features our Union's own foray into digital platforms, fuelled by a desire for progressivity as much as an existential necessity. It presents our efforts to empower the youth of today and workers of tomorrow, to build a diverse yet inclusive Labour Movement, solidifying our continued longevity. It demonstrates our endeavour in carving our own space through the Company Training Committees to support companies in outmanoeuvring change and powering through transformation.

In the process of engaging our youth, professionals, managers, executives and other worker segments, it has become increasingly clear that their desires and needs have evolved. In this context, the need for a social dialogue to refresh NTUC's compact with workers is imperative. I have penned my thoughts on NTUC's forward response to this evolving workers compact — one that is collectively defined by our workers, where no one is left behind while ensuring Singapore's resilience in a dynamic world. As the voice of the workers, NTUC is well-positioned to drive such conversations, through the "Every Worker Matters Conversations", to co-create a new compact against the backdrop of economic uncertainties, rising cost of living and an ageing workforce, amongst other challenges. I believe this would prove valuable to the ongoing global conversations on the pursuit of inclusive growth, through a human-centred approach.

It is my hope that these pages will contribute to the community of academics, policy makers, practitioners as well as our fraternal unions and workers as we seek answers to labour issues. The launch of the Singapore Labour Journal is a milestone for NTUC. I am glad to have the support of our Advisory and Editorial Board members who have helped to make this a publication of the highest standards. I would also like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to the contributors and reviewers whose efforts have culminated to the success of this issue. Moving forward, we want to invite contributions from academics, thought and advocacy leaders, practitioners and policymakers, both locally and internationally. Collectively, this Journal can be a contemporary and relevant publication in the field of labour issues.

Like the rest of the work that we do at NTUC, this Journal is dedicated to our workers. It is my wish that this Journal will better promote the development of research and practice in the field of labour issues, and the subsequent translation into tangible strategies to help our workers earn a better living and live a better life because every worker matters. Before I sign off, I would like to call upon academics, Government agencies and practitioners from all world regions to join us and vivify this journey with NTUC.

## **Ng Chee Meng**

Secretary-General

National Trades Union Congress, Singapore



# RESEARCH ARTICLES



# Mobilising Workers via Digital Means: Reinventing Trade Unions for the Digital Age

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Brigid Trenerry, Samuel Chng, Yang Wang, Sun Sun Lim and Peng Ho Oh

## Abstract

*Singapore's economy has witnessed successive waves of transformation with its highly skilled and competent workforce serving as a backbone to continuing economic growth. Tripartism is a key feature of Singapore's economy and underpins workforce participation and the mediation of employer-employee relations through collaboration between trade unions, employers, and the government. As with other unions around the world, changing social and economic realities are putting pressure on trade unions in Singapore to digitalise and adapt to new forms of worker engagement. Social norms are also rapidly changing parallel to the new forms of work and opportunities afforded by digital technologies. Amidst challenges such as membership declines, institutional changes and the rise of the gig economy and precarious labour, some unions have struggled to transform, while others have thrived and grown by adopting modern tools and technologies to engage with and organise emerging groups of workers. This article explores how the organisation of workers through digital means can benefit Singapore's trade unions in light of its economic and employment climate, and the historical trajectory of trade unions. We focus on how engagement, which is of paramount importance for trade unions, can be complemented or enhanced through the adoption of digital tools. We also present several examples from different parts of the world demonstrating how traditional unions are digitalising through transnational collaborations and collectives, and through the adoption of communication technologies, digital platforms, and campaigns to support worker organising. In so doing, we distil key lessons for trade unions in Singapore that are contemplating and exploring organising workers through digital means.*



## Introduction

As the global economy advances with the rise of digitalisation and the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Industry 4.0), trade unions are increasingly finding it necessary to reinvent themselves in how they are organising workers to remain relevant. Trade unions are organised associations of workers in a trade or profession that are formed to protect and further the interests and rights of the workers. However, unions around the world, including those in Singapore, are challenged by shifting economic and social realities, alongside demographic changes. For example, younger generations of the workforce may have less experience in engaging with unions yet are more reliant on technology as a means of communication and seeking knowledge and information. Some unions are experiencing declining membership rates, organisational changes and the rise of the gig economy and precarious work (Carneiro & Costa, 2022), while others have managed to thrive and continue to grow by embracing digital technologies to appeal to new groups of workers (Vandaele, 2018; Visser, 2019). The necessity for trade unions to rethink worker organising models and experiment with digital means of communication has become even more apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic, due to an increase in platform and remote work (ILO, 2021; Mwamadzingo et al., 2021).

Singapore is no exception, with its economy experiencing successive waves of transformation supported by a highly skilled and competent workforce. Nonetheless, Singapore's trade unions are at an important inflection point on how they should adapt to the rapidly changing needs and demographics of the workers they represent. The mediation of employer-employee relations by trade unions, employees and government, forms one of the important pillars that uphold and strengthen workforce participation in Singapore. However, this tripartite relationship is also being tested due to globalisation, increased labour mobility and digitalisation, where changes in job characteristics are rapidly evolving the landscape for organising workers. Singapore's workforce demographics are also changing, and initiatives to engage workers will need to take into account the younger population and workers of the future.

In this article, we explore how trade unions in Singapore can harness new digital technologies to organise workers more effectively in today's digital economy and society. First, we briefly review the history of trade unionism in Singapore and explore the emergence of digital organising. Next, we highlight international case studies of how global and national trade unions are digitalising through new platforms, collectives, and campaigns to support worker organising. Finally, we distil key lessons for trade unions in Singapore, which can also be applied for labour organising elsewhere.

## Trade Unionism in Singapore

Trade unionism began in the late 19th century as traders and workers migrated to Singapore and joined associations, which resembled trade unions in other countries. Following the British reoccupation of Singapore in 1945 after the Japanese occupation during War World II, the Trade Union Bill was introduced to allow labour organisations to operate and encourage them to register as trade unions. In part politically motivated against the colonial government, industrial unrest ensued and led to strikes and demonstrations, which resulted in a loss of 492,708 man-days in 1947 alone (Loh, 2018).

The decision to register trade unions was intended to help colonial authorities better monitor and regulate their activities. Intending to replicate the Trade Unions Congress in the United Kingdom, the colonial government encouraged the formation of the Singapore Trades Union Congress (STUC) in 1948. STUC was officially established in 1951 with 28 mainly white-collar trade unions. Following the start of internal self-governance and the exit of the colonial government, STUC split into two factions. The Singapore Association of Trade Unions (SATU) was formed by pro-communist trade unions while the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) was formed by non-communist trade unions.

Following Singapore's merger with Malaya under the Malaysia Agreement in 1963 and the subsequent independence of Singapore in 1965, NTUC emerged as the sole trade union movement in Singapore, with the demise of SATU and the remaining pro-SATU unions. NTUC

had, by then, developed a close working relationship and trust with the Singapore government, which laid the foundation of a symbiotic relationship to develop unique labour-management initiatives in modern-day Singapore. In 1969, NTUC held the Modernization of Labour Movement Seminar, which proposed moving beyond the outmoded concept of trade unions as purely bargaining entities to become an amalgam of worker and management interests and to contribute to Singapore's overall economic prosperity and societal well-being.

This developed into Singapore's model of tripartism, defined as a "social partnership" between the government, employers and workers (Katz et al., 2019). In turn, this also helped to ensure that interests in organising workers were more closely aligned with national objectives of economic and social development while representing and advocating for the broad interests of tripartite partners (Soh, 2012).

Since then, the Labour Movement in Singapore has gone through several rounds of restructuring and modernisation in how workers are organised. As Singapore rapidly grew in the late 1970s, omnibus unions were restructured into industrial unions to reflect the evolving industrial environment. This also allowed union leaders to be more in touch with the workers they represented on the ground. Full-time professional Executive Secretaries were also appointed to enhance the trade unions' planning, organising and management of industrial relations and activities. Subsequently, enterprise or house unions were formed in organisations with larger workforces (see Loh (2018) for a chronological history of trade unionism in Singapore).

Moving forward, the Labour Movement in Singapore faces similar issues to its counterparts in other countries. This includes the imperative to remain relevant amidst rapid industrial transformations and changes to the nature of work, while being sensitive to the evolving demographics and values of Singapore's pluralistic society. For trade unions and the labour movement as a whole to survive, there is a need for trade unions to adapt their organising strategies to increase membership and engagement of workers while continuing to represent the interests of workers. As discussed below, trade unions can take advantage of the myriad of digital technologies that have been rapidly introduced into our daily lives.

### **The Emergence of Digital Organising**

Current industrial changes as part of Industry 4.0 differ from previous periods due to their size, scale and complexity (Schwab, 2016). A key feature of recent economic and industrial change is the rise of the platform economy and more precarious forms of work, such as gig and crowd-based work (Behrendt et al., 2019). While these new forms of employment and job arrangements have provided increased opportunities and access for workers and benefits such as greater flexibility, there are growing concerns about the impact of platform-based work on working conditions and benefits, including weakened rights for workers to organise. Since 2010, there has been a five-fold increase in digital labour platforms worldwide (ILO, 2021). While most platform-based growth has been concentrated in the delivery and ride-share market, there is growing activity in online, web-based platforms that specialise in micro-tasking and matching employers with on-demand workers (Pesole et al., 2018). These trends are changing the nature of work and employment, with implications for organising workers by trade unions.

New forms of employment also make it more difficult to forge a collective consciousness and in turn mobilise collective action. The proliferation of digital tools signals an opportunity for rethinking existing organising models (Panagiotopoulos & Barnett, 2015). Online platforms are easily used to connect workers with similar interests or professions without the need to observe the bureaucracy of organising practices within traditional labour movements. The proliferation of digital platforms has also fostered the growth of freelancing and self-employment including private hire driving and food delivery in the gig economy. Such platforms, especially the established ones, are transnational and are being used by individuals in Singapore to organise locally.

The prevalence of digital technologies and the growing number of alternative worker advocacy platforms have led to an emerging trend of organising beyond the scope of traditional trade unions. These emerging worker voice groups usually function without collective bargaining and are organised to support fellow workers or campaign for workers' rights. In Singapore, we

see examples of this trend in the rise of ground-up organising by workers who are underrepresented (e.g., Grab Food Delivery Rider Singapore when gig delivery riders began proliferating in Singapore) or by advocates of specific causes (e.g., Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (HOME) and SG Climate Rally). In this context, trade unions are now seeing the need for a more proactive approach to organising and recruiting a diverse range of workers through deploying digital technologies. This also helps trade unions to provide new opportunities for member recruitment and engagement, and to expand international networks that promote worker organising thereby eliciting sustainable support and mitigating the challenges facing workers today. On the other hand, the growth of international networks exposes and pressures organising movements in Singapore to issues beyond the country, including domestic issues that occur in other countries.

### Digitalising Union Work: International Examples

To distil key learnings in harnessing digital technologies for organising workers, a review of relevant academic literature and current selected examples from different parts of the world are presented. These examples demonstrate how trade unions are digitalising by adopting new digital platforms, collectives, and campaigns to support the organising of workers. In deciding on the examples used, a search of global trade unions and trade union organisations in regions, such as North America, Europe, and Asia-Pacific was done. We sought to cover a wide range of sectors, worker and union profiles. These examples are discussed along four key themes: (i) the growth of digital technologies in global and transnational organisation of workers; (ii) how unions are embracing digital technology; (iii) supporting gig-workers in platform-based or on-demand work; and (iv) the rise of campaign-based organising of workers. While the examples below provide evidence of how digital technologies are being harnessed in both global and local contexts, there are also some pitfalls in adopting these models for local labour issues and trade union development in a specific country or region.

#### The Growth of Digital Technologies in Global and Transnational Organisation of Workers: Possibilities and Pitfalls

The rise of globalisation and economic cooperation has led to an expanded role of international union federations, or Global Unions, which represent workers globally across different industry sectors or occupational groups. Global Unions include the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and international organisations of occupational or industrial trade unions, or Global Union Federations (GUFs) (Cotton & Gumbrell-McCormick, 2012). The growth of Global Unions reflects shifts in the global economy and increasing labour mobility, as seen in the growth of multinational companies, international migration and offshoring and, more recently, increases in platform-based employment and remote work (Ford & Gillan, 2015; ILO, 2021). Global Unions are distinct from national and local unions and represent workers transnationally, thereby playing an important facilitation and coordination role (Evans, 2010; Ford & Gillan, 2015). Rather than replacing the activities of local trade unions on the ground, Global Unions are becoming increasingly successful in building transnational networks and partnerships, including with new technologies (Evans, 2010).

Trade unions have, in the past, embraced emerging technology, such as the Internet, to address challenges of relevance and membership decline (Burgmann, 2016). Indeed, early research on the future of trade unions, had proposed communication technologies as a cost-effective mechanism to help unions leverage resources and organise, regardless of the collective bargaining status of workplaces (Freeman, 2004; Hyman, 2007). More recently, trade unions are adopting new online communication channels, such as Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and YouTube, alongside web-based platforms and e-mailing lists (Panagiotopoulos & Barnett, 2015).

In part due to the increased visibility and coordination that new media provide, Global Unions are increasing their influence beyond national borders and lobbying and campaigning on issues impacting workers across industries and contexts (Hogan et al., 2010). New communication technologies allow unions to construct 'international early warning systems to alert other unions

of potential labour issues and organise transnational industrial action' (Burgmann, 2016, p. 59). However, as discussed further below, there are also disadvantages to transnational organising, whereby global union activity needs to be considered in the context of local labour issues and trade union development in a specific country or region (Ford & Gillan, 2015).

Since its formation in 2012 as an amalgamation of three GUFs representing over 50 million workers in the Mining, Engineering and Manufacturing sectors, IndustriALL Global Union supports unions and affiliates in establishing laws that support organising, strengthening union capacity to respond to labour rights, and building networks and campaigns at the national, regional, and global level (IndustriALL Global Union, n.d.). IndustriALL Global Union recently consolidated its organising strategy to campaign across key issues such as the Future of Work and Industry 4.0; Climate change; Targeted Industry Campaigns (e.g., Action on the textile and garment industry; Clean up shipbreaking, Stop Precarious Work) and engaging specific worker profiles (e.g., women, youth and white-collar workers) (IndustriALL Global Union, 2021).

Similarly, since its formation in 2000 as an amalgamation of four global union organisations representing over 20 million workers in the Services, Finance, Media, and Entertainment and Agency or Platform industries, UNI Global Union has ratified over 50 Global Agreements with multinational companies to set fair standards and conditions for workers across the globe. UNI Global Union has also set up a number of issue-based groups including UNI Equal Opportunities, which works towards a more equal and fair society and against discrimination due to race, gender, religion, or sexual orientation; UNI Professionals and Managers represents highly skilled or educated professionals and managers; UNI SCORE (Strategic Campaigns, Organising, Research and Education), which supports UNI campaigns and organising around the world, and UNI Youth, which supports young members in the Global Union for skills and services (UNI Global Union, n.d.). As discussed further below, this highlights the growing role of Global Unions and their member organisations to organise around specific issues and campaigns.

Global Unions are also supporting their affiliates and members to digitalise and navigate emerging sectoral challenges related to digital technologies. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced workers globally to find new methods to communicate, engage and develop digital solutions. For example, IndustriALL has recently donated laptops, tablets, smartphones, multi-media projectors, cameras, printers/scanners, broadband/internet connections, Zoom licenses and training to affiliates as part of their membership package (IndustriALL Global Union, 2021).

Other Global Unions are supporting their members to respond to challenges posed by new technologies. For example, Education International, a GUF which represents teachers and workers in the education sector, was recently involved in a campaign together with local unions to contest the use of digital technology through transnational action in two African contexts (Education International, n.d.). Key actions included working with a global response team against the privatisation of education, namely Bridge International Academies (BIA), an education company, with the ambitious goal to educate millions of children in developing economies through a technological platform (Bridge International Academies, 2016). However, on-the-ground monitoring found that the education innovation was of substandard quality, remained inaccessible to the most disadvantaged students and therefore contradicted goals to provide free, equitable and quality education (EI & Kenya National Union of Teachers, 2016). Education International together with local trade unions and educators have successfully campaigned to disrupt for-profit investment in favour of quality public education (Education International, n.d.), demonstrating the importance of transnational partnerships for organising.

While the above example demonstrates a positive campaign outcome between a global union and local trade union partners, such results are based on sustained efforts and resources over time, and may not always result in improved worker outcomes on the ground (Ford & Gillan, 2015). For instance, effective local campaigns may only have a limited impact on resolving labour issues in other countries and across different industries, even if they are conducted in collaboration with Global Unions (Anderson, 2015). Questions remain over the extent to which unions can in fact 'globalise' in the sense of working across 'multiple and overlapping' geographic contexts (Ford & Gillan, 2015, p. 458).

## How Unions Are Embracing Digital Technologies to Support Worker Organising

Alongside support from Global Unions, trade unions are recognising the importance of technology adoption and digitalisation in increasing their engagement with a wider variety of workers, including ‘white-collar’ and ‘new-collar’ workers (Dubb, 2019). While the rise of digital technologies is providing new opportunities for trade unions to engage with their membership base (Kerr & Waddington, 2014), there are also personnel and resource challenges faced in digitalising.

Recent studies have shown that across industries, trade unions are attempting to adopt new technologies with varying degrees of success (Maffie, 2020; Pinnock, 2005). For example, a recent survey of 149 trade unions affiliated with UNI Global Union indicated that trade unions, on average, agreed that social media platforms bring benefits to unions, such as attracting new members, conveying the unions’ positions and engaging younger workers (Panagiotopoulos & Barnett, 2015). Trade unions used a range of web-based and social media platforms, with the most popular channels including email lists, Facebook groups, Website subscription tools, Twitter, YouTube, internal network (intranet), blogs, photo-sharing platforms, and forums and discussion tools, among others (Panagiotopoulos & Barnett, 2015). Despite this, the uptake of new technologies was not consistent across industries and countries, where some unions faced resource constraints while other unions, despite being well-established and resourced, did not have a sense of urgency in adopting communication technologies. Moreover, trade unions that had a communication strategy, and could navigate different channels and streamline communication for different audiences were more effective in harnessing support for their online activities (Panagiotopoulos & Barnett, 2015).

Another study of 553 trade union members and non-members of the General Education Union (GEU) in the education sector in Australia showed that most respondents used social media, with Facebook and Twitter among the most popular platforms used (Barnes et al., 2019). Twitter and Facebook allow interactivity and transparency, such as allowing members to hold trade unions and their leadership accountable and have a say in union affairs, alongside publicly criticising employers specifically about wages and conditions (Barnes et al., 2019). Web-based platforms also provide an important way for trade unions to transform, enabling new forms of engagement and renewal (Kerr & Waddington, 2014) and the ability to reach a wider diversity of audiences other than just union members, including employers and government entities (Panagiotopoulos & Barnett, 2015; Pinnock, 2005). When used strategically, it would enhance and expand communication channels between tripartite partners. However, the openness of these forms of engagement would also necessitate putting in place safeguards and a code of conduct to ensure it is constructive towards the greater purpose of organising.

Several unions and union organisers have developed digital initiatives to support worker organising. TUC Digital is an initiative developed by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) in the United Kingdom (UK), a national trade union federation representing 48 affiliated unions in England and Wales and a membership of approximately 5.5 million members. TUC Digital aims to support unions to transform in the digital age. Key activities include working with unions on digital transformation, including leveraging e-platforms (social media/mobile/websites) to engage members and workers. TUC Digital provides an international networking space, conducts research, and holds events on innovation and digital organising and profiles best-practice examples in other countries. TUC’s Digital Lab has developed a range of resources and toolkits to support unions in digitalisation and digital transformation. Key initiatives include TUC’s Digital Health Check, an interactive toolkit for unions to assess their levels of digital maturity; Megaphone UK, a campaign-based platform, which aims to support unions to run online campaigns, develop petitions and rallies; alongside new digital tactics following the COVID-19 pandemic, such as online structured public meetings with governments and other parties.

HKLab was founded by HK Denmark, one of Denmark’s largest unions with approximately 180,000 members in the clerical, retail, and other service industries in Denmark. HK Denmark mainly organises white-collar workers in administrative professions. However, the union recently rebranded to include innovative ventures such as HKLab to better suit its professional membership base, which lacked distinct union identification. Additionally, HKLab was established in response to new tech-enabled business models in the gig economy and shifting social views

among young people. HKLAB was founded to innovate the union's offering to its members, including contract workers and young people. A key driving force for HKLab was to change the perception of joining a union and innovate the union's offerings to its members, including in response to tech-enabled business models in the gig economy (Wallace-Stephens, 2019). This includes experimenting with applying virtual reality for learning, and chatbot for providing information and handling enquiries and advice about rights at work.

UnionBase, established in 2017 for the labour movement in the United States (US), is a highly innovative web-based social networking platform for workers and unions. Set up by a prominent US-based organiser who wanted to create new tools for union organising, it is also the largest digital platform for both workers and unions. The platform has a secure members' area that links to verified unions through a cutting-edge verification system and a user-friendly platform crafted for both union and non-union members. More than 30,000 local and international unions have joined UnionBase since 2017 and it has recently been described as the Facebook for Unions. While non-union workers can also join UnionBase, union members can be verified by their union and send messages to other union members, receive membership updates, and learn more about their unions. Unions can verify their profiles on UnionBase and once verified, they can create both public and private posts to memberships. While joining UnionBase is free for workers, the platform includes a Premium Dashboard for verified unions. Another recent initiative is Workplace Leader, which is a digital publication developed by UnionBase to assist union representatives and other workplace leaders. Content is crafted from union representatives, members and leaders and includes diverse content in terms of gender, age, and background (Union Base, 2022).

Overall, these international examples show that new communication technologies, including innovative platforms and social media, can serve as a powerful organising tool for trade unions and workers based on shared experiences at work. Digital technologies are providing new opportunities for online organising, alongside offline actions (Dencik & Wilkin, 2015; Pasquier & Wood, 2018; Theocharis, 2012). Nonetheless, the extent to which trade unions can adopt new technologies is contingent on resources, and the ability of the unions to revitalise their organisational structures, including increasing their representation across a wider spectrum of workers, such as white-collar and new-collar workers, will be discussed below. Moreover, while these international examples provide evidence of new forms of digital based organising, not all models will be appropriate in some contexts, due to different labour laws, trade union development and varying political, social and cultural nuances in other countries and regions.

### Supporting Gig Workers and Employees in Platform-Based or On-Demand Work

New forms of work such as gig and platform-based or on-demand work are increasing and leading to increasing job precarity and challenges in labour organising (Johnston & Land-Kazlauskas, 2018). This includes the development of sophisticated mobile apps in the rideshare and food delivery industry, alongside increasing trends towards platform-based work that partitions off the tasks for white-collar and 'new-collar' workers in platforms such as Upwork and Amazon Mechanical Turk, among others (Bobkov & Herrmann, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has further accelerated the use of digital platforms due to an increase in remote-based working arrangements (ILO, 2021).

The shift to new forms of employment in the digital economy has created dilemmas for trade unions, which must adapt their organising models for non-conventional employment structures. Nonetheless, trade unions can learn from prior models of engaging and organising contract or agency workers (Benassi & Dorigatti, 2015). Contract-based roles are becoming more prevalent in a range of industries, from manufacturing, retail and automobile to education, technology, and professional services (Benassi & Dorigatti, 2015; Castellacci & Viñas-Bardolet, 2021).

Until recently, trade unions have struggled to represent workers in non-traditional and non-standard employment (Pulignano et al., 2015). However, trade unions are refocusing their organising strategies to be more responsive to different types of workers (Benassi & Dorigatti, 2015). For example, IG Metall, one of the largest trade unions in Germany, has recently shifted its membership and organising framework to create better representation of different workers including contract workers, women, young people (e.g., students working part-time) and white-

collar workers, alongside traditional blue-collar workers (IG Metall, n.d.). The shift in strategy was driven internally, prompted by employees who advocated to make contract work a centrepiece in the union's bargaining agenda (Benassi & Dorigatti, 2015). The union then engaged with the media, including social media, to increase awareness of issues affecting contract workers, and to explore ways to recruit and mobilise them. This highlights the need for unions to challenge and transform their own internal organising models as well as draw on external outlets, such as social media to attract new members.

The growth of the gig economy and platform-based work have also posed challenges and opportunities for organising. For example, in some jurisdictions, platform workers are unable to engage in collective bargaining and lack social protection benefits (ILO, 2021). While worker or union-led cooperatives are less common in the platform economy, there are signs that alliances between worker-led platform cooperatives, trade unions, and union-affiliated guilds and intermediaries are increasing to serve the collective interests of gig and platform workers (Johnston & Land-Kazlauskas, 2018; Vandaele, 2018).

More importantly, new forms of collective representation and voice are needed to mitigate the threats that platform workers face, such as diminishing worker rights and benefits (Vandaele, 2018). For example, IG Metall recently partnered with other established trade unions in Europe, including the Austrian Chamber of Labour, the Austrian Trade Union Confederation, and the Swedish white-collar union Unionen, to mobilise workers in crowd and platform-based work.

Fair Crowd Work was founded in 2016 as a global platform to gather data and feedback from gig and platform workers on their experience with employment platforms, such as Amazon Mechanical Turk, Upwork, Prolific, among others (Fair Crowd Work, 2017). While primarily a web-based review platform, Fair Crowd Work has a large social media presence on Facebook and Twitter and is unique in creating accountability around issues such as working conditions and fair pay. The website also provides information to crowd workers on their rights to fair pay, contract law and self-employment, and directs them to local trade unions that can represent them (Fair Crowd Work, 2017).

In some countries, trade unions have also been working with platform companies. For example, in Denmark, a collective agreement between a trade union and a cleaning platform has made it possible for some platform workers to transition to employees (ILO, 2021). Some digital labour platforms have also signed the World Economic Forum Charter of Principles for Good Platform Work, which covers issues such as worker safety, well-being and fair conditions, social protection, and data management (ILO, 2021).

### The Rise of Campaign-Based Organising of Workers

Alongside these initiatives, new technological innovations are leading to a rise in campaign-based organising of workers. While campaign-based organising platforms often work in partnership with unions, they commonly do not operate as formal unions but instead focus on providing tools, resources, and visibility for workers. Such collaborations and partnerships are growing among workers in service sectors as well as white-collar and new-collar industries. For example, a recent national survey of 750 technology industry workers in the US found that half of the workers surveyed were interested in joining a trade union (Protocol Workplace & Morning Consult, 2021), showing a growing interest in organising among workers in the technology sector.

Similarly, launched in 2020 by the Communications Workers of America (CWA), the Campaign to Organize Digital Employees (CODE-CWA) is a network of worker-organisers working to build a collective voice in the technology, gaming and digital industries in the US and Canada. With a large digital presence, CODE-CWA has been successful in organising and supporting workers to unionise within a short period of time (CODE-CWA, n.d.). For example, CODE-CWA supported organising workers at Glitch, a US-based software company, to unionise with CWA in early 2020. In 2021, the network helped Alphabet's workers (the parent company of Google) to form a solidarity union. While not a formalised union, Alphabet Workers Union has grown rapidly and aims to push for change, without traditional collective bargaining rights by promoting worker participation, conditions, rights and solidarity (Alphabet Workers Union, n.d.).

Coworker.org is another example of a campaign-based organising platform that campaigns on issues for workers in the retail, hospitality, health care, rideshare and technology sectors. Founded in 2013, Coworker.org is a non-profit organisation based mainly in the US that aims to support individuals or groups of employees to launch and join campaigns to improve worker issues and conditions (Coworker.org, n.d.). The organisation hosts and promotes online worker petitions and supports workers through education and training, strategic support, research, and advocacy. The campaigns created on the platform are globally accessible and open to members of the public who are not directly affiliated with the workplace or industry involved (Coworker.org, n.d.).

### **Discussion: Key Lessons on Digital Organising**

This final section distils key lessons from the literature and examples presented above on digital organising into recommendations for trade unions. These suggestions were developed with trade unions in Singapore in mind but would similarly be applicable to trade unions in other countries and contexts, where appropriate.

First, it is critical that trade unions establish a digital presence to ensure their strategies and approaches are visible to workers and involve the active engagement of the workers they are organising. Depending on the profile and technological savviness of their workers, trade unions will need to carefully consider which platforms they should use. The platforms chosen should enable trade unions and their leaders to share information and engage with the workers they represent in a responsive and timely manner. Considering this, social media platforms (Facebook and Instagram) and chat applications (e.g., WhatsApp, Telegram and Facebook Messenger) may be useful and cost-effective tools. Trade unions might also require multiple platforms and tools to facilitate multi-channel communication and engagement while being inclusive. In adopting digital platforms, other considerations for inclusivity must be considered among different workforce demographics. For example, how to engage older workers in the use of digital platforms, alongside workers who may not be able to access digital platforms due to financial constraints (e.g., Platforms that require a monthly subscription, or use of smart phones).

Second, due to the increasingly open nature of digital communication and outreach, trade unions should ensure that their digital platforms cater to non-members to boost awareness and support member recruitment. Accordingly, digital activities and campaigns could have two tiers, one for members and another for non-members, with different levels of information, interaction, and participation.

Third, given that establishing a digital presence or creating a digital platform is a costly and time-intensive process for a single trade union to embark on, trade unions could consider partnering to pool resources and create a “super platform”. When designing such platforms, however, it is important to ensure that they are inclusive and accessible for all workers. Another advantage of a super platform is its ability to create a more comprehensive library of resources for its users.

Fourth, the proliferation of digital tools also signals an opportunity for rethinking existing organising models. From the review of literature and examples from around the world, it is observed that the rethinking of existing organising model has led to a more ground-up, organic shift of workers using social media tools and platforms, especially in emerging industries and jobs such as gig work. This is underpinned by the lack of representation and formal organising, coupled with easy access to technology that can galvanise support among unorganised workers with relative ease and speed. Organising outside the purview of more traditional labour movements has also led to more spontaneous organising of collective actions and transnational organising. Besides, the various examples mentioned seem to indicate an emerging movement for ideology- and value-based organising. This is most clearly seen in the organising of ‘Amazon Employees for Climate Justice’ to call for more aggressive climate plans by Amazon. The efficiency, convenience and reach provided by organising through digital means provide traditional trade unions the opportunity to expand or change how and who they are organising.

Finally, moving ahead, the organising of workers by trade unions will increasingly incorporate the use of digital tools. We can expect organisers and trade unions to embark on a digital transformation of sorts in terms of how they organise, engage, and grow their movements. Digital tools will also continue to evolve, perhaps at a faster rate than before, and this will require organisers to be adept at evaluating these new tools and incorporating them into their organising efforts to ensure that they remain current and relevant to population shifts.

Digital organising has necessitated organisers to embark on digital transformation and acquire the technical expertise and resources, to remain current and continue attracting membership. Organisers need to be mindful of the limitations and development cycles of technology and should look to continually update the digital tools they employ to stay relevant. Nevertheless, different trade unions are at different stages in the journey to digitally organise and will need to consider their availability of resources, priorities, and characteristics of the individuals they are organising.

### **Conclusion**

This article affirms that the organising of workers by trade unions will benefit from the greater use of digital tools because they create fresh possibilities for organising while offering inroads to revitalise existing membership structures and strategic goals. Nonetheless, key challenges lie ahead before digital organising can be fully assimilated into trade unions in Singapore. Trade unions will need to be savvy and deliberate in their selection and application of these digital tools for them to be effective, and to keep abreast of the types of tools and platforms available for worker organisation. Existing formats and purpose of organising workers would also need to be reconsidered to ensure that they are able to incorporate and benefit from digital organising. Digital organising affords new, non-traditional forms of organising. Further, the legislations governing organising movements in Singapore would also need to be revised as digital organising can lead to different digital union structures that may not fit within the existing model of tripartism.

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# Continuing Education and Training: Looking Through the Lens of Business Leaders in Singapore

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## Abstract

*As the labour market evolves, the skills required are in constant change as well. It is thus imperative to equip workers with the necessary skills to survive and succeed in the rapidly changing work environment. Drawing on the findings from a mixed-method study, this article seeks to investigate the training and learning opportunities of workers provided by business leaders in Singapore. It is found that despite skills mismatch being the most prevalent form of mismatches according to business leaders, workers with skills gaps are not the top priority group of workers to be sent for training. Findings have also shown that there is inequality in access to training for workers. This article also discusses recommendations on how Continuing Education and Training can be enhanced to upskill our workers to meet the needs of today's and tomorrow's labour market in Singapore.*



## Introduction

The early 2000s introduced the Fourth Industrial Revolution, enabling individuals to seamlessly move between online and offline domains. Technology has become an essential part of almost every aspect of the human experience. This phase prioritised talent over capital, information over industry and automation over manual labour. As the world transits into the Fifth Industrial Revolution of the future, this will see man and machine working hand in hand, safely and efficiently and signal an increasing emphasis on human intelligence and skills (George & George, 2020). This would necessitate as well as accelerate the transformation of skills by every individual to meet the ever-changing work demands since every subsequent industrial age both creates new job opportunities and destroys redundant jobs of the preceding age (Xu et al., 2018). It is thus imperative to equip workers with the necessary skills needed to survive and succeed in the rapidly changing work environment.

Continuing Education and Training (CET) has become an indispensable prerequisite for almost every country with the aim of increasing societal peace, improving income equality and economic productivity (Aleandri & Refrigeri, 2013). The literature has highlighted three main purposes of CET. Firstly, CET enables workers to continuously upskill to enhance their employment and employability in the labour market. This is especially critical in view of the significant impact of technology on jobs and skills. Secondly, CET provides the platform in which the workforce can be upskilled and made nimbler and more adaptable to move into growth sectors and take up new job roles. Lastly, as governments around the world deal with issues of ageing populations and youth unemployment, CET enables workers of all ages to remain relevant in the labour market (Jagannathan et al., 2019).

Countries such as Denmark, Finland, and Sweden demonstrated notable performances in promoting participation of adult learning — all three have exceeded the Education and Training 2020 benchmark of attaining at least 15% of adult participation rates in lifelong learning in the past four weeks (Eurostat, 2021). Asian countries too are giving more attention to CET, spurred on by globalisation and increased competition in attaining enhanced knowledge (UNESCO, 2016). For example, China has been progressing well in recent years, achieving technological breakthroughs, and overtaking the US in the number of patent filings in 2019, while governing one of the largest and also ageing population (Global Times, 2021). South Korea's development is similar to Singapore's (Yang & Yorozu, 2015), both had economic breakthroughs around the same time, attributing to their titles as the Asian Tigers.

Common features observed in CET systems of these countries include: (1) Inclusive participation (Bahl & Dietzen, 2019; German Economic Institute, 2018); (2) Incorporation of work-based learning/workplace learning/on-the-job training (Bahl & Dietzen, 2019; German Economic Institute, 2018); (3) Alignment of training content with changing labour market needs through partnership between various stakeholders such as the government, unions, employers and training providers (International Trade Administration, 2022); (4) Individualisation of education and training (CEDEFOP, 2016); and (5) Providing quality assurance (Australian Skills Quality Authority, 2021; CEDEFOP, 2016; Huang & Shi, 2008).

Traditional approaches to education and training are fast becoming irrelevant as the front loading of skills for single lifetime qualifications can no longer stand against the tide of rapidly changing skills needs (ILO & OECD, 2018). This has called for future education and training systems to be flexible in meeting changing work demands and equipping individuals for present and future skill deficiencies, “encompassing formal, non-formal and informal learning” (UNESCO, 2016). Furthermore, COVID-19 has exacerbated these trends, transforming our markets, increasing the need to equip people with the ability to respond to trends of automation and digitalisation faster (Watermeyer et al., 2021). These trends especially impact workers whose jobs are at risk of automation and thus need training for new emerging jobs (OECD, 2021b).

In some countries today, there are patterns of under-investment in skills training leading to such deficiencies. This trend has been attributed to various factors such as the dependence on immigration, increasingly ageing populations, extensive opportunity costs for business leaders, the poaching of skilled workers and business short-termism, some of which are experienced by Singapore such as ageing workforce, employee poaching and job-hopping (Sng & Chia, 2011).

According to the Ministry of Manpower (2020) in Singapore, the proportion of private establishments (consisting of all industries in Singapore) that provided structured training has been declining from 2014 till 2020. Remaining at around 71% from 2010 till 2012, a major spike occurred in 2014 (81.5%) possibly due to the establishment of the Lifelong Learning Council, however, it declined quickly again to 71.0% in 2018, and dropped to 65.4% in 2020.

A study by Hung and Wong (2007) found that business leaders' support of CET would encourage better performance from their workers through training. At the same time, "there is also evidence of unmet employer demand for intermediate-level skills, many of which are better acquired through employment-based training rather than through full-time classroom study" (Mason, 2020). It was found that informal training was perceived as the most effective (Thomas & Qiu, 2012).

There is much discussion about the unequal participation of different groups of workers in CET. Several studies have shown that workers with formal education are more inclined towards training as opposed to those without formal education (Mason, 2020; Wolbers, 2005). Participation rates also tend to decrease along the spectrum from most professional to unskilled occupations, for example, workers in the service sectors are more likely to be trained compared to those in agriculture (Wolbers, 2005). These trends are worrying as adult education can potentially enhance upward mobility of individuals, especially those who are low-qualified (Lopes & Carreira, 2020). This would suggest that with the decreasing participation rates, unskilled workers are missing out on valuable opportunities that may facilitate their social mobility.

While there are studies conducted to understand the impact of training on workers (Fouarge et al., 2010; Hara, 2014), there are few or no recent academic publications on the training and learning opportunities of workers from the perspectives of business leaders in Singapore, to the best of the researchers' knowledge.

## The Singapore Context

CET in Singapore is constantly evolving to prepare the workforce for the jobs of today and tomorrow. The CET Masterplan 2020 that was introduced has three key areas of focus:

- Building deep expertise in the Singapore workforce, with increased involvement by business leaders in building and valuing skills;
- Enabling individuals to make informed learning and career choices through the improved delivery of education, training and career guidance; and
- Developing a vibrant CET ecosystem with a wide range of high-quality learning opportunities.

There has been an increasing shift towards lifelong learning in Singapore, and Singapore can be at the forefront in cultivating lifelong learning, with its SkillsFuture national movement to change how people view skills, jobs and learning (Lim, 2019). There is also less emphasis on delivering training in a classroom-based setting, a phenomenon made more prominent by COVID-19, as seen in the dramatic shift towards learning on a virtual platform (Chen et al., 2021).

However, Singapore had not fared well in the Education-Employment Linkage Index (EEL), scoring the lowest in this area (Nair et al., 2021). The index measured any contact between education-system and employment-system actors along the process of learning. A possible explanation brought up was that much of the curriculum decision falls into the hands of the government instead of the industry employers (Nair et al., 2021).

Moreover, in Singapore, structural, and social gaps remain, in part caused by growing political, socio-economic, and technological changes. Imminent changes will take place with complex political, socio-economic, and technological forces at play and intertwined with CET (Gog, 2013).

At the political level, Singapore needs to re-balance the social impact and roles to be played by the individuals, the community and the government (Gog, 2013). CET must play a bigger role in supporting the nation's aim to achieve a more inclusive society with the pursuit of excellence:

(1) Level up low-income Singaporeans; (2) Enhance workers' employability; and (3) Keep social mobility high so that everyone can move up through their efforts regardless of their social backgrounds (Gog, 2013).

At the socio-economic level, there is a demand for complex skills and a shorter lead time to build competitive advantage rapidly. Skills strategies have become a critical part of business strategies (Ashton et al., 2009). Issues of income disparity, ageing population, increase in the number of freelancers, the long-term unemployment rate among the professionals, managers, executives and technicians (PMETs) and the need for sustainable job growth for a more educated workforce emphasises the importance of transforming the CET sector.

At the technological level, it is well demonstrated that the nature of work is changing. The Emerging Stronger Taskforce Report observed the trend towards a more digitally connected global economy, creating new opportunities for businesses to access markets and talent across geographical boundaries (The Future Economy Council, 2021).

The political, socio-economic and technological forces converge, reinforce, and interact with one another and have resulted in a twofold challenge for CET. Firstly, CET will need to respond more quickly to meet the fast-changing skills demand. Secondly, CET is also impacted by the new technologies that offer new methods for learning but also disrupt and complement the traditional approaches of learning.

## Research Questions

To provide insights into how CET in Singapore can be improved to enhance the employment and employability of workers, the findings discussed in this paper are drawn from a research study that was conducted by a research team in the Labour Movement of Singapore. The study aimed to (1) examine the provision of training and learning opportunities for workers; and (2) identify new methods and partnerships for workers to better access training and upskilling opportunities.

## Research Methodology

The research study adopted a mixed method approach, collecting both quantitative and qualitative data. It consisted of a 15–20-minute quantitative survey with 564 business leaders across industries to provide a broad understanding of the current training and learning practices and opportunities for workers, and the impact of training on employment outcomes for workers, from the perspective of the business leaders. The survey was conducted from February 2021 till April 2021.

Participants were contacted through a third-party market research company, with the following criteria: (1) Respondents had to be the main decision-makers of the organisations; (2) Spread across different industries; and (3) Spread across different establishment sizes of Multinational Companies (MNCs) and Small-Medium Enterprises (SMEs). The market research company helped to disseminate the online survey link, which was hosted on Qualtrics, to the respondents. There would only be one respondent from each company, and the selected respondent had to be the key decision maker in the organisation. A pilot survey was conducted to 50 business leaders to assess whether the instructions and questions were accurately interpreted before the survey was officially launched.

The dataset was cleaned using the SPSS Statistics software to remove incomplete responses, yielding a final 564 completed responses. To ensure that the responses were from business leaders of the organisations, the research team verified the job roles of the respondents in the dataset.

The survey was divided into 11 sections: (1) Profile of the respondent and the background information of the organisation they managed, including establishment size, profile of workers and minimum educational attainment required of workers; (2) Details of skills gaps and skills required of workers; (3) Workers' access and opportunities for training; (4) Motivations and challenges of sending workers for training; (5) Preferred mode and provision of training by business leaders; (6) Outcomes of workers post-training; (7) Hiring practices and requirements by business leaders; (8) Number and type of job vacancies and challenges in filling those vacancies; (9) Provision of talent

development and career support to workers; (10) Level of awareness and participation in training-related initiatives; and (11) Innovative ways of upskilling workers. The design of the survey was based on the broad categories of issues identified from the literature review. While the survey had a combination of close-ended and open-ended questions, most of the questions were primarily closed-ended with options for respondents to give additional answers that were not provided as an option. There were two open-ended questions in the last section for respondents to describe and suggest innovative ways to upskill workers and how training could be made more effective for the workers.

Two in-depth interviews were also conducted with the business leaders of one MNC and one SME to understand the innovative approaches adopted by the two organisations to enhance training and learning of the workers. The interview questions had seven sections: (1) Profile of business leader and background of company; (2) Skills gaps of workers in the company; (3) Training and learning opportunities for workers; (4) Outcomes of training and learning; (5) Innovative upskilling approaches; (6) Support for training; and (7) Hiring practices and challenges. Each interview session took about 1.5 hours and both were conducted in June 2021. The two organisations were selected as they were recognised by industry practitioners for adopting innovative upskilling approaches. The researchers analysed the recording of the interview sessions and detailed notes that were taken during the interviews.

### Survey Respondents/Sample Characteristics

A total of 564 responses were recorded from the quantitative survey with business leaders, with a good spread across 14 sectors: Manufacturing (15.2%), Information and Communications (13.1%), Wholesale and Retail Trade (12.8%), Financial and Insurance Services (12.2%), and Professional Services (11.7%). Business Leaders operating in the Education, Construction, Transportation and Storage, Health and Social Services, Real Estate Services, Administrative and Support Services, Public Administration, Arts, Entertainment and Recreation, Accommodation and Food Services, and other sectors made up the remaining 35% of responses.

There was equal representation of unionised companies (46%) and non-unionised companies (46%), with the remaining 8% being unsure of their company's unionisation status. Most companies had a lower representation of females than males.

There was a good spread of respondents across the different establishment sizes of the organisations: 54% of the respondents were from SMEs while the remaining 46% were from MNCs. Using the definition from the Ministry of Trade and Industry, SMEs are enterprises that employ less than 200 workers.

Looking at the demographics of the surveyed companies, many had a younger workforce, with 61.9% of companies having less than 40% of their workers aged 45 and above. 63.9% of SMEs and 60.0% of MNCs had less than 40% of workers who were aged 45 and above. 64.2% of unionised companies and 63.0% of non-unionised companies had less than 40% of workers who were aged 45 and above. 79.3% of companies had more than 40% of their workers being Singapore Citizens or Permanent Residents. 61.7% of the companies had less than 40% of their workers being PMETs.

## Results

### Access to Training

Only 50.9% of business leaders had sent their workers for training in the past six months<sup>1</sup>. Out of those business leaders who sent workers for training, on average only 33.6% of their workforce in the company attended training. This suggests that 66.4% of workers in the company were missing out on training.

<sup>1</sup> Six months before February 2021, when the survey was conducted with 564 business leaders.

Out of the companies that reported sending workers for training, 57.1% were from unionised companies (see Table 1). It is statistically significant that unionised companies are more likely to send their workers for training as compared to non-unionised companies.

**Table 1**

*Proportion of Business Leaders who Sent Workers for Training in the Past 6 Months*

Type of Companies	Percentage (%)
Unionised	57.1
Non-unionised	36.9

*Note.* 6% of the business leaders are unaware of their company's unionisation status.

Business leaders are more supportive (indicated by Always or Often) of job-related training (68.2%) than non-job-related training (21.5%). There were six times more business leaders who reported always supporting job-related training than non-job-related training (see Table 2). This is likely due to the view by business leaders that job-related training would be more beneficial for the companies, as compared to non-job-related training.

**Table 2**

*Degree of Support for Training*

Support for Training	Always (%)	Often (%)	Sometimes (%)	Rarely (%)	Not at All (%)
Job-related	28.0	40.2	27.3	3.4	1.1
Non job-related	4.3	17.2	37.4	31.7	9.4

**Table 3**

*Willingness to Support Job-Related Training by Unionised or Non-Unionised Companies, and SMEs or MNCs*

Types of Companies	Percentage (%)
Unionised	74.1
Non-unionised	64.9
SMEs	67.1
MNCs	69.5

Our findings showed that a higher proportion of MNCs support job-related training compared to SMEs, and a higher proportion of unionised companies compared to non-unionised companies support such training (see Table 3). It is statistically significant that unionised companies are more likely to support job-related training for workers, as compared to non-unionised companies.

### Skills Mismatch

Skills mismatch (63.1%) was the most prevalent form of mismatches according to business leaders (see Table 4). This was followed by experience mismatch at 17.8%, wages mismatch at 16.7%, expectations mismatch at 1.8% and other mismatches at 0.5%. The top three industries most concerned about skills mismatch were Public Administration, Real Estate Services and Wholesale and Retail Trade.

**Table 4***Forms of Mismatches*

Forms of Mismatches	Percentage (%)
Skills mismatch	63.1
Experience mismatch	17.8
Wages mismatch	16.7
Expectations mismatch	1.8
Other mismatches	0.5

Note. Percentage may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Business leaders revealed that workers with skills gaps were not the top priority for training (14.5%), as compared to workers with high potential (44.9%).

**Table 5***Priority for Training*

Priority for Training	Percentage (%)
High potential workers	44.9
Workers with skill gaps	14.5
Younger workers	13.5
Mature workers	10.6
New workers	9.9
Experienced workers	6.9

Note. Based on respondents' first choice. Percentage may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Only one-quarter (26.2%) of business leaders perceived more than 40% of their workers to be high-potential: only a small group of workers are considered high potential (see Table 6). High potential workers were being prioritised for training as compared to other groups of workers (see Table 5). This might imply that only a small group of workers had access to training.

**Table 6***Proportion of Workers Perceived to be High Potential by Business Leaders*

Proportion	Percentage (%)
0%-20%	39.4
21%-40%	34.4
41%-60%	20.6
61%-100%	5.6

**Preferred Mode of Training**

On-the-job training (55.9%) was most preferred by business leaders, followed by internal workshops/seminars/courses (46.6%) and online learning (45.9%). Mobile learning was the least preferred mode of training at 9.9%. This calls for the need to bring training to the workplace. Workshops/seminars/courses were the most common mode of internal training and learning activities<sup>2</sup> provided by business leaders (39.9%), followed by online learning (35.3%) and on-the-job training (34.2%). The results showed that the modes of training provided by business leaders were consistent with their preferred modes of training.

However, it was interesting to note that despite 55.9% of business leaders expressed a preference for on-the-job training, only 34.2% of them provided it (see Table 7).

<sup>2</sup> Internal training and learning activities are conducted in-house

The most popular modes of external training and learning activities<sup>3</sup> provided by the business leaders were online learning (41.7%) and workshops/seminars/courses (36.5%). As the survey was conducted between February to April 2021, the increase in provision of online learning was likely due to the COVID-19 pandemic as 41.7% of companies reported that they provided training via online learning (see Table 7). Mobile learning was the least provided form of training and learning by business leaders. Based on insights from the in-depth interviews conducted, mobile learning was less well-received by workers as they found it difficult to learn on-the-go and on devices with smaller screens.

**Table 7***Provision of Training and Learning Activities*

Internal Training and Learning Activities Provided by Company	Percentage (%)	External Training and Learning Activities Provided by Company	Percentage (%)
Workshop/Seminar/Courses	39.9	Online learning	41.7
Online learning	35.3	Workshop/Seminar/Courses	36.5
On-the-job training	34.2	Partnerships with industry peers	29.8
Training resources	32.6	Partnerships with businesses in other industries	28.4
Mentorship	32.4	Networking events	27.1
Orientation	29.6	Partnerships with Unions	23.0
Lunchtime talks	29.1	Overseas training	20.0
Networking events	21.5	Mobile learning applications	17.0
Mobile learning applications	12.9	None of the above	1.8

Note. Multiple selection possible

**Outcomes of Training**

Most business leaders reported meeting the outcomes that they set to achieve when sending their workers for training. 59.6% of business leaders who sent workers for training in hopes of improving productivity reported that they managed to achieve this (see Table 8). 58.2% of business leaders reported that they achieved their desired outcome of improving the competencies of their current workers. Only 3.1% of business leaders indicated that they did not observe any of the positive outcomes.

**Table 8***Outcomes Observed of Workers Post Training by Business Leaders*

Outcomes Observed from Training	Outcomes (%)
Improved productivity in the company	59.6
Improved competencies of my current employees	58.2
Retain existing talents in the company	48.1
Job roles of employees have changed	41.8
Gain an advantage over competitors in the industry	37.3
Changing business model of the economy	33.4
Attract new talents	24.0
None of the above	3.1
Others	0.0

Note. Multiple selection possible.

It has always been difficult for organisation to measure post-training effectiveness. In one of our in-depth interviews, the company implemented Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that workers need to meet post-training as a proxy of training outcomes. For example, to track the number of compliments received after the worker had attended customer service training.

<sup>3</sup> External training and learning activities are conducted by external vendors.

## Awareness and Participation in Training-Related Initiatives

While three in four business leaders surveyed said that they had participated in training-related initiatives<sup>4</sup> by the government, or the Labour Movement, the overall utilisation of initiatives remained low at an average of 14%.

Unions (17.9%) remained one of the top three avenues where business leaders had heard of training-related initiatives (see Table 9), with the others being human resource departments in the company (27.5%) and government websites (25.9%). Out of companies who had heard about the initiative from unions, 67.3% were unionised and 25.7% were non-unionised companies<sup>5</sup>.

**Table 9**

### Sources of Initiatives

Sources	Percentage (%)
HR department in the company	27.5
Government websites	25.9
Unions/Company Training Committee	17.9
Search engines (Google, Yahoo, etc.)	17.6
Industry peers	17.4
Business associations	17.2
Social media (Facebook, Instagram, etc.)	13.5
Employees	11.9
Media outlets (Television, Newspapers, Radio, etc.)	11.2
Friends and relatives	6.0

Note. Multiple selection possible

While 54.4% of business leaders believed that they played the most important role in training as compared to the government (20.3%) and workers (25.3%), 37.8% of business leaders reported that high financial costs were a strong deterrence (see Table 10) to sending workers for training. Other challenges included difficulties in identifying relevant courses or workshops for their workers (37.1%), difficulties in matching workers to the training (33.3%), staff reluctance (32.8%) and inadequate manpower if workers were sent for training (32.3%). Based on the insights from the interviews conducted, one of the companies had set up a training committee in the company that consisted of representatives of the management and workers to facilitate discussion on skills and training courses for workers to overcome barriers to training.

**Table 10**

### Challenges Faced by Business Leaders in Sending Workers for Training

Challenges	Percentage (%)
Financial cost is too high	37.8
Met difficulties in identifying relevant courses or workshops	37.1
Met difficulties in matching employees to training	33.3
Staff reluctant	32.8
Inadequate manpower if employees were sent for training	32.3
Training is not necessary for my employees	18.3
Training is not beneficial to my employees	17.2
Did not know where to find relevant courses or workshops	17.0
No challenges faced	5.7
Others	2.7

Note. Multiple selection possible

In relation to overcoming the challenges in sending workers for training, 72.7% of business leaders had requested higher training subsidies (see Table 11). Out of these responses, more non-unionised (46.8%) companies requested subsidies as compared to unionised companies

<sup>4</sup> List of training-related initiatives is not exhaustive

<sup>5</sup> The remaining 7% of the companies are unaware of their unionisation status

(44.6%)<sup>6</sup>. Similarly, a higher proportion of companies were SMEs (57.3%) that had requested higher training subsidies as compared to MNCs (42.7%).

Other incentives that would encourage business leaders to send more workers for training included business consultancy services (54.6%) and certifications offered (46.5%).

**Table 11**

*Incentives for Companies to Send Workers for Training*

Incentives	Percentage (%)
Training subsidies	72.7
Business consultancy services	54.6
Certifications offered	46.5
Others	1.1

*Note.* Multiple selection possible

## Discussion

The intention of this paper is to provide insights into training and learning of workers from the business leaders' perspective, and to propose potential recommendations to help workers gain greater access to training and learning.

### Provision of Training and Learning Opportunities for Workers

Our findings show that while business leaders in Singapore are most concerned about skills mismatch, only 50.9% of the business leaders sent their workers for training in the past six months. This suggests that business leaders are looking for "plug and play" workers with the relevant skills to be able to meet the needs of the firm and are more reluctant to invest in upskilling of workers despite their concern about skills mismatch. This aligns with a research study conducted by Mason in the United Kingdom, that despite the need for firms to improve skills of workers, there is a decrease in participation rate and in the number of business leaders willing to provide training for workers (Mason, 2020).

Between SMEs and MNCs in Singapore, our findings show that a lower proportion of SMEs send their workers for job-related training as compared to MNCs, reflecting that SMEs may be less supportive of and/or less resources for training. This indicates more support for SMEs' training needs should be provided to encourage SMEs to send workers for training. Recognising that Singapore has one of the lowest EEL scores, there also has to be a greater connection between training and industry needs. Thus, the training providers can leverage their different strengths to work with the organisations especially SMEs to aggregate their skills demands, and consortia comprising multiple educational institutions, unions and companies can be formed to upskill workers and better meet business needs.

Business leaders in Singapore prioritise high potential workers over workers with skill gaps, despite business leaders identifying skills as the biggest mismatch. 44.9% of the business leaders identify high potential workers as the top priority group of workers to send for training as compared to workers with skill gaps (14.5%). As 73.8% of business leaders view less than 40% of their workers to be high-potential, this would put a strain on the mature workers or workers with skills gaps that not only require training but would have benefitted the most from the training. In the long run, skills polarisation may widen between workers who are prioritised for training, and those who are not but possess skills gaps.

There is evidence to suggest that CET can alleviate the issue of skills mismatch. The economic value of training is rarely disputed, as training increases the rate of workers staying employable (Fouarge et al., 2010), and improve their skills to match the demand. Furthermore,

<sup>6</sup> The remaining 8.6% of the companies are unaware of their unionisation status

much research has been done on the topic of skills mismatch, with many recommendations from studies promoting training and learning as the solution to addressing skills mismatch in Berlin and London (OECD, 2021b, 2022). Similarly, amongst many advantages that have been observed by the business leaders after workers attended training in our study, 85.1% of the business leaders have seen workers take on additional or new job responsibilities after training. Furthermore, more than 80% of business leaders have seen enhanced knowledge and deepened technical skills of workers. This suggests that skills mismatch can potentially be alleviated through training. However, not all modes of training and learning are effective, and the design of the interventions is also important to consider as well, as not all learning can take place through a set of practices nor will theoretical knowledge always be applied to a set of circumstances (Fuller et al., 2004).

The most preferred mode of training by business leaders in Singapore is on-the-job (55.9%) in our study but only 34.2% of business leaders have provided on-the-job training for their workers. This may indicate that companies face challenges and require more support in implementing on-the-job training for workers. The World Economic Forum (2017) recognises that on-the-job training is deemed the more significant method of training. On-the-job training would have the highest link between education and industry, creating relevant learning experiences that can be better applied at the workplace. There is overwhelming evidence of on-the-job training having a positive impact on a firm's innovations which includes new processes and organisational structures, and these findings have been corroborated in many countries such as Malaysia and Germany (Na, 2021). A study by Konings and Vanormelingen (2015) has shown that on-the-job training has led to an increase in the productivity of the firm, hence new models of partnership and more support must be provided to the business leaders to implement on-the-job training for their workers.

Out of those business leaders who sent employees for training, on average only 33.6% of their workforce in the company attended training. The findings suggest the need to promote a more equal distribution of training opportunities for workers. This phenomenon is not uncommon, as countries like Germany has an above average training participation rate but has a high inequality in participation of workers, where the low-skilled, low-wage, or workers in SMEs "have particularly low participation rates" (OECD, 2021a).

An important aspect to enhance CET will be the promotion of more equal distribution of training opportunities for workers. A wider movement within Singapore is required to develop a broader, more inclusive definition of talent (Brown et al., 2019) that recognises the capabilities, and contributions of all rather than a few individuals. New models of partnership are also needed, with employers recognising their roles as both investor and beneficiary of their workers' training.

### **New Methods and Partnerships for Workers to Better Access Training and Upskilling Opportunities**

Trade unions have always been associated with higher employer investment in training for workers (Green et al., 1999). Findings from our study have also shown that it is statistically significant that unionised companies are more likely to send their employees for training as compared to non-unionised companies in Singapore. Together with the government agencies, employers and training providers, the unions should be involved in the national training ecosystem to ensure that workers are provided with fair opportunities to reskill and upskill to remain competitive and employable.

The most popular mode of external training and learning activities provided by the business leaders in our survey was online learning. COVID-19 has become the catalyst for the transition to online learning and training, but the recent study by the Institute of Adult Learning in 2021 highlighted that online adult learners were also uncomfortable about trainers being unfamiliar with the use of digital tools (Tan & Sheng, 2021). With the proliferation of online learning, the training providers could join efforts to potentially deliver online training and learning through a common platform in the future. Training providers should also aim to provide more concrete professional development opportunities and funding support to help their educators and trainers to grow their expertise at work so as to develop high-quality online programmes for learners.

Despite the demand for more training subsidies by business leaders (72.7%) in Singapore, the utilisation of existing programmes with training subsidies was low. It is plausible that due to the huge variety of initiatives targeted at helping business leaders, most are unsure of which initiative would best address their concerns. Alternatively, it could be due to the administrative work required, when applying for these initiatives that deters companies from participating in these initiatives. This could be exacerbated in companies that are short-staffed or do not have a dedicated department focused on employee learning and development. Companies could leverage unions to help them better access and utilise the subsidies as unions remain one of the top three avenues where business leaders have heard of training-related initiatives.

### Limitations and Future Research

The fieldwork of the survey collected for the study coincided with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and its evolutions. There was a rise in online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, and adult learners have embraced the shift to online learning as a result of the Circuit Breaker in Singapore in the year 2020 (Chew, 2021). Much effort and resources had been channelled into upskilling and reskilling of workers during this period. This includes national, sectoral, and organisational level initiatives to help firms digitise, and digitalise training for learners to ensure that workers as well as their organisations are able to evolve with the disruption. This likely have sped up training efforts and technological adoption. Hence a longitudinal study could be undertaken to examine (1) if online learning will be the norm after the COVID-19 pandemic; (2) the impact of online learning on workers' learning outcomes; and (3) what more could be done to empower adult learners and professionals to take learning and teaching beyond the traditional limits of the classroom.

While the study was collected during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic which might have impacted some of the findings, discussions from the paper continue to contribute useful insights on the transformation of CET ahead as the discussions revealed the gaps in the training and learning opportunities provided for workers by business leaders in Singapore.

### Conclusion

The pandemic has exacerbated the technological innovations and have fundamentally changed the labour market and changing the type of labour required; in other words, transforming jobs (Nunes, 2021). By 2025, the World Economic Forum has estimated that 86 million jobs would be destroyed while 97 million jobs would be created across 26 countries, an updated estimation taking into account the disruption made by the pandemic and automation (Zahidi, 2020). Speed is of the essence in picking up new complex skills to meet the fast-changing skills demand. With the tight labour market situation in Singapore, one of the ways to overcome the challenge of filling job vacancies is to upskill and uplift current workers as developing the existing workers is more cost-effective than hiring new talents.

Existing CET policies in Singapore are moving in the right direction of empowering individuals to take charge of their career and skills strategies. While efforts have been placed on managing short-term job creation and helping displaced workers find jobs; an equally, if not more important mission on hand would be to envision the future of CET to plan and prepare for the labour market structure that is evolving.

This will, by no means, be an easy task and all stakeholders (i.e., government, unions, business leaders, institutes of higher learning and training providers) will need to come together to rethink and to facilitate the transformation of the CET in Singapore.

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## BIOGRAPHIES



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# BRIEF REPORT



# Power to Participate: Building Young Voices, Choices and Experiences

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King Wang Poon, Isabel Lam, Darion Jin Hotan, Jane Lee and Jia Hui Chow

## Abstract

*The study examines the future needs of young workers (18–35 years old) and how the labour union membership model in Singapore could evolve to continue to stay relevant to current and future workers. A combination of literature and qualitative research methods were used to examine the needs of youth and young workers. The insights and research findings indicated that the Singapore Labour Movement’s reputation amongst the youth is that of a place of “insurance”, in that it is a place only approached when one is in times of need. This has diminished the Labour Movement’s presence and reach amongst youth. To address this, we have adapted the Barbell Strategy’s principles and presented 4 actionable plans that aim to reposition the labour union as not just containing offerings of “insurance”, but also “investment”. The 4 actionable plans identify gaps in the market/society and leverage the union’s resources, as well as cater to the needs and interests of youth/young workers.*



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## Introduction

The first industrial revolution in the 18<sup>th</sup> century brought about great manufacturing and technological advancements across North America and Europe, leading to greater labour concentration in factories, mills and mines. It was then that the organisation of largely unskilled and semi-skilled workers into early trade unions began, fighting for better pay, benefits, and working conditions.

With increasing digital and technological disruption today, the global labour movement is being confronted with newer challenges. The inability of labour/trade unions to adapt to such changes has led to a steep decline in union membership in most developed countries. For example, leading OECD countries such as Australia, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States saw their unionisation rates dip from an average of nearly 40% in the 1980s to just below 16% in 2018 (OECD, 2019). New blood is seen less frequently in unions.

Singapore's Labour Movement faces similar challenges. The services/products unions can offer their members face increasing competition from the public sector, commercial services, and well-funded finance and technology platforms. The intense competition consequently causes confusion and scepticism amongst workers on the role and value of unions. This is especially so for younger workers who perceive unions as caring for "old dusty men" (Hodder, 2015) and are thus deterred from joining.

This points to a deep generational shift that has been inadequately accounted for by unions worldwide, and thus a growing deficit in their relevance and attractiveness to young workers (and even older ones). This is a demographic facing an ever-expanding range of careers, causes, and consumption choices, while exhibiting an increasing desire to exercise its political voice along a spectrum of meanings and modalities. To determine how unions can continue to appeal to workers and provide appropriate support, we need to understand the needs and desires of the young workforce.

## Research

A literature review was conducted to understand and identify the history and trends of global labour movements and where Singapore's Labour Movement fit on the spectrum of labour union models. It also informed our understanding of the disadvantages and limitations of these models.

Qualitative research in the form of interviews, meetings, focus groups and workshops was conducted to examine the needs of youth and/or young workers and their impressions and understandings of Singapore's Labour Movement, with an emphasis on their relationship with the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC).

The interviews, meetings, focus groups and workshops were conducted mainly for the purpose of idea generation, rather than data collection, to inform a strategic direction that is feasible and (probably) immediately employable by the Labour Movement and its organisations. Thus, as the format of the study is meant as an exploratory examination of perspective as opposed to a strict encoding of themes and underlying factors (of the problem or research questions), standard encoding of data from the transcript of the focus groups was not employed. Nevertheless, based on the preliminary results of this brief report, it is worth recommending future in-depth research that investigates specific factors/reasons using more extensive qualitative/quantitative analysis.

Two stages of interviews/focus groups were conducted with the following profiles of participants respectively:

### 1. Workshop Interviews/Meetings

Interviews were conducted with eight youth/young professionals who had different experiences and levels of involvement with NTUC's initiatives (such as nEbO (stands for nobody Enjoys being Ordinary) alumni/staff/members, former members, non-members and those that recently returned to help out). They were all male except for one female. Their ages ranged from late teens to early 30s, with a mix of educational and work backgrounds.

## 2. Focus Groups

Two focus groups were held with two participants from the first focus group returning for the second focus group to help us connect ideas across the two sessions. There was a total of ten participants, aged 18 to mid-40s, with 50:50 male/female ratio. The two older participants (around 40s) were included in the second focus group as they were business/social/educational entrepreneurs and volunteers focusing on new ways to energise the community and provided concrete focal points for the younger participants to discuss ideas concretely instead of abstractly. The younger participants had a range of backgrounds to ensure diversity (e.g., educational qualifications, served National Service, work experiences, relationship/marital status, etc.)

Meetings were also held with different stakeholders within the Singapore's Labour Movement to better understand their membership offerings.

### Diagnosis

Across interviews and focus group discussions, participants were often unable to articulate the purpose of the Labour Movement. At best, participants understood the Labour Movement's role as a haven of last resort — to be engaged with in times of crisis or need, such as during a work dispute or retrenchment. One such participant was a male who shared that it was only when he was faced with injustices at his workplace, such as delayed salary payment, that he learnt of the union's ability to provide support on such matters. Another participant shared that when he needed to upgrade his skills to attain employment, he attended the union's courses which were free or available for financial assistance from the union. Both these individuals shared that before they needed Labour Movement's support, they hardly thought about the union's existence, were unaware of the union's abilities, and did not have an existing relationship with the union. All participants shared similar sentiments. Participants who work in/with the Labour Movement learnt more about the union after the opportunity to join the union/work with the union materialised.

Conceptually, the research team drew a parallel of the participants' understanding of the Labour Movement as a haven of last resort to the idea of "insurance". The Labour Movement's existence and membership in the union was thought of as being a backup resource that could be accessed when things turned sour rather than thought of as services that could be useful day-to-day or regularly enjoyed.

This concept of "insurance" risks limiting the Labour Movement's efforts to attract more youth to become union members. It is potentially limiting because, like any form of insurance, it is seen as being necessary only at certain rare moments in working life, as opposed to a constant need. It thus boxes the Labour Movement into a much smaller role than it could potentially play. At the same time, with the government and the private sector becoming increasingly active in safeguarding workers' jobs, this "insurance" role is an increasingly crowded space for the Labour Movement to compete in — a contest that the Labour Movement is not necessarily well-positioned to win.

### Recommendations

One interesting insight which emerged from our qualitative study was a conceptual shift: to re-frame the perspective of the Labour Movement of being there for "insurance" to being a place for opportunities of "investment".

Insurance and investment are two sides of the same coin of risk, resilience, and robustness. They are two ends of a "Barbell Strategy", an idea by Taleb (2007, 2012) in which a strategy pursues safety at one end and speculation at the other, so that one is resilient to negative events and robust to capture new opportunities that have the highest growth, especially Black Swan-type events and opportunities. The possibilities of minimising the downsides and maximising the upsides are why Barbell Strategies have been adopted by financial institutions (e.g. (DBS, 2021)).

We believe such a Barbell Strategy can be similarly adapted to the Labour Movement’s mission. On one hand, the union provides “safety” to ensure disruptions, restructurings, and crises do not cripple workers’ livelihoods and careers i.e., to stay resilient. On the other hand, through the course of this project, we have identified a new opportunity on the “speculative” end where labour unions can help workers probe, experiment, explore and potentially pursue new high-return opportunities i.e., to be robust to capture high-reward possibilities. The introduction of resources with more of an investment aspect can help shift perspectives on the Labour Movement and move it with the times to stay relevant, supportive and attractive to workers. Notably, the addition of “investment” features to the union’s resources will attract both young and older workers, and overall bears benefits for all members as support can be obtained throughout life stages.

What would these “investment” features look like within the Labour Movement’s resources? We suggest four ideas below that introduce an avenue for investment in a member’s future and/or the union’s infrastructure to support workers’ futures.

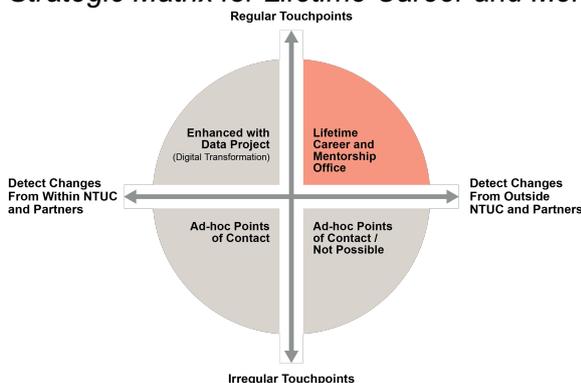
### Lifetime Career and Mentorship Office

Beyond graduation from tertiary institutions, young workers have no “Career Office” to help with their résumés and professional development (and may also not know what to expect, what to do and/or who to ask). The union’s access to workers across a multitude of sectors and roles, as well as its existing experience in providing career guidance, makes it uniquely positioned to enter this new space and become the prevailing organisation to approach for career guidance.

At present, labour movement institutions like NTUC have few means to regularly interact with members or detect changes happening. With the establishment of this service, the Labour Movement will have opportunities for continued and regular active communication with their members when the office reaches out to offer its career services. This allows the union to accumulate a wealth of information on personas and desires, enabling more effective anticipation of members’ needs.

**Figure 1**

*Strategic Matrix for Lifetime Career and Mentorship Office*



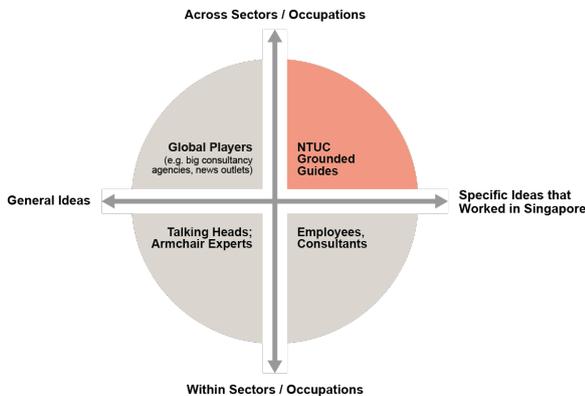
### Grounded Guides: Voices and Choices From Unions

To invest also means to prepare ahead of time for shifts in the broader socio-economic and environmental landscape as these changes will have substantial effects on each person. Youth are particularly engaged by these shifts and treating them as causes to champion. It is important for the Labour Movement to keep pace with society by also preparing for these shifts.

This suggests the union should aim to become a hub for young people to turn to when they encounter a cause they want to champion or an issue they wish to resolve. Although there are existing means through which young people have been empowered to take action (e.g., schools and non-profit organisations), there is yet to be a central source to approach for help or reference when youth undertake their initiatives. As an authoritative source, the union can leverage these platforms instead and build an online-to-offline presence.

The union can be a representative of tried and tested methods used in the workforce and society to resolve practical concerns by tapping on its exclusive knowledge from its unions, leaders and members across a multitude of industries. It benefits from leveraging its extensive collective knowledge of solutions and initiatives that have worked in the local context.

**Figure 2**  
*Strategic Matrix for Grounded Guides*



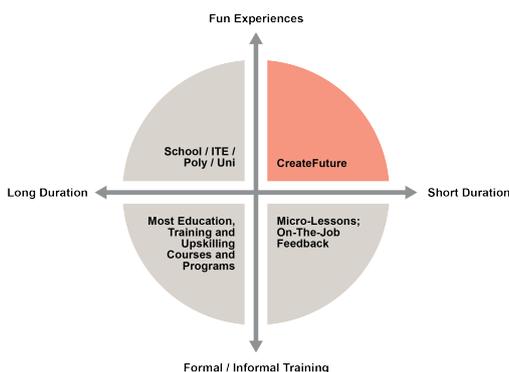
**CreateFuture: Micro-Experiences for Self-Exploration**

Feedback from research participants suggested that most existing workshops and skills training are heavily results-based. These become framed as ‘chores’ to participants, thus losing their appeal. Consequently, even though some continue to attend such courses, long-term knowledge or skills-retention tends to be low because the training style is not conducive to habit-formation (Milkman, 2021).

Participants expressed a desire to have fun while learning something new and/or pursuing their goals. Woolley and Fishbach (2017) found that when people made their pursuit of long-term goals more enjoyable in the short-term, they tended to exhibit stronger commitment rates to their activities. Thus, a Mary Poppins approach — ‘a spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down’ — uses ‘fun’ or instant gratification as a source of appeal (Milkman, 2021).

Focus group participants were interested in the idea of trying their hands on short fun experiences as microcosms of their training experience. As other skills training providers and organisations market their programmes for skills enrichment, the union can explore the market for pure enrichment. This would involve offering youth and young professionals the opportunity to try their hands at different short fun experiences, exploring multiple possibilities, before committing to a longer term personal or professional pursuit. This reverses the conventional approach where they have to first commit to the latter upfront (as is the case when signing up for most courses). By curating tasks/topics that are focused first on being meaningful, enjoyable, social and impactful, the Labour Movement provides versatility in skills/knowledge acquisition.

**Figure 3**  
*Strategic Matrix for CreateFuture*



## Feelers: Offline-to-Online and Online-to-Offline Intelligence

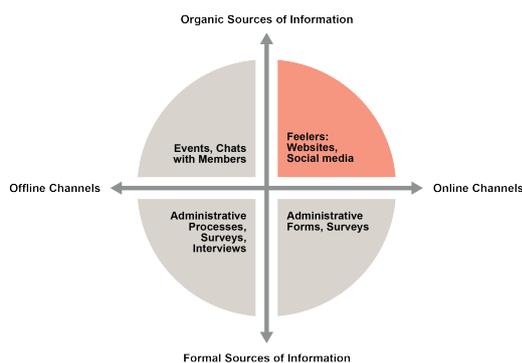
Traditionally, labour unions have been covering the ground through numerous offline channels like roadshows, partnered events and community outreach groups. As the use of technology grew, it has introduced online channels to meet this change. Many of these online channels exist as a means to support offline activity but there is greater potential to grow them as their own service or revenue stream and also leverage their existence to gather valuable insights.

Notably, a substantial cache of insights and information can be gathered through these online channels given the union has a significant number of members and hence potential users of these online channels. A set-up for data collection from the union's online properties and a framework for the kinds of important data to collect, and how it informs different organisation or business goals, will aid the crafting of efficient and fruitful strategies. The website and/or content design and development should complement the data points that have been identified for collection.

In building a strong digital presence across multiple online platforms that are perceived as 'useful' in people's eyes, the Labour Movement can also further establish itself in people's minds as a legitimate, accessible and valuable source for resources and services. Through these online channels, the union can also initiate contact with members by hosting polls, online events and so forth, which would not only boost outreach but also help to further collect insights.

### Figure 4

*Strategic Matrix for Feelers*



## Discussion

The present stage of this work has drawn on a variety of sources to diagnose the problems faced by unions to appeal to the young workforce. Since the phenomenon of membership trend is complex, our diagnosis is unlikely to be fully comprehensive; however, we find the central thread — that the “insurance” narrative serves to limit the Labour Movement’s prominence in the public consciousness — has sufficient support from our interviews and focus group discussions.

The next stage is to put the various recommended initiatives to the test. Their ultimate efficacy will be known through efforts by the unions and their affiliates to implement pilot programmes and track their results over time. Efficacy should be measured both in terms of the effects on union membership rates in the young workforce, and also in the prospective shift in perception of the Labour Movement in Singapore. Additionally, in-depth research that investigates specific factors/reasons for the growth/decline of youth membership using more extensive qualitative/quantitative analysis could also be conducted.

## Conclusion

We identify the Labour Movement's conceptual frame of "insurance" as a limiting factor in its ability to attract new blood. Insights from research participants suggest the possibility of re-framing the Labour Movement as fulfilling the twin functions of "insurance" and "investment", establishing a new role for itself in helping its members become robust and resilient in capturing high growth opportunities — a first step in showing that the Labour Movement can stay relevant and attractive to workers, and offer support consistently and throughout their members' lives, no matter their age or life stage. These insights and recommendations are not limited to Singapore and are generally applicable to labour unions globally, as they all face declining interest from youth and also need to move with the times to appeal to workers and provide suitable support.

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<https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167216676480>

# PRACTITIONERS' INSIGHTS



# National Trades Union Congress (NTUC)'s Changing Role in Shaping Singapore's Evolving Work Compact

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Chee Meng Ng

## Abstract

*This paper provides insights on the key challenges tripartism will face as Singapore's developmental context and social compact around work evolve. Specifically, it examines how NTUC's role has evolved to address key challenges, especially during the pandemic. In doing so, it seeks to outline NTUC's forward response of social dialogue towards longer term socioeconomic, demographic and other disruptive trends Singapore faces, including rapid technological change, skills obsolescence, workforce fragmentation and an ageing population, inviting individual stakeholders and partners to partake in consultation and policy co-creation for the future.*



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## Introduction

Tripartism is often the secret sauce in Singapore's growth and economic transformation. The National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) champions workers' interests and at the same, is pro-growth and pro-business. Our people are at the heart of why we strive for growth — to create good jobs that achieve their aspirations and improve lives.

Tripartite partners collaborate and make compromises leading to stronger employment, better overall business and national economic outcomes (Soh, 2012) which forges a resilient compact around work. This approach embraces a mutually beneficial arrangement built on the pursuit of collective over exclusive interests.

Singapore's model has implications for unions worldwide. Global research sometimes points towards the notion that "tripartism's heyday is clearly past" (Croucher & Wood, 2015). Even though studies in advanced economies like the US and Norway find that high unionisation levels are associated with positive outcomes in areas of economic, political, personal well-being (Banerjee et al., 2021) and firm productivity (Barth et al., 2020), unionisation rates nonetheless continue to decline worldwide (Visser, 2019). This obviously can have knock-on implications for societal cohesion and begs the question of how this trend can be arrested to preserve workers' interests.

The challenges facing an advanced Singapore economy are similarly becoming more complex. Many Singaporeans have achieved intergenerational mobility through education and abundant economic opportunities over the decades (Yip, 2012). But today, rapid economic change, job polarisation and the decline of traditional mid-wage occupations risk wage stagnation for the vulnerable, widening income disparities perceived and real, and the impairment of social mobility (Peng, 2019). These fissures can significantly fray Singapore's social fabric if not correctly managed.

In Singapore, what workers want out of work is also changing, posing new complexities. Singaporeans desire a fair and inclusive society — a fair shot at a job, an equitable reward for honest work, space for family responsibilities and the pursuit of other aspirations (Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, 2020).

Looking ahead, NTUC's approach and focus is to refresh the workers compact — one where our economic system remains open and meritocratic, responsive to new challenges, and supportive of inclusive and sustainable growth for new generations of workers. Where applicable, we hope the ideas encapsulated will be useful to other labour movements seeking ideas to address similar issues.

## The Labour Movement Has Kept Faith With Workers and Employers Through the Decades

Singapore is well placed to do this needful work. Tripartite partners have painstakingly built an understanding over many decades. In the earlier years of independence, the workers compact involved businesses providing jobs and training, as workers and unions laid aside strikes and work stoppages.

Since then, NTUC has helped to forge an understanding that sacrifices and gains should be shared by both employers and employees across good and bad times. For example, workers accepted wage cuts during the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis (Yue, 1998) but saw quick restoration with bonuses during the recovery. In addition, through the National Wages Council (NWC) and unions, tripartite partners assuaged employers' fears of being locked into inflexible wage expectations that could threaten future business competitiveness (Lim, 2014). This process of negotiation led by unions held companies and workers together.

COVID-19 tested this arrangement. But armed with the resolve to aid workers impacted most by the pandemic, tripartite partners rose to the challenge and evolved new tools. Workers were protected with the Labour Movement's proposed Fair Retrenchment Framework, later enshrined in the Tripartite Advisory on Managing Excess Manpower and Responsible Retrenchment. The

tripartite NWC urged for responsible wage reductions and management to take the lead. NTUC focused on training and placing displaced workers through a new NTUC Job Security Council. NTUC also administered the Self-Employed Income Relief Scheme, providing a safety net for this group (Ministry of Manpower, 2020). The resident unemployment rate did not exceed 4.7%. Singapore bounced back to pre-pandemic levels by February 2022 (Ministry of Manpower, 2022b). Credit too must go to the government's fiscal measures and the support of employers in averting catastrophic job losses (Ministry of Finance, 2022).

All this is only possible because the concept and practice of tripartism that sees the bigger picture allow us to overcome a national crisis. Singapore's model of coordinated tripartism is a brand of tripartism perhaps best described by Le Queux and Kuah (2021) as involving agile coordination enabling quick adjustments. It has been our competitive advantage as a node in the world economy — allowing us to be responsive to new economic challenges while safeguarding the welfare of workers.

Indeed, in times of crisis, unions' value as ballast against business pressures to shed workers, hidden during good economic periods, becomes more publicly seen (McNicholas et al., 2020).

The ethos of compromise has been key, something we at NTUC understand deeply. For example, the 1969 NTUC Modernization Seminar, which established our role in nation-building, also saw the introduction of the Industrial Relations Act regulating the power of unions (Parliament of Singapore, 1968). It was a bitter pill to swallow, but the sturdy partnerships fostered with businesses and the government have allowed NTUC to achieve strong employment outcomes for workers.

Singapore's brand of tripartism also created a favourable environment for strong economic outcomes, evident from the high and positive growth in GDP and wages. Across the past few decades, the few periods of recession were followed by strong recovery — most notably, the post-COVID-19 pandemic 7.6% growth in real GDP and a 3.9% increase in annual wages, in 2021 (Department of Statistics Singapore, 2022; Ministry of Manpower, 2022a). This attests to the notion that strong tripartism is commonly associated with better economic and social outcomes (Soh, 2012).

In 2019, Singapore held the top spot as the most competitive country with cooperative labour-employer relations (Schwab, 2019). Instead of industrial strife, we have enjoyed more than 30 years of harmonious labour relations. The last legal strike was in 1986 by members of the Shipbuilding and Marine Engineering Employees' Union (SMEEU) against their employer Hydril (Low, 2020).

As spelt out in Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's 2022 May Day Rally speech, NTUC has been an "active and valuable partner" as a stabiliser in Singapore's economic and national cohesion, playing a pivotal role in driving policies such as the Progressive Wage Model (PWM), and increasing the re-employment and retirement ages (Prime Minister's Office, 2022). Our work with employers also serves to provide a much-needed post-pandemic boost. Certact Engineering, which endured a loss in competitiveness during COVID-19, set up a NTUC Company Training Committee (CTC) and worked with the Advanced Manufacturing Employees' Union (AMEU) in pursuit of needed business transformation. Like many others we have embarked on, this endeavour proved successful, with business revenue doubling and the company's subsequent expansion (Prime Minister's Office, 2022).

Tripartism — the Singapore way, has continued to bring forth real benefits. It is by NTUC and tripartite partners stepping up to the plate time and again that the trust among employers, employees and the government can be solidified, forging a partnership that withstands the test of time.

## A Refreshed Workers Compact

The role of social dialogue has been key in shaping countries' recovery in a post-pandemic world, as policy interventions based on trade unionists' experiences during the downturn incorporate workers' views and give them a stake in their countries' reopening. When I attended the 110<sup>th</sup> International Labour Conference in June, delegates agreed that countries must take a human-centred approach, prioritising inclusive and resilient growth that supports sustainable enterprises and worker protections (ILO, 2022).

As the voice of workers, NTUC seeks to venture a new workers compact — one collectively defined by workers, where every individual has access to fair, fulfilling and inclusive work in an increasingly uncertain and dynamic world.

This is a compact where every worker can give his or her best, access necessary training, networks, and peer support to chart a fulfilling career, receive protection and representation, and be assured of support if he falls. This is a compact of stakeholder capitalism, where businesses invest in engaging employees to strengthen their work prospects, wages and welfare — building their confidence in embracing new opportunities and keeping pace with transformation in a world redefined by technological change while giving them a stake in evolving the business (Schwab, 2019). Unions play a critical role in forging an accepted consensus, while the government supports strong outcomes with a conducive regulatory environment and fiscal levers.

Getting there is a monumental undertaking and will require giving it everything NTUC has. Workers face new insecurities exacerbated by rapid technological change. With skills-biased growth in the digital economy, workers must constantly upgrade themselves to adopt new, innovative ways of doing business (World Economic Forum, 2020).

Forward efforts to tackle this are seen through NTUC's CTCs established in 2019 and supported by a \$70 million government grant to carry out Operations and Technology Road-mapping for companies, redesign jobs, and reskill workers who otherwise risk long-term structural unemployment. CTCs bring employers and unions together to redesign and preserve jobs amidst restructuring, weaning companies off the impractical expectation of new "plug and play" workers who come onboard seamlessly. Over 1,000 CTCs have been set up as of July 2022, covering 28 sectors. They are at various stages of their Operations and Technology Road-mapping journey, from strategic planning to leadership development and workforce training. From 2020 to Q1 2022, over 96,000 workers from participating CTCs have gone through relevant training offered by NTUC's Training and Placement ecosystem. We are confident in this approach to achieve win-win outcomes for companies and workers through enterprise-level transformation and workforce upskilling, and have set the bold goal of establishing 2,500 CTCs by 2025.

Still, addressing the more profound challenges of skills obsolescence and job displacement as business cycles shorten will require a broader, concerted national strategy. The Professionals, Managers and Executives (PME) Taskforce in 2021 recommended measures to ensure workplace fairness, aid with unemployment support, expand hiring opportunities for mature PMEs, and support PMEs in their aspirations for progression based on consultations with more than 10,000 PMEs, union leaders and business leaders (National Trades Union Congress & Singapore National Employers Federation, 2021). Moving forward, we need a larger national conversation over the model of lifelong learning that strengthens every worker's employability, placement and progression.

In a future where change is more fast-paced than ever, the Labour Movement must keep the compact whole and ensure that no one is left behind. Building on the strong tripartite consensus for restoring the Central Provident Fund contribution rates for mature workers and raising the statutory retirement and re-employment age, we must continue harnessing the strengths of an older, more experienced workforce. We must combat regressive views around age and ensure fair treatment in the workplace. Furthermore, we remain fully committed to working with tripartite partners to find ways for mature workers to participate in meaningful roles as their industries transform while strengthening their overall retirement resilience and financial adequacy in old age.

Singapore must also continue expanding the PWM. Now in its 10<sup>th</sup> year, the PWM establishes a wage floor and pushes for workers to undergo training leading to productivity-linked wage

growth. The PWM represents Singapore's collective desire to check inequality, transform jobs and create more pathways for progression. We have made headway in the cleaning, security, landscaping, food and beverage, retail and waste management sectors, as well as for administrators and drivers. We must, however, do more to expand this uniquely Singaporean innovation to more job families, companies and sectors.

Another national dilemma is the local-foreign manpower mix needed to keep Singapore vibrant amid a shrinking, ageing workforce. NTUC's role in developing the new Complementarity Assessment Framework (COMPASS) seeks to ensure that foreign professionals complement our local workforce, but Singapore may need to refresh our national consensus on the shape and direction of this manpower mix. If Singapore must remain open to global investments and foreign talent to stay economically vibrant, in exchange for this consensus, Singaporean workers need assurances of a level playing field and support to succeed in this environment of intensified competition and rapidly transforming industries.

Last, the gig economy's growth poses new questions about the balance between independence and security. Recent efforts by the Advisory Committee on Platform Workers seek to recommend ways to enhance protection against workplace injury and ensure greater representation, retirement and housing adequacy for this precarious group of workers (Parliament of Singapore, 2022). Even so, we need to understand the attractiveness of gig work and how we can strengthen the traditional, full-time employment model in Singapore.

Indeed, a greater desire for autonomy and flexibility around work is coming into sharper focus. Tripartism can facilitate these adjustments. By establishing and calling for the Tripartite Standards on Flexible Work Arrangements to remain as workplace restrictions eased in April 2022, and having the public sector lead by example, tripartite partners hope to ease companies and workers into a sustainable agreement.

At NTUC, our long-serving unions must also reinvent ourselves to represent a workforce with increasingly differentiated needs. In recent years, NTUC has reached out to more groups of workers — PMEs, workers in small and medium-sized enterprises, migrant and domestic workers, freelancers in content creation and coaching, professionals in tech and platform workers through new affiliated associations — those not historically represented in collective bargaining. As a result, we have seen increases in our membership numbers to more than 1 million as of end-2021, an increase of more than 10% from the previous year. But more can be done to evolve new strategies and tools for unions to better connect with the future workforce.

As we help workers realise their aspirations, we will also aid those who fall through the cracks. Although Singapore has reopened, uncertainty wrought by the Ukraine invasion, global inflationary pressures and supply chain shocks, coupled with a manpower crunch, have led to higher living costs and doing business. Our supermarket NTUC FairPrice has stabilised benchmarks on essentials, with discounts in 2022 to ease financial pressures at a time of price volatility. In uncertain times ahead, NTUC's social enterprises will continue to provide workers with affordable access to necessities and amenities, to assuage anxieties and meet the needs of every Singaporean worker — from childcare to healthcare to insurance and more.

### **Forging an Inclusive and Fulfilling Future of Work Together**

We in Singapore must continue to cast our eyes on the future in evolving the workers compact. A new generation of Singapore youth gives me confidence that our future will be in good hands. More affluent, educated and exposed to varied viewpoints, many of our youth desire diversity and are increasingly socially conscious (National Youth Council, 2021). They are more open to non-traditional forms of employment and expect purposeful work — to be challenged, contribute, and feel a sense of community. NTUC has therefore set up a Youth Taskforce to chart the way forward and partner with the youth to write this next chapter in the future of work.

Regardless of age, we invite workers, employers, the government and other like-minded partners to shape the compact of work with the Labour Movement. Work is a big part of our lives — it takes up many waking hours and is a means to our individual goals. We want to understand

workers' concerns, priorities and aspirations against the more challenging economic and social backdrop, and how we can support them as we journey together. We want to hear what society thinks should undergird the new compact around work and what trade-offs need to be made as part of the "give and take" to build trust among tripartite partners.

We will consult widely with stakeholders as part of our #EveryWorkerMatters Conversations launched in August 2022 and complement the Forward Singapore Conversations efforts to refresh Singapore's social compact, launched by Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong. We invite employees, employers, tripartite partners and interested organisations to partner with us to hear what workers think, chart out priority areas, and co-create solutions.

We will continue working with the political leadership and future generations of public servants to champion tripartism. The Labour Movement will also examine new approaches to organising, advocating and engaging workers to represent and realise their aspirations in responding to the feedback and findings. We will continue to learn from international best practices, and we hope that our work and findings in this paper will prove informative for governments, unions and businesses worldwide in emerging stronger from this pandemic and adapting to changes.

Trade unions and tripartism must remain relevant in a world where mega-drivers of change have thrown the effectiveness of social dialogue into question while critically examining workers' emerging needs and challenges. For us, renewing this compact with workers is vital in ensuring Singapore's resilience in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) world, and strengthening our people's capacity to take on opportunities offered by technology and the global economy. Ultimately, we want workers to be proud of their jobs, have secure livelihoods and look forward to a brighter future of better jobs and lives.

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As NTUC Secretary-General, Chee Meng Ng pushes for initiatives that will lead to better wages, welfare and work prospects for workers. Company Training Committees were set up for unions and management to help workers keep up with industry transformation. The NTUC Job Security Council was formed to provide pre-emptive assistance for at-risk workers. The PME Taskforce and Youth Taskforce were set up to champion the interests of PMEs and the youth as every worker matters.

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# The Journey of Engaging and Organising Workers Through Digital Means

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Horson Cheong

## Abstract:

*This practitioner note examines the motivations that the Singapore Supply Chain Employees' Union (SCEU) had in embarking on their journey of engaging and organising workers through digital means. The advent of new, digital tools and the evolution of communication methods amid changing work and workforce landscapes meant that new and effective ways to reach out to more workers needed to be devised. SCEU's foray into digital platforms as a means of communication, engagement and organising of workers was thus borne out of a desire for progressivity as much as it was an existential necessity. There remain challenges that must be addressed to ensure that the use of digital platforms translates into successful organising. This practitioner note draws from SCEU's experiences and outlines its digital organising strategy in response to these challenges, as it works towards its aim of establishing a strong foundation and community of supply chain and logistics workers for the next generation of SCEU leaders to continue building upon.*



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## Introduction

The Supply Chain Employees' Union (SCEU) is one of the youngest unions in Singapore today, having been set up only in 2018 with the main objectives of (i) growing the industry; (ii) consolidating the representation of workers in the supply chain and logistics industry; and (iii) attracting and retaining younger workers in this industry (Heng, 2018; Owe, 2019). In the early stages of SCEU's inception, we quickly realised that the above could only be achieved if we gave our rules, scope, and means of engagement a rethink. Due to the changing landscape of the national workforce, the number of professionals, managers, and executives (PMEs) entering the supply chain and logistics industry had increased and would continue to increase. Disruption to the supply chain industry with the advent of automation and digitalisation also meant that SCEU needed to be proactive in supporting our workers in navigating through these uncharted territories. There were also challenges inherent in our being a young union as well — there might be a lack of public awareness on what SCEU does, what we can do for workers, and who we can represent.

These pressures meant that we needed to devise new and effective ways to reach out to workers and to keep all workers — who are gradually getting digitally and/or social media savvy at their own pace — up to speed with industry developments. In our bid to do so, we studied the tools and methodologies adopted by global unions in their efforts to engage workers. We discovered an emerging trend in the use of digital technologies such as social media platforms for worker advocacy (Trenerry et al., in press). A report by the International Labour Organization (2021) also revealed a five-fold increase in the use of digital labour platforms globally. To this end, the SCEU Executive Committee (Exco) made a collective decision to explore digital platforms as a means of communication, engagement and organising of workers.

In a research report by the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) and Singapore University of Technology and Design (2022), "Organising" is described as "actions developed by trade unions aimed at recruiting, involving, and/or mobilising workers with the express aim of making workers and new union members more conscious of their rights through awareness-raising, education, advocacy, training, and networking". There are two broad outcomes that extend from this definition — first, organising should lead to an increase in membership due to the act of recruiting members; second, organising should lead to an increased awareness amongst workers in terms of their rights to fair employment and their opportunities for progression and development.

Taken together, I propose that organising — when successful — should lead to the outcome of an increased number of passionate workers with the awareness and expertise to collectively push for change in their respective companies when there are workplace issues to be addressed.

Since we embarked on digital engagement efforts in 2018, we have set up social media accounts across three main platforms — Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram. We have also been consistent in our efforts to post regularly on all three social media platforms, publishing at least one post every few days, with the firm belief that these consistent efforts will enable us to extend a greater reach to workers in the supply chain and logistics sector.

However, we have faced our fair share of challenges in using digital platforms. Reflecting on our journey thus far, these challenges include both concrete as well as hypothetical ones that could take time to play out in reality. In short, some of these challenges that we have encountered during our journey are that the use of digital platforms (a) is resource intensive; (b) could alienate less technologically savvy workers; and (c) exposes our content to the risk of mis- and disinformation. I will explore how we could address these three challenges in the following sections.

## Circumventing Resource Intensive Digital Platforms

One might think that the use of digital platforms supersedes that of physical, in-person organising because it requires less time and less manpower. That could not be further from the truth. We have found that the approach taken for one social media platform (i.e., Instagram) and another (i.e., LinkedIn) must be different because their respective demographic of users differs greatly. These differences make it evident that content created for one page cannot be replicated across multiple digital platforms.

In addition, creating content requires a range of different skillsets. Time and effort must be expended to curate and produce the content for each platform with the objective of reaching the intended target audience by demographic.

While the union is constantly on a look out for better solutions, we have innovatively used the "trial and error" method by leveraging available internal resources such as SCEU officers and Exco members to curate SCEU's digital content. We believe that our Industrial Relations Officers (IROs), Exco and Branch Officials know SCEU best. As a start, SCEU IROs began producing a series of social media posts with individual profiles of SCEU Exco members, so that the wider public can get a glimpse into the workings of SCEU and how we champion workers' rights (See Figure 1 for an example). We also have plans in the pipeline to link up with our management partners and produce content specifically about the supply chain and logistics industry to attract more workers to join this sector. As Figure 2 shows, we aim to publish a variety of content in different formats on our social media platforms.

### Figure 1

#### Profile of SCEU Exco Member Jackie Leung



**Figure 2**  
**Overview of SCEU's Social Media Content**

Theme	Key Topics					Example
Membership benefits	Protection	Placement	Progression	Privileges		
IR Sharing	Retirement and Re-employment Act	Employment Act	Workplace Safety and Health Act	Work Injury Compensation Act		
Exco Profiles	Why are you a union leader?	Why should workers join the union?	What keeps you going?	What is your one wish for NTUC and SCEU?		
About Supply Chain and Logistics Industry	Myths about the Logistics Sector		'Day in The Life' Videos, featuring various jobs in the logistics industry			

At the same time, SCEU will continue making the right investments to upskill our union officials including Exco and Branch Officials with the relevant knowledge and skills required to navigate the digital media landscape, as well as to leverage digital means for engagement with members and workers. Courses on digital marketing, social media analytics, and content strategy are readily offered by various training providers such as NTUC LearningHub (LHUB). Such courses are available in microlearning formats as well, including mobile platforms such as the NTUC LHUB's Learning eXperience Platform (LXP) which offers over 75,000 courses. SCEU's

existing social media platforms also provide the training ground for officers to put their skills to practice. Through a continuous process of learning and practice by trial-and-error, we might eventually find a breakthrough in our digital organising strategies and extend our reach to support more members and assist more workers who need SCEU's help.

### **Upskilling Technological Knowledge of Workers as well as Balancing the Use of Digital Platforms With Physical Engagement Sessions**

As much as we invest in our union officials, we must also pay equal attention to the upskilling of workers. SCEU is an all-collar union, catering to both rank-and-file workers and PMEs, among whom have different levels of comfort in using digital tools. For those who might be less technologically savvy, providing them the resources to upskill their technological knowledge would also be crucial, both in ensuring that they stay relevant and are able to stay up to date with SCEU's online communications. In that transition, it is also important that we adopt a hybrid approach encompassing both offline and online engagement to ensure that we reach out to all workers. For example, emails serve an important function, but they can only be circulated to our existing pool of members, thus restricting SCEU's reach to potential members and limiting our ability to recruit. There are also workers who might prefer a more physical, face-to-face approach, and who appreciate the time taken by our union leaders to converse with them and to understand the issues that they are facing at their workplaces. For these workers, the sincerity and personal "touch" will likely nudge them to join unions.

Thus, in catering to the needs of our different types of members, we must find a balance in the use of digital and physical means to engage existing members and to recruit new members. We must complement our digital organising efforts with ongoing physical engagement sessions.

This is for a few reasons. First, we want to continue serving all demographics of workers within the supply chain and logistics industry. Second, our use of digital tools has room for improvement and our expertise in digital organising still needs to be honed. Third, organising through physical means could help us bridge gaps in the digital sphere that we may not have sight of. For example, workers could be concerned about leaving digital traces and facing repercussions from their companies if they were to reach out to SCEU for help via one of its digital platforms, causing them to avoid seeking help altogether.

### **Developing Capabilities to Guard Against the Potential Misuse of SCEU's Digital Content**

One challenge that is always on our minds and which we are always on guard against is the potential abuse and manipulation of SCEU's content, as well as the risk of SCEU's content being taken out of context.

Consider the following case that was reported in August 2019. A Facebook page called "Well Vacation" had fraudulently used Singapore's then-Deputy Prime Minister and then-Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat's photograph in a post that read, "You can take a HUGE advantage of this program!". The photograph was of Mr Heng speaking at the World Bank-Singapore Infrastructure Summit and carried a link that led to a reproduced Straits Times article, but the headline read "The Nation Says Goodbye To Finance Minister Heng Swee Keat" (Goh, 2019).

Mr Heng filed a police report, and cautioned the public against responding to such fraudulent websites that use the names and photographs of ministers and other prominent public personalities, especially when they asked for personal information such as emails, passwords, and credit card information.

This is a prime example of how digital content can be taken out of context and misappropriated to deceive the public. Such instances make us wary of how SCEU's social media posts could likewise be manipulated to promote a certain agenda. This is further complicated by the difficulties in detecting potential instances of content abuse. Very often, manipulated posts which promote disinformation cannot be detected until they go viral or are shared by a high-profile

individual. This is a cause for concern for us simply because we will not even be aware of how our content is being used in ways to provoke, influence, and promote other causes.

Thus, we are mindful that while generating content is important, it is likewise crucial that we beef up our monitoring and analytics capabilities to mitigate concerns over mis- and/or disinformation, privacy and cybersecurity. For content published on SCEU's digital platforms, what are some measures that we will need to put in place to track its performance, where it is shared, and by whom? Another area to look into would be putting in place whistleblowing policies and procedures. For a whistleblower reaching out to SCEU via one of our digital platforms, what can SCEU do to ensure that their feedback is kept confidential and will not be shared on other platforms? These are important questions which we endeavour to address moving forward.

## Conclusion

The challenges I listed above are our current key concerns, and I anticipate that more challenges will continue to surface as media platforms continue to evolve in step with changing needs and demographics of users. I anticipate that unions and union leaders around the globe are likewise grappling with similar issues and challenges. It is inevitable that trade unions will embark on greater use of digital tools in how they “organise, engage, and grow their movements” (Trener et al., in press). In this regard, I urge my fellow unionists to take a leaf out of SCEU’s playbook, and continuously engage both union officials and workers on the importance of upskilling and bolstering digital capabilities to ensure safe and sustained relevance in a rapidly changing world of work and labour relations.

In closing, the steps that SCEU is taking now will also go a long way in supporting our efforts of engaging and organising workers in the future. By harnessing digital means, we are working towards building up a strong foundation and a tight community of supply chain and logistics workers, thus laying a stronger foundation for the next generation of SCEU leaders to continue building upon.

Ultimately, we recognise that it will be a long and iterative process in identifying and developing the best digital organising strategy that works for SCEU. However, as Thomas A. Edison once said, “Never be discouraged, because every wrong turn attempt, when left behind you, is another step forward taking you closer to your goals.” This is a phrase that rings true in our digital organising journey — an iterative process that we will not give up regardless of the many obstacles that stand in our way — as we forge ahead to ensure that we can continue serving our workers, now and in the future.

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### Horson Cheong

Horson was elected to be the President of the Supply Chain and Employees' Union (SCEU), in October 2019. SCEU currently represents 36 unionised companies and more than 3000 members on labour matters. For labour matters, he represented National Trades Union Congress as the Alternate Member to the 2020/2021 National Wages Council. Concurrently, Horson is the Chairman of the ST Logistics Branch of SCEU.

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# Supporting Workforce and Company Transformation Through the Labour Movement: Company Training Committees and Training and Placement Ecosystem

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Vivienne Pei Liang Tan and Dawn Seow Yuen Liw

## Abstract

*The Labour Movement has always been an anchoring force in Singapore, where the government, employers and unions work for a common cause. This tripartite partnership has enabled the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) to be progressive in its efforts to support workers' skills upgrading to stay relevant. Amidst the dynamic economic landscape, this article explores how NTUC, through the Company Training Committee (CTC) partnerships and the NTUC Training and Placement (T&P) ecosystem, continues to achieve its core purpose of advancing workers' interests while helping companies to meet their business outcomes.*



## Upskilling Workers as Part of Nation Building in Singapore

Labour movements around the world play a pivotal role in securing legislated labour protections and rights such as safety and health, overtime pay and family/medical leave, as well as in enforcing these rights. For instance, unions support and champion worker safety by investing in programmes to educate workers about on-the-job hazards and working with employers to reduce worker injuries and the time lost due to injury. This is the essence of any labour movement — to provide a voice for workers, serving as the bridge between employers and employees.

The Labour Movement (LM) in Singapore has evolved over the years while still staying true to its mission of enabling workers to earn a better living and live a better life. In the 1970s, the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) shifted from its confrontational stance to that of a collaborative partnership with the government and companies, leading to the birth of tripartism that has been the cornerstone of Singapore's economic progress while maintaining harmonious labour-management relations (Ministry of Manpower, 2022). In conjunction with this, cooperatives were set up with the social mission to help workers cope with rising costs of living through the provision of affordable and essential goods and services.

NTUC's brand of progressive trade unionism continued to push for workers' skill upgrading to stay relevant and ahead of changes. In 1982, NTUC set up the Computer Training Centre to equip workers with basic Information Technology skills, in preparation for computerisation. The Basic Education and Skills Training (BEST) programme was also introduced to cater to workers who had less than Primary 6 education (NTUC, 2019). In addition, funds were made available for training through the NTUC Education and Training Fund (NETF) and training schemes such as the Worker Improvement through Secondary Education (WISE), the Critical Enabling Skills Training (CREST), and the Skills Redevelopment Programme (SRP). In 2004, the Computer Training Centre evolved into NTUC LearningHub which has grown to become one of Singapore's largest continuing education and training provider. With the firm belief that jobs and training are the best welfare for workers, NTUC continues to work closely with the government in shaping the national Continuing Education and Training (CET) ecosystem.

## Company Training Committees (CTCs) — Leveraging Union-Management Partnership to Support Business and Workforce Transformations

In recent years, Singapore has been confronted with growing and diverse challenges, which includes rising competition, global trade tensions, disruptive technologies and changing business models. Responding to these challenges, the Future Economy Council (FEC) was set up in 2017. The aim was to drive the growth and transformation of Singapore's economy for the future, and spearheaded the launch of 23 Industry Transformation Maps (ITMs). The rollout of ITMs for the various sectors were inevitably met with challenges (Shiao, 2018). According to a 2018 survey by the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry, a majority of firms were still unaware of these sectoral roadmaps or how to benefit from them two years after the ITMs were rolled out for various sectors (Heng, 2018).

In its efforts to complement and enhance the implementation of ITMs on the ground, NTUC launched the Company Training Committee (CTC) initiative in 2019 to deepen collaborations between unions and companies in identifying skills and training needed to help workers stay relevant in tandem with business transformation. Leveraging the strategic partnership with government agencies, the CTCs would help to translate ITMs into concrete and actionable initiatives to achieve win-win outcomes for the company and its workers. It was envisaged that this could be achieved by transforming both the workforce and business (see Table 1).

**Table 1**  
*Outcomes of Workforce and Business Transformation*

		Outcomes	
<b>Workforce Transformation</b>	Reskill and upskill workers by increasing their productivity and preparing them to take on emerging job roles.	Contribute to making workers' work environment and processes smarter and safer.	Strengthen workers' partnerships with employers and to adapt to change more easily.
<b>Business Transformation</b>	Companies recruit and retain talents with the relevant skillsets.	Companies tap on NTUC and government support for capability development and innovation, and productivity enhancement.	Companies adopt new technologies to digitalise and transform business.

Through the CTCs, union leaders and management representatives work together to identify jobs and skills needs, and implement initiatives that are relevant to meeting the business outcomes. This can be aptly summarized by the following:

*Helping every worker to become a better worker through training. Making every job a better job through job redesign. Matching the better workers to the better jobs through effective job placement.*

With the emergence of COVID-19 in 2020, disruptions and challenges were amplified and accelerated, causing significant impacts on lives and livelihoods. In addition to government support measures, NTUC pivoted the CTCs to help companies review their business strategies and explore opportunities to sustain operations and help workers stay employed. As of May 2022, more than 900 CTCs have been formed, covering multi-national corporations, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and the public sector.

**Integrated Training and Placement Ecosystem — Providing Holistic, Coordinated, and Timely Support for Companies and Workers**

To better support the CTCs' efforts in driving transformation, the NTUC set up the Training and Placement (T&P) ecosystem in 2021 to establish a one-stop intermediary to operationalise business and workforce transformation. This was in response to ground challenges faced by businesses in approaching the right government agency, or business association for assistance. SMEs, which have limited resources, time and manpower, needed additional help to navigate or understand the various government schemes and grants available.

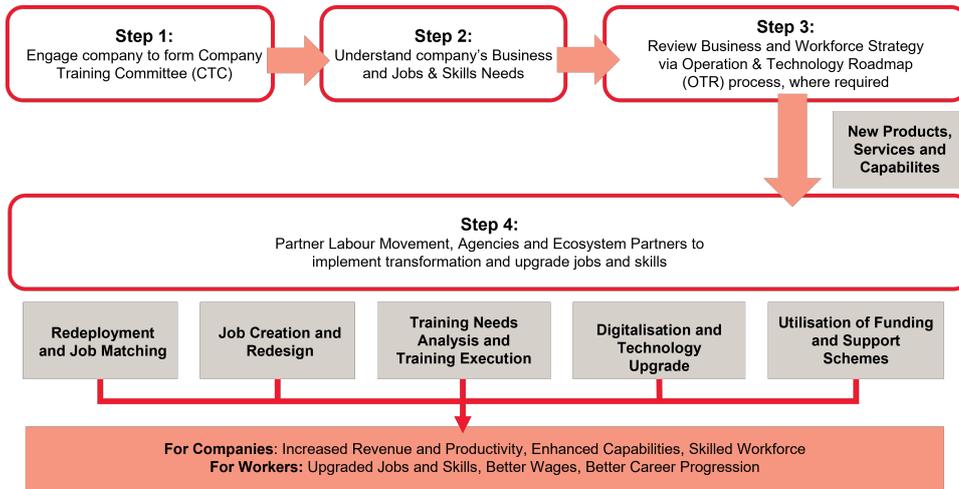
The one-stop integrated T&P ecosystem brought together a comprehensive package of training and placement services offered by the Labour Movement: NTUC Industry Training and Transformation (IT&T) team, NTUC's e2i (Employment and Employability Institute), NTUC LearningHub (LHUB), and Ong Teng Cheong Labour Leadership Institute (OTCi).

In this T&P ecosystem, NTUC IT&T team assisted companies in planning their strategic roadmap and identifying business transformation plans. e2i served as a bridge between workers and employers, as well as connecting with workers to offer job security through job-matching and career guidance. While OTCi, an established centre on labour education and training, offered a range of training from short certificate courses to professional diploma courses for trade union leaders, labour-management groups and others who would be interested in the industrial and employment relations field.

With this renewed synergy in the ecosystem, NTUC works closely with unions and union leaders to mobilise workers for upskilling in support of companies' transformation plans (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

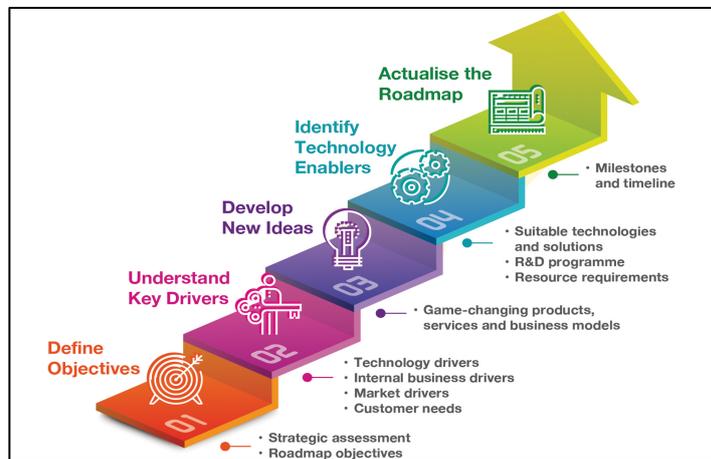
*CTC Process Flow*



The Industry Training Officers (ITOs) would engage the companies' management and union representatives to better understand their current situation. Leveraging the Operation & Technology Roadmap (OTR) planning process, the ITOs helped the CTC to develop a customised roadmap for sustainable growth. During the COVID-19 pandemic, physical facilitation was pivoted to a virtual-hybrid OTR model that leveraged digital tools such as 'Mural' (virtual workspace) to facilitate brainstorming discussions as well as capture key inputs and ideas (refer to Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

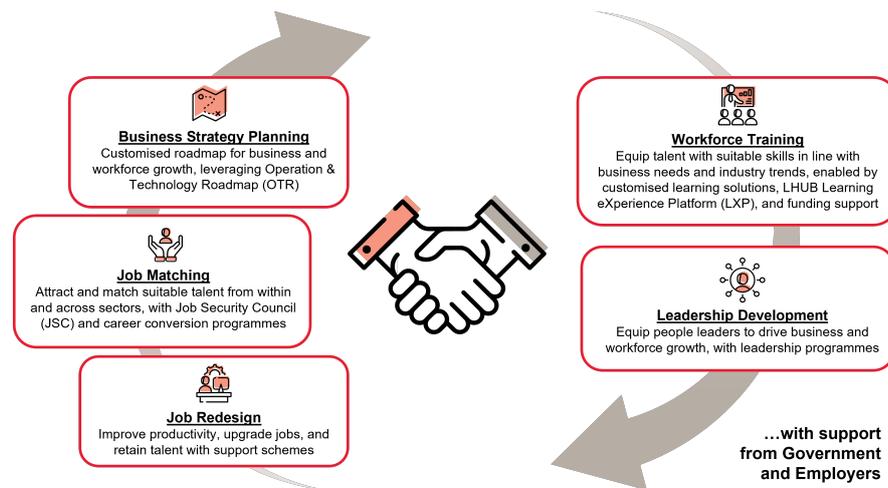
*The OTR Planning Process (Source: Agency for Science, Technology and Research)*



Upon completion of the roadmap, these companies could navigate and tap on the NTUC T&P ecosystem to implement the plans laid out in the roadmap. The NTUC T&P ecosystem supported companies with one-stop services including business strategy planning, job-matching, job redesign, workforce training and leadership development (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3**

*NTUC Training and Placement Ecosystem*



Enabled by NTUC Training and Placement Ecosystem:



**Benefits of the Company Training Committees, and Training and Placement Ecosystem: Achieving Win-Win Outcomes for Companies and Workers**

Company-union level partnership through the CTCs allowed companies to review their business strategies and explore opportunities to pivot their operations for survival; and at the same time, to retrain workers and multi-skill them so that they can perform different job roles. To implement their plans, CTCs could tap on the NTUC T&P ecosystem’s comprehensive services and support.

**Case Study 1: Manufacturing SME**

An OTR was conducted for a precision engineering company in 2020. Established in 1968, the company’s revenue was adversely affected by COVID-19. The pandemic forced the company to think out of the box and explore how it could enhance its offerings, technical capabilities and profit margin. Beyond its business objectives, the company also needed to solve its shortage of manpower brought about by border restrictions. The company knew that it needed to transform itself and its workforce to weather the pandemic.

To better sustain its transformation efforts, the company was unionised in May 2020 and formed a CTC to review the necessary skills, training and capabilities needed to transform and grow its business as well as to strengthen its workforce. Through the CTC, NTUC IT&T assisted the company to develop a five-year business strategy through the OTR process. This helped the company to expand into new markets, diversify its offerings, innovate its processes and build its talent pool.

Since partnering with NTUC, the company’s revenue has doubled. It has also expanded its workforce by 30 per cent. The adoption of automation and implementation of robotic manufacturing has helped raise its productivity and production quality. On the adoption of automation, the Managing Director shared: “The implementation of robotic manufacturing has helped us a lot. It has helped to raise our productivity and our [production] quality. Now, with the shortage of manpower, it has also lightened our workers’ burden and helped us meet our customers’ high expectations.”

The once precision machining company has now, with the help of the NTUC Enhanced Enterprise Development Support (NEEDS) funding, also diversified its business offerings to

include precision plastic engineering at its new facility. The company's ability to invest in new capabilities has allowed them to meet customers' high expectations and instilled greater confidence in them. It managed to leverage the union-company partnership for business transformation through the CTC platform and NTUC T&P ecosystem.

As for workforce transformation, workers benefitted from the digitalisation of the company's internal processes, adoption of automation and workers' training. For example, a 56-year-old senior engineering manager, who has worked in a company for over 20 years, was retrenched two years ago. Knowing that he still had much to offer, he went to NTUC's e2i to seek job placement. After fulfilling some training courses with LHUB, he secured a job with the above company through e2i's Professional Conversion Programme. He has been with the company for over a year now, working as a Quality Assurance Manager.

The story of the engineering manager reinforces the benefits of the training and placement ecosystem and helps mature PMEs enhance their employability. A recent report published by the NTUC and Singapore National Employers Federation (2021) highlighted that mature PMEs are most concerned with the lack of job security and require greater support in employment and training opportunities. It is, therefore, important that the NTUC T&P ecosystem not just helps companies transform and sustain their business, but also serves workers' training and job matching needs, matching job seekers to companies that are growing and expanding their workforce. Hence, the CTC is not just a "meeting" platform but serves to enable a long-term relationship with all stakeholders benefiting from it.

### **Supporting Sectoral Transformations Through CTCs and Working with NTUC T&P Ecosystem**

Beyond the company-level transformation efforts, the NTUC T&P ecosystem brought together other stakeholders in pushing ahead with sectoral transformation. Together with unions, government agencies, trade associations and chambers (TACs) as well as other industry partners, companies were engaged to address common interests and pain points such as digitalisation efforts or workers' productivity at the sectoral level. In exploring the transformation plans for the sector, efforts were made to align the plans with the ITMs, identify jobs and skills requirements, as well as explore ways to accelerate transformation and growth.

### **Case Study 2: Sectoral Transformation of the Waste Management Sector**

The waste management industry contributed S\$5.79 billion to Singapore's Gross Domestic Product in 2019 and employed over 12,000 workers covering the end-to-end process of waste collection, sorting, recycling, treatment, and disposal. With the Singapore Green Plan 2030 and Zero Waste Masterplan, businesses face increasing pressure to deliver higher environmental targets, and shift from a linear to a circular economy. The waste management sector is a critical essential service in any modern economy. Companies in this sector typically face challenges of a tight labour market characterised by rising wages. A limited pool of available workers for related jobs and industries has also intensified competition to recruit manpower to sustain operations.

The Waste Management and Recycling Association of Singapore (WMRAS) was set up in 2001 as the only not-for-profit trade association for solid waste management. Its aim was to advocate best practices and be the platform to share and transfer knowledge amongst industry players, government and the community to create a more sustainable living environment. Together with other stakeholders of the waste management sector, WMRAS and the Building Construction and Timber Industries Employees' Union, with support from the National Environment Agency, took on the OTR initiative in 2020.

Specifically, WMRAS and 17 of its member companies in the general waste collection and recycling sub-sectors committed to three key strategies that all parties have identified to be pivotal in the next phase of sectoral transformation:

- Explore relevant technological adoptions leading to better innovation, productivity, and safety
- Attracting, retaining, and localisation of waste management workers
- Continuous learning and development of waste management workers

For the first key strategy on technological adoption, the discussions generated greater awareness of new trends and technologies such as sustainability and artificial intelligence which have a significant impact on jobs of the future. For the waste management sector, such transformations in new technologies and digitalisation are expected to raise productivity, optimise operations, and reduce costs in the long term.

As for the second and third strategies, the roadmap covers the exploration of relevant technological adoptions for improved safety and productivity, implementation of continuous learning and development of initiatives for workers, and supported the implementation of the Progressive Wage Model for about 3,000 workers to attract and retain workers. In partnership with e2i and LHUB, companies have also embarked on training in the areas of workplace safety, simulation safety driving, basic Information and Communications Technology skills as well as job description and writing workshops to uplift their human resource capabilities. Workers have benefitted from skills upgrading through training and certification, which led to an overall increase in productivity in the sector.

With the shift towards the adoption of new technologies, training needs are identified during the OTR process whereby training programmes are curated for workers to upskill and be better prepared for the future. Such strategy planning allows for stronger tripartite partnerships between the relevant stakeholders and has led to positive outcomes.

## Conclusion

The journey thus far has been fulfilling for the team at NTUC T&P ecosystem as we worked together to support the CTCs' transformation efforts. However, more needs to be done as challenges and gaps are identified along the way. Some companies face bottlenecks in the execution of their action plans after completing their OTRs, be it due to the lack of resources or ground resistance to see through the execution.

Moving forward, the Singapore Government has set aside S\$100 million for NTUC to scale up efforts to help companies implement concrete training and transformation programmes. This is part of the Government's Budget 2022 plans to build a future-ready workforce while fostering a culture of lifelong learning at the workplace. The new grant will allow NTUC to help more companies and workers through the scaling up of CTCs and supporting the implementation of their transformation plans. This new grant is a timely boost as the Singapore economy gains a firmer footing towards recovery and growth.

To lend further support to the country's overall efforts in addressing manpower constraints, NTUC is working with the government to identify potential tripartite alliances in sectors with a greater need for transformation. This will allow us to tap on the collective capabilities and resources from different industry partners to bridge skills gaps, improve job-matching and support companies' transformation efforts.

Many businesses and workers around the world continue to face uncertainty and changes in the geopolitical environment, leaving workers to confront the prospect of a more fragmented world. The COVID-19 pandemic has also vanquished jobs and left millions unemployed around the world. In the face of these challenges, workers will require greater support to understand, navigate and adapt to changing structures, processes, and job roles in the VUCA (stands for volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity) world. Through the CTCs and T&P ecosystem, NTUC strives to facilitate the advancement of workers' interests while helping companies to meet their business aspirations. Hence, the Labour Movement serves as the nexus of industry, company and workforce transformation and must continue to innovate to be the champion for workers and help them to stay competitive and relevant.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Vivienne Tan was a Lead Industry Training Officer at the NTUC Training and Placement (T&P) Division at the point of writing this paper. Vivienne has more than 15 years of experience in manpower and industrial relations work with stints in MOM, WDA and MTI. Her research interest is in the training and placement ecosystem approach to support business and workforce transformation.



### Dawn Seow Yuen Liw

Dawn Liw is a Principal Industry Training Officer at the NTUC Training and Placement (T&P) Division. As part of the bigger team at NTUC Industry Training and Transformation, she works with unions in supporting companies' transformation journey, as well as workers' capability and upskilling plans.

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# Can We Do More to Help PMEs Overcome Disruption and Discrimination in the Next Normal?

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Patrick Tay

## Abstract

*This paper examines the key concerns and needs of professionals, managers and executives (PMEs) in Singapore. The top concerns of PMEs are lack of job security and the need for greater support in employment and training opportunities. Drawing on the findings from the joint National Trades Union Congress-Singapore National Employers Federation PME Taskforce report, this paper highlights key insights from the taskforce's engagements and follows with a condensed discussion of recommendations to enhance the employment and employability of PMEs.*



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## Introduction

The global labour market and work landscape are constantly in a state of flux, brought about by rapid developments and transformations in technology, geopolitical structures and demographics (ILO & OECD, 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic has further accelerated these changes and brought about unprecedented global economic disruptions and pushed Singapore into an economic downturn, putting jobs at risk and causing retrenchments to rise in 2020.

Professionals, managers, and executives (PMEs), especially those aged 40s to 60s, have become an increasingly vulnerable group — not only in securing a job when they are retrenched but in keeping their employment. The National Trades Union Congress-Singapore National Employers Federation (NTUC-SNEF) PME Taskforce (PME TF), which I co-chaired, had engaged over 10,000 PMEs, employers and stakeholders since its formation in October 2020 to understand PMEs' key concerns and needs at the workplace. We drafted and submitted a 60-page report which included a deck of recommendations to the Minister for Manpower in 2021. It was found that PMEs were most concerned with the lack of job security, and needed greater support in employment and training opportunities (National Trades Union Congress & Singapore National Employers Federation, 2021). More must be done to strengthen PMEs' employment and employability while ensuring that they can compete fairly and effectively to meet the manpower and skills demand of employers in a dynamic labour landscape.

## Key Insights From NTUC-SNEF PME Taskforce Engagements

Through a series of online surveys, focus group discussions and engagement sessions with PMEs across all ages and occupations, the PME TF found that PMEs are most concerned with the lack of job security and require greater support in employment and training opportunities. These concerns and challenges are felt more acutely by mature PMEs in their 40s to 60s. Even as businesses transform to ensure business sustainability, the skillsets possessed by PMEs, including younger PMEs, may be at risk of becoming obsolete. In short, the half-life of skills is shortening and is further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Protection Against Job Losses and Support in Employment and Job-Related Training

PMEs generally need protection against job losses and more support in employment and job-related training. Based on a survey done in December 2020 with 3,500 PMEs recruited through NTUC's networks and events, the top three areas in which PMEs need the most help are support in employment opportunities (70%), protection against job losses (60%) and help in job-related training (50%).

## Fears and Anxieties of PMEs Across Different Age Groups and Occupations

Younger PMEs, aged below 40, are worried that their skills will become irrelevant in the fast-changing economic landscape but are unaware of future skills requirements. They recognise that new trends and technologies such as sustainability and artificial intelligence will have a significant impact on jobs of the future. However, they are not fully aware of the skillsets required for new growth areas and opined that their employers are not investing enough to equip them with relevant skills to prepare them for the future. They are keen on acquiring new and/or additional skillsets in their own time or through the support of their employers. In addition, they find career progression as one of the key challenges in the workplace.

Mature PMEs, aged 40–60, on the other hand, found it difficult to search for employment and attribute that to their age. In an online survey with 1,000 PMEs in April 2021, it was highlighted that as compared to PMEs who are younger (20 to 40 years old), a higher percentage of the mature PMEs (40 to 60 years old) attributed their age as a disadvantage to them in the workplace (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*PMEs’ Perception of Career Opportunities*

	20 to 40 years (n=569)	41 to 60 years (n=406)
Agree that there are career opportunities out there for them	85%	67%
Confident in getting a job with current skills and capabilities	74%	58%
Think that they are easily replaceable due to age	27%	63%
Think that it is difficult to find a job as companies are not open to older workers	21%	71%

In another online survey conducted in July 2021 on 1,000 mature PMEs, majority of mature PMEs highlighted difficulties in employment search and attributed age as the key reason. Half of them expressed that they faced some form of discrimination during the job search or at their workplaces and some also had the perception that companies are not being open to hiring workers who are aged 40 and above (see Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Sentiments of Mature PMEs*

	Mature PMEs aged 40 to 60 years old (n=1000)
Felt that it was difficult to find another job that matches their skills or interests	85%
Felt the key reason was that companies were not being open to workers who are 40 years and above	67%
Opined that it will take more than six months to secure their next job	49%
Perceived workplace discrimination when applying for jobs	24%
Experienced discrimination at work	26%

**Recommendations**

Based on the insights above, the NTUC-SNEF PME TF had made nine recommendations under four key thrusts to address PMEs’ concerns.

I will focus on two areas in this paper — 1) Entrench progressive and fair employment/workplace practices and 2) Support PMEs with career progression and skills upgrading.

**Entrench Progressive and Fair Employment/Workplace Practices**

To allay the concerns of PMEs on job security, we will need to ensure that the local PMEs receive fair opportunities and treatment when seeking employment or in their workplace. It is important that we improve the Human Resource (HR) standards and strengthen enforcement against egregious companies.

Studies have found that HR management practices have a positive impact on workers’ satisfaction and reduce the perception of discrimination (Russo et al., 2020). In addition, PMEs also want more actions taken against the small number of employers who are recalcitrant in their workplace practices. Between 2014 and the first half of 2021, the Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices (TAFEP) received an average of 379 workplace discrimination complaints each year. Out of these complaints, an average of 41 employers were found to be in breach of the Tripartite Guidelines on Fair Employment Practices (TGFEPP) and had their work pass privileges suspended each year (Ministry of Manpower, 2021b).

### **Improve HR Standards**

With about 90% of HR professionals across different wage levels in Singapore being locals (Ministry of Manpower, 2021a), the HR industry is a sector with a strong Singaporean core. The HR department in a company is key in helping to develop its employees, set the company's culture and ensure employees' satisfaction. Based on the HR Manpower Study commissioned by Workforce Singapore in 2017 involving more than 800 companies, it was revealed that many HR teams are inundated with transactional tasks such as recruitment and payroll (Ministry of Manpower & Workforce Singapore, 2017). Many SMEs have highlighted that their HR could be better equipped with the necessary knowledge to manage HR issues, as well as build and entrench fair and progressive employment/workplace practices.

Following the tripartite taskforce which was set up in 2015 to develop a national HR professional certification framework, the Institute for Human Resource Professionals (IHRP) certification was launched to qualify HR professionals based on their skills and knowledge (Ministry of Manpower & Workforce Singapore, 2017). To date, it is noted that the percentage of HR professionals who are IHRP certified remains low at about 10% of the entire HR fraternity in Singapore (National Trades Union Congress & Singapore National Employers Federation, 2021). There is an urgent need to level up the competencies of our HR professionals in Singapore and encourage more HR professionals to acquire the relevant certification.

For small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) with lean manpower, shared HR services should be introduced so that SMEs can adopt fair and progressive employment/workplace practices.

### **Strengthen Enforcement Against Egregious Companies**

Besides improving HR standards, stronger enforcement and stiffer penalties against errant companies with discriminatory hiring practices should go hand in hand. While many measures and policies have been put in place over the years, more needs to be done to penalise the small proportion of egregious companies that exploit the system, so that local SMEs continue to receive fair opportunities and treatment while maintaining Singapore's economic competitiveness.

Many SMEs have highlighted that there is currently a lack of protection from reprisal for reporting or whistleblowing. As such, individuals, including HR practitioners and management staff, may not step forward to report against their employers for fear that they may be subjected to further acts of discrimination/victimisation. It is therefore important to put in place a safe whistleblowing policy and procedures.

By the same token, there are currently no remedies for victims of discrimination as employers are only penalised through the suspension of Work Pass privileges and there is no avenue for an individual to seek redress except for unfair dismissal. The Tripartite Committee on Workplace Fairness can take cognisance of these points while scoping and promulgating the legislative and non-legislative options to improve and entrench workplace fairness.

### **Support SMEs With Career Progression and Skills Upgrading**

To remain relevant in an ever-changing economy, SMEs will need to learn and re-skill throughout their career to keep up with existing and new job requirements emerging from the continuous technological change (Bughin et al., 2018). A study found that providing employee training and reskilling tend to increase older employees' intention to continue working (Armstrong-Stassen & Ursel, 2009).

Today, findings have shown that while business leaders are most concerned about skills mismatch, only 50.9% of the business leaders sent their workers for training in the past 6 months (Yang et al., in press), highlighting a limitation in investment into employees' skills upgrading by businesses.

There is hence a need to enhance employment and employability through supporting SMEs with career progression and skills upgrading, so that SMEs can achieve better work prospects.

This can be done through the Company Training Committee (CTC) initiative launched by NTUC coupled with stronger collaboration between tripartite partners and Institutes of Higher Learning (IHLs).

### ***Develop Structured Jobs and Skills Plans for SMEs Through Company Training Committees***

Helping to improve workers' wages, welfare and work prospects remains core to the work of the Labour Movement. In particular, the CTC was one of the initiatives launched in April 2019 by NTUC to support workers in achieving better wages and work prospects through company training.

The CTC comprises both management and worker/union representatives. It is a collaborative and consultative approach towards identifying the skills and training needed for employees in order to support the company's strategic vision/direction and keeping up with industry transformation. The CTC acts as a coordinating effort to communicate and implement training plans to build new competencies, close existing skills gaps and enhance productivity through adaptive, technical, and technology skills to realise the company's vision for the future. In the same vein, the CTC enhances and implements workforce upgrading plans, to help prepare employees for the evolution of jobs and stay relevant with new skills. CTC may also be deployed to focus on the disrupted, newly created or in-demand SME job roles and curate structured training plans to better prepare the affected workers.

### ***Strengthen the Nexus Between the Tripartite Partners and IHLs to Prepare the Workforce for Economic Transitions and Investment Pipelines***

The shift in what the workforce needs is already underway, and the lacuna will continue to expand with the speed of technological advancement. Apart from moving towards a greater recognition of different aptitudes and talents, the education system should also impart the skills and knowledge imperative for the future and prepare future generations to thrive in this changing landscape. The tripartite and industry partners can work with IHLs to ensure that the critical training needs are incorporated into the curriculum and bridge the learning gap between what students learn and what they are expected to know to be job ready.

### **Limitations**

This practitioner insight does not cover all the recommendations made by the SME TF. As there was a special focus on the mature SMEs in their 40s to 60s in the SME TF report, the recommendations might not have comprehensively addressed all concerns by other segments of the SMEs, including the younger SMEs.

### **Conclusion**

As Singapore continues to face demographic shifts over the next decade, our workforce will become more educated and SMEs will make up a higher percentage of the workforce. At the same time, our population is ageing, and the global economy is also undergoing a groundbreaking transition. The geopolitical environment, which has allowed Singapore to thrive over the past 50 years, has changed, leaving us to confront the prospect of a much more bifurcated and fragmented world. We will need to transform urgently to stay competitive, while ensuring that we continue to meet the job aspirations of Singaporeans.

In the near term, we need to address the fears and anxieties of SMEs, especially our precarious mature SMEs. We need to eradicate age and nationality discrimination and strengthen the Singaporean core. At the same time, we need to ensure that our SMEs are ready for the new economy in the next normal post-pandemic.

In the longer term, there is a need to remove the dichotomy between SMEs and non-SMEs and do away with this rank-and-file and SME classification. Non-SMEs today may be promoted to become SMEs in the future and SMEs will become the new majority of the Singapore workforce with rising skills and educational qualifications. This differentiation between rank-and-file and SME workers will eventually become blurred as the nature of jobs evolves, and as existing rank-and-file workers continue to progress in their careers.

Policymakers who wish to help SMEs will need to continue to review policies and identify ways to strengthen SMEs' employment and employability, and ensure that SMEs have access to a level playing field for jobs, while balancing companies' manpower needs. Employers will need to be more progressive in their workplace practices and invest in the skills development of their people. SMEs, especially the mature SMEs, will need to embrace lifelong learning and be adaptable to meet the skills demanded by employers to support business transformation and growth. Fundamentally, societal change is necessary to ensure the longevity of our SME workforce (Tay, 2022).

As we pivot and transform to the next normal of work, employers and workers alike will have to find new ways and new avenues to navigate the kinks and curves that the uneven and uncertain future presents.

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Patrick Tay is Assistant Secretary-General of National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) and Director of NTUC's Legal and Strategy. He is an elected Member of Parliament (Pioneer SMC) and chairs the Government Parliamentary Committee for Education. He co-chaired the NTUC-SNEF SME Taskforce and is currently serving as Executive Secretary of the United Workers of Electronics & Electrical Industries (UWEEI) and the Singapore Manual & Mercantile Workers' Union (SMMWU).

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# Supporting Youth to Realise Their Aspirations and Address Their Needs

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Wendy Tan

## Abstract

*This practitioner note examines the support Young NTUC, the youth wing of the National Trades Union Congress, offers to youth in Singapore. In such uncertain times and due to the wide variety of influences of which creates diversified new goals and values in life, youth's motivations, needs and aspirations are constantly shifting, possibly on opposite ends of the spectrum. Most notably, mental well-being has come to the forefront of priorities amongst youth. This practitioner note will explain Young NTUC's efforts in engaging youth to support them on their career and adulthood journey. Harnessing the strengths within the NTUC ecosystem and collaborating with like-minded partners, Young NTUC provides resources to help youth navigate their career journey confidently and develop their personal and professional selves. These efforts are continuously revised to holistically address issues of youth, with the latest effort being a year-long engagement to better address their work-life needs.*



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## Introduction

Whenever we speak of the future, we turn to the youth. It is imperative that they are “empowered to realise their potential” so that they may “lead change” and will be “a vital and valuable investment for now and the future” (Lifaka, 2020), says Emilia Monjowa Lifaka, Cameroonian Politician, Chairperson of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association Executive Committee and Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly of Cameroon. Thus, it is encouraging to see youth engagement today expanding, its results evident in the progress in sustainable development, peace (Wickramanayake, 2020), human rights, and so much more. However, being the traditionally under-represented population (Hodder & Vandaele, 2019), youth face challenges and barriers that hinder them from reaching their true potential (Wickramanayake, 2020).

Unions around the world help to address the challenges faced by youth and support them to achieve their potential. They try to engage the youth by giving them that extra boost to realise their potential in the workforce. In Singapore, we have the Young NTUC, the official youth wing of the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC). It is an organisation by the youth, of the youth and for the youth (Union of Telecoms Employees of Singapore, 2005). Launched in 2005, with over 150,000 members aged 35 years and below today, Young NTUC offers a multitude of purposeful activities and opportunities to allow youth to thrive at work. This was followed by establishing nEbO (nobody Enjoys being Ordinary) in 2007. nEbO serves as a lifestyle club that actively reaches out to youth between 12 and 25 years of age, socially engaging them by creating a vibrant community that guides and cultivates them to be Work-Ready, World-Ready and Life-Ready. The youth arms of NTUC collectively seek to help youth discover their passion and purpose by creating different experiences and opportunities outside their education sphere, to prepare them beyond school and enable them to confidently develop into young working adults. We are also a channel for youth to build friendships and communities with like-minded individuals, bonding together to achieve common goals (National Trades Union Congress, 2018). Together, Young NTUC and nEbO complement each other to support our youth through their different life stages from student to adulthood, and aid in the development of their professional and personal growth.

It is vital that we continue with this effort because youth are the future of our workforce. Moreover, the importance of growing the pipeline of young union leaders cannot be ignored: they are indispensable in helping the unions to stay relevant (Lin, 2013) and consequently help the Labour Movement stay relevant in the future. It is also critical to acknowledge that youth today have different career aspirations and may embark on non-traditional work (National Trades Union Congress & Singapore University of Technology and Design, 2022). Other than evolving ourselves to remain relevant to them, it is critical to innovate the engagement and development of young leaders for the Labour Movement.

## Motivations, Needs and Aspirations of Youth

Today’s youth spans across two “generations” — the Millennials (born between 1980 – 1996), and the Generation Zs (Gen Zs) (born between 1997 – 2012). Shaped by the context and experiences during their formative years, different cohorts of youth exhibit different work motivations and attitudes. A Youth Survey by TODAY (online mainstream media) showed that 59 per cent of respondents, between the age of 18 and 35, believed the top indicator of material success is to “have enough money to retire early” (Ong, 2021). In an annual survey conducted by Young NTUC, “remuneration” moved up the ranking and was listed as the top factor in choosing a job in 2022, while work-life balance came in closely in second place. This is very possibly motivated by the exacerbated financial challenges witnessed by young workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Only 4 out of every 100 youth intend to remain in their current jobs and positions (National Trades Union Congress & Singapore University of Technology and Design, 2022). Rather than frowning upon this behaviour as being less loyal to one’s organisation, we have to understand that youth job-hop in the hopes of attaining better wages and career mobility.

Worryingly, for today's youth, the trends in subjective well-being have been decreasing. Both the happiness index and life satisfaction index have dropped from 5.45 in 2010 to 4.78 in 2019, and 7.64 in 2010 to 6.44 in 2019 respectively. This may be explained by "rapid structural changes, uncertainties, and competition in the global economy impacting Singapore, a small and open economy-society" (National Youth Council, 2021b).

Naturally, the topic of mental health has garnered much more attention since COVID-19, and youth are now more aware and vocal about such issues. In a research study conducted in partnership by NTUC and Singapore University of Technology and Design (2022), when asked about the top challenges and needs of youth, what came up top were career-related matters and mental well-being. In an annual survey conducted by Young NTUC, 30 per cent of 1,000 respondents indicated a stress level of "4" with 1 being least stressed and 4 being most stressed; and 2 in 5 respondents cited work stressors related to lack of work boundaries as primary stressors at work. These included "poor work-life balance", "long working hours", "heavy workload" and "blurred lines between work and personal life". "Feeling undervalued" also ranked high in terms of work stressors, and had been a consistent stressor highlighted by youth in 2021 and 2022. Correspondingly, in National Youth Council's COVID-19 special edition survey, it was also reflected that the pandemic has had an impactful effect on many youth (National Youth Council, 2021a). Their perceived mental wellbeing has decreased further from 2019's survey.

While Singapore has taken many steps to combat the stigmatisation of mental health, more needs to be done. What then is restricting the effectiveness of mental health initiatives? Many organisations reach out to workplaces to engage employers to help build resilience for mental health in the workplace, however, such initiatives have low take-up rates due to the financial cost on the company, especially for SMEs (Zalizan, 2022). In universities, 1 out of 3 respondents felt that information on student-led initiatives and mental well-being workshops are not far-reaching enough (Ang, 2022).

In the next segment, we will share how Young NTUC is evolving, being cognisant of the growing multitude of challenges and barriers that the youth of today face, and developing initiatives on supporting mental well-being in the workplaces, to better support them.

### **Key Observations by Young NTUC on Youth and How Young NTUC is Supporting the Youth**

To remain cognisant of evolving youth's needs, we constantly gather ground sentiments through our interactions with youth to create and curate programmes and resources that are relevant to them. For example, in 2016, taking into consideration our youth's feedback on the lack of networking opportunities, Young NTUC launched the Youth Career Network, comprising a pool of volunteers with diverse industry experience as career mentors for youth. Today, we have over 450 volunteer career mentors on board and their experiences have benefitted more than 12,000 youth since. Additionally, the LIT (Learning is Triggered) Career Series was created in 2017 to provide young workers and fresh graduates with the knowledge and skillsets that they need to realise their career aspirations. When the pandemic came, we responded immediately, shifting to online activities, and providing a one-stop platform for young job seekers seeking coaching, job opportunities, or connections with industry professionals.

In 2020, through engaging young workers, we realised it was necessary to advocate for better mental well-being in the workplace; and more importantly, act on it. Young NTUC and NTUC LearningHub joined hands to curate a first-in-market Singapore Workforce Skills Qualifications (WSQ) Certified Training in Peer-To-Peer Mental Well-Being at Work programme in 2021. The course equips working adults with basic psychological first-aid and peer support skills. Beyond the provision of training, Young NTUC also conducted a series of safe space conversations and peer supporter learning circles to further advocate the destigmatising of mental health. To date, over 500 individuals have been trained as peer supporters under this programme, and the community continues to grow.

## Conclusion

Compared to the previous generations, it is no longer about surviving, instead, it is about thriving (Neo et al., 2022) and thriving with purpose. Coupled with the effects of the pandemic, youth require more support than ever if we were to create a sustainable labour force. This not only applies to our local landscape, but Asian countries around us have also been feeling the impact of globalisation, going through a rapid structural transformation, and moving beyond simply surviving (Brooks & Go, 2012).

This year, in response to the key challenges of youth identified in the study by NTUC and Singapore University of Technology and Design, we have embarked on a year-long journey to engage 10,000 youth aged 18 – 25 years old through a dedicated NTUC Youth Taskforce. The taskforce will help us gain deeper insights into the work-life needs of young individuals who will be entering or have recently entered the workforce. The whole of NTUC will continue to innovate to remain steadfast in our mission to better the lives of every worker, including workers of the future and young working adults, supporting them in every aspect of their lives.

## BIOGRAPHY



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Wendy currently leads Youth Development at the National Trades Union Congress. Previously a SG Youth Action Plan panel member, she mentored teams who participated in the Youth Action Challenge (Jobs and Future of Work track). Currently a member in the 17th National Youth Council, Wendy aspires to help youth navigate the different phases of their working lives, from discovering their purposeful career paths to securing better career prospects as young working adults.

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# ADVISORY BOARD MEMBERS



## Mr Ng Chee Meng

*Secretary-General*

*National Trades Union Congress, Singapore  
Chairman of the Advisory Board*

Mr Ng Chee Meng was elected as the Secretary-General of the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) on 22 May 2018. As the NTUC Secretary-General, Mr Ng advocates and pushes for initiatives that will lead to better wages, welfare and work prospects for workers. He championed the formation of Company Training Committees whereby unions and management work together to identify disrupted jobs and new roles, and curate training for workers to keep up with industry transformation.

Mr Ng drove the setting up of the NTUC Job Security Council to provide pre-emptive assistance for at-risk workers through training and job matching. He also led the formation of the Professionals, Managers and Executives (PMEs) Taskforce to provide greater protection for local PMEs and strengthen their collective voice. Mr Ng was formerly the Minister in Prime Minister's Office and before that, was the Minister for Education (Schools) and Second Minister for Transport. Prior to his Cabinet appointment, Mr Ng was the Chief of Defence Force for Singapore.



## Mr Patrick Tay

*Assistant Secretary-General*

*National Trades Union Congress, Singapore*

Mr Patrick Tay is Assistant Secretary-General of the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) and Member of Parliament of Pioneer Single Member Constituency (SMC). He chairs the Government Parliamentary Committee for Education and co-chairs the Financial Sector Tripartite Committee. As Director of NTUC's Legal and Strategy departments, he represents the Labour Movement in tripartite workgroups to review/update employment and industrial relations legislation and has been pivotal in lobbying for the many changes to manpower related laws and policies in Singapore.

He also co-chaired the NTUC-SNEF PME Taskforce and is currently serving as Executive Secretary of the United Workers of Electronics & Electrical Industries (UWEEI) and Singapore Manual & Mercantile Workers' Union (SMMWU). Representing workers and the Labour Movement, he also sits on several Government boards, national institutions, and tripartite committees.



## Professor Tan Eng Chye

*President*

*National University of Singapore, Singapore*

Professor Tan Eng Chye was appointed President of the National University of Singapore (NUS) on 1 January 2018. He is the University's 5th president, and the 23rd leader to head Singapore's oldest higher education institution.

Professor Tan is a passionate and award-winning educator. He was a pioneer architect of the current academic system in NUS, and has seeded many initiatives such as the Special Programme in Science, University Scholars Programme, University Town Residential College Programme, Grade-free Year, and Technology-enhanced Education. He was recognised with the University Teaching Award for Innovative Teaching in 1998, and other teaching awards.



### **Professor Hoon Hian Teck**

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Professor Hoon Hian Teck is Professor of Economics at the Singapore Management University. He specialises in macroeconomics, international trade, and economic growth. How Singapore managed to grow without being caught in the middle-income trap and understanding what is needed to generate economic prosperity as a mature economy has occupied his mind in recent years.

He is author of *Economic Dynamism, Openness, and Inclusion: How Singapore Can Make the Transition from an Era of Catch-up Growth to Life in a Mature Economy* (2019). He is a past Vice-President of the Economic Society of Singapore (2002-2004) and co-editor of *Singapore Economic Review* (2002-2020).



### **Mr Alexander C. Melchers**

*Vice-President  
Singapore National Employers Federation, Singapore*

Mr Alexander Melchers is Vice-President of Singapore National Employers Federation (SNEF) and Member of the Advisory Council of the Singaporean-German Chamber of Industry and Commerce (SGC). Other current and past Tripartite appointments: NWC since 2006; Chairman of the Tripartite Implementation Workgroups on Employability of Older Workers (Retirement and Re-employment); Director in Institute for Human Resource Professionals (IHRP); Board Member of Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices (TAFEP).

After vocational training in international trade, he worked in Venezuela before studying at the University of St. Gallen. He worked in brand management with P&G; joined C. Melchers Group of Companies in Singapore in 1997. C. Melchers is a diversified trading, development and services company established in 1806. Headquarter in Bremen, Germany and offices across Asia. Married with four children.



### **Dr Beh Swan Gin**

*Chairman  
Economic Development Board, Singapore*

Dr Beh Swan Gin is the Chairman of the Singapore Economic Development Board (EDB). He is a board director for Enterprise Singapore, Human Capital Leadership Institute, and Singapore Exchange Limited. He also chairs the board of Ascendas Funds Management (S) Ltd. He was Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Law from July 2012 to November 2014 and was Managing Director of EDB from August 2008 to June 2012.

Dr Beh is a medical doctor by training and graduated from the National University of Singapore. He is also a Sloan Fellow with a Master of Science in Management from Stanford University's Graduate School of Business and completed the Advanced Management Programme at the Harvard Business School.

# EDITORIAL BOARD MEMBERS



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Dr Chew Soon Beng is a Senior Associate at the Centre for Arts and Social Sciences at Nanyang Technological University (NTU). He is also an adjunct senior fellow at RSIS at NTU. Dr Chew has been Program Professor at School of Public Affairs at China's University of Science and Technology since 2012. He had been a full professor of Economics at NTU from 1999 to 2018. He received his PhD from the University of Western Ontario, Canada. Current research includes Union Social Responsibility and Strategic Collective Bargaining. He is one of three editors of a book entitled *Political, Economic and Social Dimensions of Markets: A Global Insight*, published by World Scientific in 2022.



## **Dr Gog Soon Joo**

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Dr Gog Soon Joo is the Chief Skills Officer at SkillsFuture Singapore, a statutory board under the Ministry of Education. She oversees the skills development system in Singapore, through working with tripartite partners in the identification, dissemination and measurement of the skills needs of Singapore economy. She works with global researchers, EdTech, HRTech and CareerTech partners in shaping the skills ecosystem. Her research interests include capitalism in the digital economy, new economy firms, skills ecosystems and skills policies. She has published on topics related to inclusive skills ecosystem, empowerment of adult learners, skills-use and job-design. She chairs the Singapore National Steering Committee for the OECD-PIAAC study, and she is a member of the International Committee of Experts for UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities.



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Associate Professor Ho Kong Weng is Associate Professor of Economics at the Singapore Management University (SMU). His research areas include meritocracy and inequality, career opportunities and subjective well-being, and economic-social issues related to the Singapore society. He has served as principal investigator or research advisor to the Ministry of Social and Family Development, National Youth Council, Strategic Group in the Prime Minister's Office, and the National Trades Union Congress. He teaches Macroeconomics of Income Distribution, and an experiential course Family and the Society. He has published on topics related to growth, inequality, happiness of youths, and challenges to social mobility in Singapore.



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Associate Professor Intan Azura Mokhtar is Associate Professor and Deputy Director of the Community Leadership and Social Innovation Centre (CLASIC) in the Singapore Institute of Technology. Dr Intan has more than 20 years of teaching and academic experience, and has taught courses related to social context and innovation, change management, school and community leadership, and educational technology and policies, for Undergraduate and Masters degree programmes. Dr Intan has published widely on the above and has more than 60 publications to her name. She also served as an elected Member of Parliament in the 12th and 13th parliament of Singapore, from 2011 to 2020.



### **Professor Jack Qiu**

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Professor Jack Linchuan Qiu is Professor in the Department of Communications and New Media, at the National University of Singapore. He has published more than 100 research articles and chapters and 10 books in English and Chinese including *Goodbye iSlave: A Manifesto for Digital Abolition* (University of Illinois Press, 2016) and *Working-Class Network Society* (MIT Press, 2009). Recipient of the C. Edwin Baker Award for the Advancement of Scholarship on Media, Markets and Democracy, he collects workers' voices and conducts case studies in various Asian contexts, while collaborating with Fairwork and Platform Cooperativism Consortium, to promote labour sustainability in digital economies.

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## **Ms K. Thanaletchimi**

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Ms K. Thanaletchimi is an elected Vice President of the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) Central Committee where she chairs the Essential Domestic Services Cluster and NTUC Women's Committee. As President of the Healthcare Services Employees' Union, she was a Nominated Member of Parliament from 2016 to 2018 and leveraged her experiences as a veteran unionist to champion workers' interests. She received the National Day Award (Public Service Medal) in 2019 for her contributions. She also plays an integral role in rallying tripartite stakeholders to advocate training and job redesign so workers can enjoy fulfilling careers in the Healthcare Sector.



## **Professor Lim Sun Sun**

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Professor Sun Sun Lim is Professor of Communication and Technology and Head of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences at the Singapore University of Technology and Design. She has extensively researched the social impact of technology, delving into technology domestication, digital disruptions and smart city technologies. She authored *Transcendent Parenting - Raising Children in the Digital Age* (Oxford University Press, 2020) and co-edited *The Oxford Handbook of Mobile Communication and Society* (Oxford University Press, 2020). She serves on thirteen journal editorial boards and was named to the inaugural Singapore 100 Women in Tech list in 2020.



## **Mr Mike Thiruman**

*General Secretary  
Singapore Teachers' Union, Singapore*

Mr Mike Thiruman is the General Secretary of the Singapore Teachers' Union (STU). Mike is an educator with more than 25 years of experience in education research, teaching, curriculum development, educational project management and professional development. As STU General Secretary, Mr Mike Thiruman serves in various committees in the Labour Movement in Singapore and internationally. He is currently in the Public Service and Essential Services Cluster as well as the Membership Committee. He is also on the panel of union representatives for public service disciplinary proceedings as well as the Industrial Arbitration Court. He represented the Trade Union Advisory Committee to the OECD (TUAC) at a Teaching and Learning International Assessment (TALIS) Board meeting.

**Associate Professor Randolph Tan**

*Director of Centre for Applied Research  
Singapore University of Social Sciences, Singapore*

Associate Professor Randolph Tan currently serves as the Director of the Centre for Applied Research at the Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS). His research interest lies in applied labour market research, changing demands in skills and the acquisition of in-demand skills to facilitate workers' transition to adjacent higher-skilled roles. Associate Professor Tan has conducted analysis on the changing profile of the labour market and has expressed his views on the Singapore Government's Budget on productivity, CPF, and the employment credit scheme.

**Dr Samuel Chng**

*Research Fellow and Head of Urban Psychology Lab  
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Dr Samuel Chng is a Research Fellow and heads the Urban Psychology Lab in the Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities at the Singapore University of Technology and Design. He is an applied social psychologist and his research focuses on human behaviour and decisions in cities across a range of areas including mobility, sustainability and wellbeing. His work is multidisciplinary and applied in nature, focusing on delivering practical and policy impacts.

# EDITORIAL TEAM

## General Editor



### Mr Patrick Tay

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Mr Patrick Tay is Assistant Secretary-General of the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) and Director of NTUC's Legal and Strategy. He is an elected Member of Parliament (Pioneer Single Member Constituency) and chairs the Government Parliamentary Committee for Education. He co-chaired the NTUC-SNEF PME Taskforce and is currently serving as Executive Secretary of the United Workers of Electronics & Electrical Industries (UWEEI) and the Singapore Manual & Mercantile Workers' Union (SMMWU).

## Founding Editors



### Dr Silin Yang

*Assistant Director of Strategy  
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As an Assistant Director (Strategy) of the National Trades Union Congress, Dr Silin Yang conducts strategic research studies to identify emerging trends that impact workers and the Labour Movement. Silin holds a Doctor of Philosophy and has more than 15 years of experience in the education sector. Her current research focuses on future human capital, underemployment and gig economy.



### Dr Reuben Ng

*Assistant Professor of Lee Kuan Yew  
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National University of Singapore,  
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A behavioural and data scientist trained at NUS, Oxford and Yale, Dr Reuben spent 16 years in government, consulting and research. He is an expert in ageism, social gerontology, quantitative social science, and credited with creating innovative techniques for measuring societal perceptions that are applied to strategic policy communications. More details: <https://www.drreubenng.com/>

## Editorial Associate



### Dr Yiwen Tan

*Research Fellow of Lee Kuan Yew  
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Dr Yi Wen is a research fellow at the National University of Singapore. With a doctorate in psychology, his main area of work involves ageing and retirement. He is also involved in research on risk perceptions and mental health. Dr Yi Wen aspires to pursue academic excellence with interdisciplinary methods and produce unique contributions to the wider literature.

## Associate Editor



### Ms Kang Ruihan

*Principal Specialist of Strategy  
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As a Principal Specialist (Strategy) of the National Trades Union Congress, Ms Ruihan conducts strategic research to support the development of strategies for NTUC and analyses key issues, local and regional trends that impact workers. Her experience and work include analysis on skills and training gaps, underemployment and the impact of technology on job opportunities.



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