



Uncovering Hidden Talent in Singapore

Redefining diversity to find the best hires. Age and gender bias may work against employers in one of the world's strongest economies.

Singapore's success as a regional hub for companies operating across Asia Pacific has been driven by proactive measures taken by the Government to make it as easy to conduct business here as possible. Incentives for companies and workers alike have been implemented, giving the city state a reputation of being very "open," not only to local entrepreneurs and foreign investors, but also to new ways of managing workforce issues.

Along with Singapore's economic growth and relative stability has come a tightening of its labor pool at every level, making recruitment and retention the top two challenges repeatedly cited by HR practitioners in industry surveys and reports. As companies seek new ways of facing these issues, the concept of "diversity" is getting more attention. However, the way companies define diversity – focusing primarily on foreign workers - makes their vision narrow so they fail to see some of the best sources of talent in the market.

For example, despite steps taken by the Government to make it as easy as possible for women to return to work after having a baby (e.g. providing tax relief on domestic help), several organizations are not yet maximizing this, failing to proactively plan on supporting women execs during these transitional periods, even though it is becoming widely accepted around the world that their communications skills and other sensibilities make them great leaders. Specifically, many companies do not provide the flexible work environments that enable women to excel in their roles while managing the demands of raising a family.

Part-time or flexi-schedules, telecommuting, and other programs can go a long way in retaining existing female staff as well as opening doors for other workers who can help fill in talent gaps. One such group includes those aged 60-65, who might be dismissed as being "over the hill" or "past their prime," but who bring a wealth of professional and life experience to any organization willing to help upgrade their skills.

In fact, it is indeed flexibility – not only in terms of the work arrangements companies provide employees, but also in terms of the mindset they adopt towards various demographic groups, people's work history and skill sets – that can help Singaporean HR teams move away from a "straight jacket" approach towards recruitment and truly benefit from the Government's initiatives. I encourage clients to be open minded about:

- **Women in the Workplace:** Women comprise 57% of Singapore's work force, and are gaining visibility in professional roles. With unemployment averaging below 3% and a "talent vacuum" emerging as local professionals go north for positions in China, providing opportunities for women to grow into leadership roles is a matter of survival for companies wanting to thrive here in the future. Remaining misperceptions about women's abilities or dedication to their careers are eroding quickly as they continue to make significant contributions to the economy as well as society as a whole.

- **Employability of “Older” Workers:** Bias against workers over 60 – such as assuming that they are less productive and potentially more costly (due, for instance, to concerns about rising health care costs) - does not take into consideration the value of their loyalty and adaptability, let alone their significant experience. I encourage clients to give them adequate ramp up time, as they would any new employee. A small investment in retraining or supplementing their skills can reap large rewards.
- **Transferable Skills:** As the talent wars continue, it is imperative for companies to look outside their own industry for people who have soft skills (e.g., people management), or functional expertise (e.g., marketing) that can cross over. The days of a bank seeking PR professionals who have only done PR for banks or financial services, for example, are coming to an end. HR managers in Asia are beginning to understand the need to be creative when evaluating resumes and matching them against mandates, but this practice should be more broadly adopted to remove any “industry bias” whenever possible.
- **Resume Gaps:** As the concept of “career” changes region-wide, people are becoming empowered to align their career paths with their personal goals. As a result, mid-career professionals are more apt to take time off to continue their education, travel, or pursue entrepreneurial endeavors, returning to the workforce with fresh perspectives and renewed energy. Again, recruiters must be careful not to rule out a candidate on the basis of perceived “gaps” on their resume, and to do a proper assessment of their career motivations.



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