



Every job is an opportunity for someone to put food on the table for their loved ones, say the writers, who add that essential jobs like being a cleaner are honest ones and we cannot let their circumstances diminish their children's inheritance. ST PHOTO: LIM YAGHUI

The 'invisibility cloak' has been lifted from essential workers

Unmasking our hidden heroes – what's next for cleaners, labourers, landscape workers?

Chong Ee Rong and Veera Sekaran

For The Straits Times

Ever notice the faces of the cleaning staff in your local foodcourt or shopping mall? Or the garden and landscape team who come regularly to your community to keep the space clean and green? Or the friendly faces of your local security team staying vigilant and keeping things orderly? Ever said thank you? Or nod? Or smile? For some of you, this may sound familiar, but it is more likely that the answer to these questions is a quizzical "no". We live in a garden city that prides itself on being efficient and effective, running like a well-oiled machine with almost clinical precision. This means that we have probably given very little thought to the people behind the scenes who make this possible – the human faces, stories, triumphs and tribulations behind this essential-services workforce. Covid-19 has brought about many difficulties and challenges, but it has also led to a deep sense of reflection for individuals and for societies collectively. From issues of inequality to the role of jobs, it

has cast the spotlight on many often overlooked and underserved communities. Recently, The Sunday Times ran a story based on survey results from 1,000 respondents on perceptions of essential jobs. The article sparked fierce debate about what defines a job as essential and started important conversations on the value of jobs. Critically, what is more important than categorisation is how we convert the conversations into tangible action, especially for the essential-services workforce, which has perennially been under-represented and undervalued despite the critical role they play in keeping Singapore going daily. Some of the survey findings are encouraging. Seventy-three per cent of respondents said that they "respect essential workers more now" when asked to what extent the pandemic has affected their views. Correspondingly, eight in 10 Singaporeans are willing to pay more for essential services such as cleaning and security if the extra amount goes to the workers directly. When asked what should be done to increase the salaries of essential workers, the majority of the respondents' responses were aligned with recommendations in

favour of an outcome-based sourcing model that would serve to reward productivity and quality work. So what can we do about it? **Doing better** While effort has been made to improve the livelihoods of essential workers even before Covid-19, it is timely to ride on the collective will of the nation to do more. Data cited from the Ministry of Manpower's report on the labour force in Singapore last year stated that by occupation type, a significant 86 per cent of workers employed as cleaners, labourers and related employees earn less than \$2,000 a month. Apart from the inextricable link to low wages, this group also faces associated pressures including low morale, lack of belonging and appreciation, and stagnating skillsets. Yes, the same workforce standing at the front lines of our battle with Covid-19. The Government introduced the Workfare Income Supplement in 2007 to top up the salaries of low-wage employees, and initiated the Progressive Wage Model (PWM) in 2015 to increase the wages of the workforce in the cleaning, security and landscape sectors by upgrading skills and improving productivity. Both schemes have been enhanced over

the years. In December, official guidelines were issued for companies to provide proper rest areas for outsourced workers, a basic but often overlooked provision. But is that enough? **Sustainable employment** Almost seven months ago, the Singapore Business Federation (SBF) launched a biennial report on Sustainable Employment – Achieving Purposeful Business Success Together. At the time, the world was dealing with emergent narratives related to rapid advances in technology, rising life expectancy as well as evolving societal values. At the heart of this was an issue that Singapore could not be complacent about – income inequality. The Sustainable Employment report was intended to inspire businesses to take action, provide recommendations to create a more vibrant and competitive business environment, and build a more inclusive future for all Singaporeans. In particular, the report focused on three groups of people who are most at risk: the less well-off, the elderly, and PMETs (professionals, managers, executives and technicians) who are vulnerable to job displacement. As co-chairs of the Low Income

Recognising that the terminology around "low-income" workers alluded to an unwanted self-fulfilling prophecy, we took a position to rename our working group as the Essential Services Sub-Committee in recognition of the often unseen but valuable work carried out by this group of workers. Renaming is not just a symbolic act. Embedded within such a gesture is the recognition that as a society we should appreciate workers.

Sub-Committee, our research was centred on the less well-off; more specifically, the group of employees who have by and large not been able to progress in tandem with the economic growth of Singapore because of the nature of their work. These workers typically deliver services that are essential for daily living in an urban city but are often taken for granted: cleaners, landscapers and security officers – sectors covered by the PWM. Recognising that the terminology around "low-income" workers alluded to an unwanted self-fulfilling prophecy, we took a position to rename our working group as the Essential Services Sub-Committee in recognition of the often unseen but valuable work carried out by this group of workers. Renaming is not just a symbolic act. Embedded within such a gesture is the recognition that as a society we should appreciate workers. It is about respect for those who take on jobs that others won't (regardless of nationality), who work as hard as any "well-educated" person. Every job is an opportunity for someone to put food on the table for their loved ones. Essential jobs like being a cleaner are honest ones and we cannot let their circumstances diminish their children's inheritance. The children from these families should be proud of their breadwinners regardless of any job they perform, and certainly when the jobs is that of an essential-services worker. Labelling a group as "low-wage workers" or "low-skilled workers" is a derogatory way of putting them down constantly. Perceptions of jobs and skills have to change. Our recommendations call on businesses to take steps to provide decent work conditions, dignity to jobs, inclusivity and meaningful opportunities for progression. **SHIFT FOCUS FROM COST TO QUALITY** Our first recommendation is for businesses to develop like-minded partnerships and select socially responsible vendors in outsourcing arrangements. Shift from pure cost considerations towards outcome- and value-based sourcing. In a society motivated by moving up, we can't be racing to the bottom on contracts and tenders. Work with clients and vendors who focus on outcomes and performance, while ensuring that fair value is paid for quality work, and, importantly, minimising the margin squeeze on service providers and (inevitably) their employees. **LEARN MORE, EARN MORE** The second recommendation is to transform jobs by changing work processes through innovation to enlarge job scopes, raise wages and provide better career progression. Leveraging technology to increase productivity can lead to better margins, which can be transferred

to employees in the form of wage increases. Job engagement could also provide broader and more varied job responsibilities, which could improve job satisfaction and build a multidisciplinary and robust workforce for growth. **Our social compact** Senior Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam in his national broadcast on Wednesday stated: "The economic challenges Singapore faces underscore the need for the country to strengthen its social compact and make sure no-one is left behind." One silver lining of Covid-19 is the symbolic lifting of the "invisibility cloak" around our cleaners, landscapers and security officers. Ground-up initiatives such as the distribution of care packs to cleaners and other similar acts of care have helped these workers feel valued and appreciated. The willingness to pay more for essential services also signals that citizens are starting to think about the fair value due to our essential workers, over and above what is mandated under the PWM. The role of businesses in addressing the financial and other pressures faced by essential workers through outcome-based sourcing, job redesign, training and upskilling, clear communications and more, is mission critical. This workforce stands at the front line of our Covid-19 battle, keeping us safe, clean and secure. While bread and butter issues have dominated business and consumer concerns since the onset of Covid-19, there is also recognition of the urgency of pivoting our perceptions and treatment of our essential-services workforce. Government initiatives to tackle inequality, build social cohesion and drive social mobility are one giant part of the equation. Equally so, businesses and the average Singaporean need to do our part. We need to be relentless in our pursuit to elevate and make meaningful improvements to the career and wage prospects of our cleaners, landscapers, security officers and other essential workers in similar roles in a sustainable manner. "It may lead to a small rise in the cost of services that we all pay for. But it is a small price for us to pay for better jobs and income security for those who need it the most, and a fair society," said Mr Tharman. The next time you walk past one of our essential workforce colleagues, how about some eye contact, or a nod, or a gesture and a simple word of thanks? They deserve not just our thanks, but also to step out of the shadows and into the light. stopinion@sph.com.sg * Ms Chong Ee Rong and Mr Veera Sekaran are co-chairs of the Essential Services Sub-Committee, SBF Sustainable Employment Report 2019, Singapore Business Federation.