

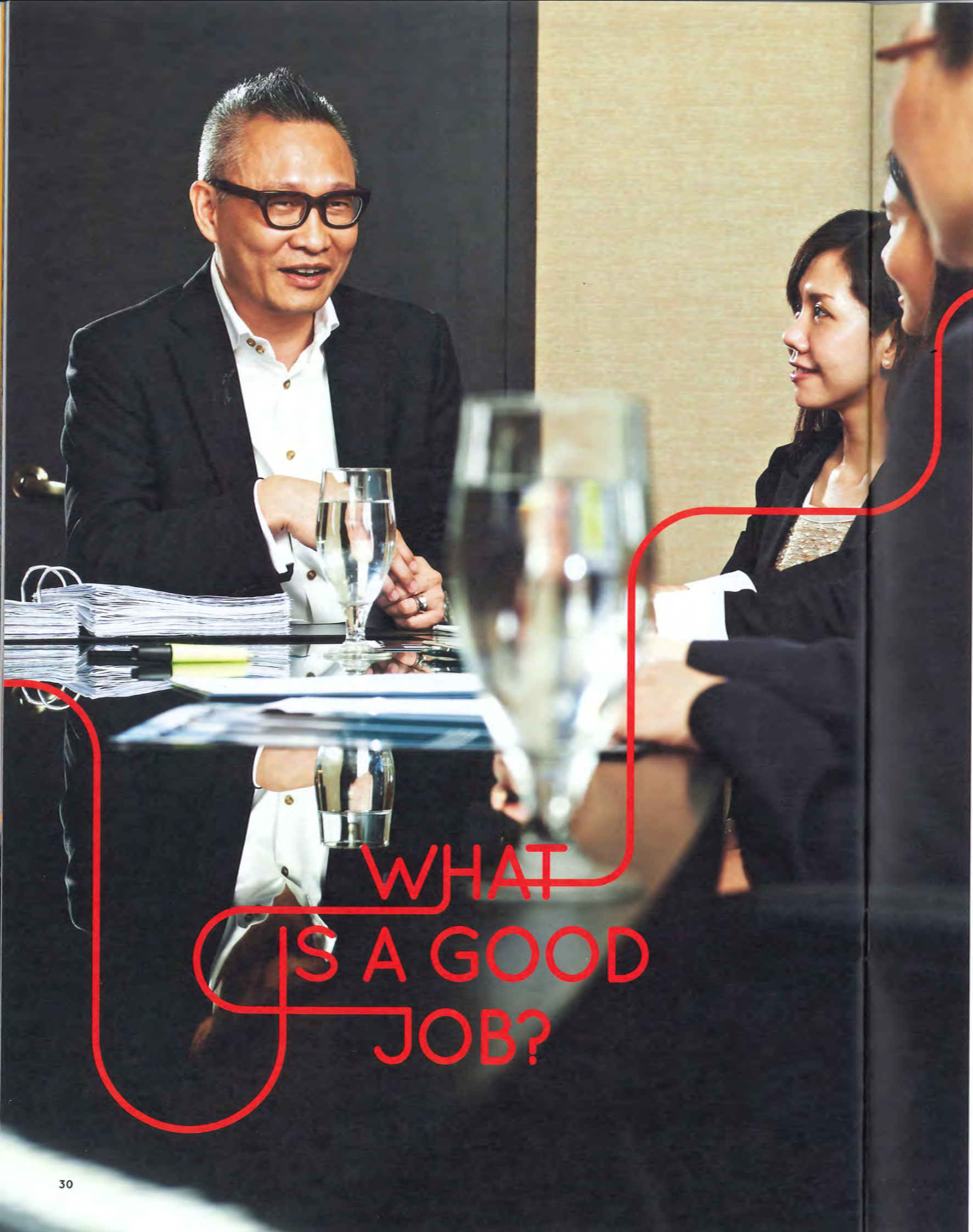


ASPIRE



Ministry of Education
SINGAPORE

PATHS TO A BRIGHTER FUTURE



WHAT IS A GOOD JOB?

Employers are hungry for skilled workers in the healthcare, hospitality and manufacturing industries, but cannot find them. Recruiter Mr David Leong thinks it's time to rethink what good career options look like – but employers and the Government have to send a strong signal first.

My company helps employers recruit people who have the skills they need. I've worked with over 100 employers over the course of 10 years, and placed close to 10,000 people in jobs. Across the board, and especially in the offshore and marine, service, and healthcare sectors, industry is crying out, "We don't have enough skilled employees." Companies are actually denying orders because they can't cope. This is unfortunate for the companies, but if you look at the bigger picture, this isn't good for Singapore's growth either.

Bosses tell me they can advertise for an engineer's job that pays more than \$3,000, but of the hundreds of applicants, fewer than 10 per cent are Singaporeans. We need a lot more service staff in hotels and airports. There are many openings for passenger service and ground handling service staff roles.

But there just aren't enough people willing to do the jobs. So, although they would like to employ locals, the companies' short-term solution is to employ non-Singaporeans.

I think the issue here is that students are choosing not to enter the jobs they are trained for. They're spending all this time in school, and coming out doing something completely different. So they don't get to use many of the skills they've learnt while they're at polytechnic or ITE. It's a pity. But to some extent I can understand why – there's a perception that there isn't a future in some of these jobs.

We really need to shift mindsets on what a good career looks like. There are opportunities out there, but students and parents may not know what exactly is being offered. Employers must also do a lot more to get students interested in skilled jobs.

But before students can be interested, I think it's important that we cultivate in our students a respect for all jobs. This is part of an individual's value system, and you can't start this when they're already choosing their career. It starts much earlier, in primary school. We can show them how every job contributes to the country's success.

School is also a great place for developing values that later translate into good work ethics – working hard, having the right attitude, and respecting each other as individuals. It's good that MOE has focussed on developing these values for the past few years. I have two sons in primary school, so I'm very aware of this.

I'm glad there's also an emphasis on activities beyond academic studies, because that's how you pick up skills that you can't learn in the classroom. The most important thing I took away from my schooldays were the leadership skills I picked up – whether as a prefect in Anderson Secondary, or as a student councillor at Nanyang Junior College.

Values and skills take time to nurture, and this must start in school, whereas I believe domain knowledge can be picked up when you need it. Right now, as a businessman, all the mathematics I use only involves four things – plus, minus, multiply, divide. But it's the work ethic and people skills I picked up that have really stuck with me.

We need to be flexible to meet the changing demands of the world we live in. I think we've got to create different ways for people to achieve success, other than through academic means. We've got to help people see that there are many pathways to get what you want. They can choose the course they're actually interested

in, and start working in an industry they're passionate about. But are we offering good opportunities for Singaporeans? That's where employers and the Government come in.

One path that holds a lot of promise is the continuing education route – where you continue to upgrade your skills after starting work. Perhaps if developing your skills can actually command a salary jump, people will be willing to try this path. But for this track to attract Singaporeans, employers must be ready to recognise the certification from upgrading programmes.

If there is a ladder of skills which employees can climb – this gives them hope. Of course, the employers take the cue from the government ministries, and both parties need to work together to create these clear, skills-based paths.

I think it's important that we help our next generation with more and better options to progress in their careers. Ultimately, career success and the job take-up rate depend a lot on how much society values jobs. If we're hoping for the pattern of job creation and adoption to change, we must be prepared to pay skill-based jobs better. That's something employers have to be ready to do.

Another thing I hope the employers and schools can work together on is to have more good internships for students. My company brought in polytechnic interns to help to programme a portal. They were very on-task, independent and competent. I didn't think it was burdensome at all. **We employers have to engage with these students and see them as an extra pair of hands – not to do menial tasks, but to accomplish real goals.**

Going further, I hope employers can consider an apprenticeship-style placement for the students while they are still in school. This means they spend nearly half their week at the workplace, earning a wage, and the other half at school. Sometimes the students need a taste of working life to become attracted to the idea of starting work after they graduate.

It's a chance for them to find out what they're good at. And maybe with good performance they can become full-time employees with the companies afterwards! It's a win-win situation.

I think we've got to create different ways for people to achieve success, other than through academic means. We've got to help people see that there are many pathways to get what you want.

Mr David Leong
Managing Director
PeopleWorldWide Consulting

These models do require a fair amount of investment on the employers' part. Some support from the Government would be very welcome, I imagine.

And at the very least, industry partners need to work more closely with the schools to show the students what the options are – and they should be very concrete. Show them: this is the salary, and this is what you'll do. We cannot wait until they're searching for jobs to give them the information.

I like to visualise these different paths as branches of the same tree. That tree is Singapore and we are the leaves on these various branches, reaching for sunlight and contributing to the health of the entire plant. When the leaves receive light, the plant grows.

That's the Singapore I hope we can aspire to be – where we respect every job, the jobs are priced right, and each person has a real shot at reaching their goals if they work hard. **If we can show students the future, they can work towards it. We've got to make these routes more visible.**

A DIFFERENT WAY FORWARD

Mr David Leong envisions what an alternative route to success might look like in the future

Let's say I'm an ITE student with a real interest in building things. I don't feel like I have to go to polytechnic after graduation – I prefer to start work and start earning a salary. I can start as a foreman, earning \$1,600 a month. I observe my supervisors at work, and they give me on-the-job training. I work hard and I have a good attitude.

Within three years, I might become a superintendent, earning \$2,000. If I consciously make the effort to keep upgrading my skills by going for courses, I can move forward in my career. I know this because there's a clear chart that shows me which skills I need to get certified in. Perhaps the top of the ladder is a senior manager role that pays up to \$6,000 – not too bad at all!

Of course, this is just my own speculation about the future. For each sector, the Government and industry players will need to come together to create these paths and agree on the details. This will take many years – but I know it can be done because I've seen this happen overseas.