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### Implementing lasting change: HR in the social service sector

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# Human Capital Leadership

*Insights*

Graduate Cohort 2020  
Master of Human Capital Leadership  
Singapore Management University

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## Implementing Lasting Change – HR in the Social Service Sector

FERMIN DIEZ

NG RUN QIAN

### **Introduction**

The Human Resources (HR) practices in any organisation can make a big difference in its ability to implement the strategic plan (Thomas, Smith & Diez, 2013). This assertion points towards an additional question: Can a whole sector of the economy increase its overall capability and capacity by improving the overall HR abilities of the organisations in the sector?

The Social Service Sector in Singapore has been undergoing just such a sector-wide transformation over the past 6 years, and provides a great opportunity to analyse empirically whether a systemic approach to improve the overall HR practices of the Social Service Agencies (SSAs) can improve their ability to implement organisational strategies and, at the same time, deliver services more efficiently and effectively. For HR professionals in the sector, this is an ideal time to develop and implement HR practices that will continue to enhance the service that SSAs provide to their clients, with support from staff, volunteers and caregivers. This article reflects on the transition that the HR practices in the sector have been through to better support the work of their agencies and highlights next steps in this journey.

To illustrate the state of the HR practices in the sector we relay the fictional story of an HR Practitioner who was “on the ground” some years ago, and use it as a framework to describe the HR interventions that have happened systemically in the Social Service Sector to increase the Capability and Capacity of the SSAs. Many HR practitioners in the sector have passion and dedication to serve to the best of their abilities, but perhaps not all have enough training and experience as HR Professionals. Our journey traces the story of our “protagonist”, whom we shall call Ms. Dee, from the time when she first began a career in social service and how eventually that led to an HR role. In parallel, we relate how NCSS used HR

analytics and other tools to progressively improve the situation that Ms. Dee describes:

*“I started out as a regular volunteer in 2009 in the eldercare sector. Subsequently, I joined the disability sector as a full-time staff for five years before moving back into the eldercare sector for another year and a half. During the orientation as a volunteer, I was informed that my key role was to conduct regular visits to elderly who were socially isolated. During each visit, I was expected to observe the home condition and well-being of the elderly. This is to minimize or avoid the situations in which these elderly individuals fell sick or passed on without anyone knowing. These tasks are simple enough that most people can carry them out without formal training.*

*After completing my degree education in 2010, I joined the disability sector not knowing what to expect. During the interview, I was told that I would be supporting the administration and operations of the facility. However, within the first few months on the job, I was disappointed with some of the practices I saw. For instance, Psychologists were turning down referrals to conduct behavioural management interventions, claiming that it was the trainer’s job, despite knowing that trainers were not adequately trained with the skills to do so, and hence needed advice from the psychologists to carry out these interventions.*

*There was a shortage of formal training for staff in my area. Soon, I experienced burnout when my suggestions for improvements were ignored. However, with the strong support from two of my colleagues, we managed to effect changes, implemented structured programmes with outlines, sent the staff for training and we also set goals. We did all these without any support from HR.*

*About a year later, I was asked to get involved in the job evaluation and appraisal process, and it nudged me towards finding out more about the role of the Human Resource Department within the organisation. As I read more into the various functions of HR, and recalled my readings in*

*organisational psychology during my university degree, I began to question: what if the HRD has an active role in social services? What would be the impact, considering social services is a highly people-oriented business? Why are the talents in social service not being developed like those in the private sector?"*

In response to this apparent need for enhanced HR in the sector, in early 2014 the National Council of Social Service (NCSS) created the Human Capital and Organisational Development Group. As part of their initiatives, this team developed a People Practice Index for the Social Service Sector to measure the state of People Practices across SSAs. A total of 101 SSAs participated, chosen mostly by the fact that they had at least one dedicated HR Professional looking after the function. The goal was to guide organisations on their talent strategies by identifying the people-related areas that should be prioritized and further developed, to enhance the capabilities of the workforce and to drive positive service quality for the sector. In this way, progress in the HR practices in the sector can be measured over time.

The Social Service Sector in Singapore is currently composed of over 450 SSAs, working in one (or sometimes more than one) of the following sub-sectors:

- Healthcare
- Seniors
- Adults and Family
- Children and Youth
- Disability
- Mental Health

By size, around one third of the agencies have less than 30 employees, a third have between 31 and 73 employees, and the rest have more than 74 employees. Only a handful of SSAs have in the neighbourhood of 1,000 employees.

During the initial development and application of this index, several HR challenges in the sector were identified:

- Attracting and Selecting Talent
- Performance Management, Rewards and Recognition
- People Development & Career Planning
- Leadership & Culture
- People Engagement
- Talent Supply

We will analyse each of these in subsequent sections below.

### **Attracting and Selecting Talent**

Ms. Dee continues by recalling the time after starting to work in the HR Function of an SSA. In this segment, the comments refer to attracting and selecting talent for the SSA.

*“The key means of sourcing was through candidates that wrote to the corporate website or through placing ads on job portals, such as JobStreet. These platforms provided little support to differentiate the quality of the talent pool available. The shortlisting of candidates from the pool of applicants then relied on the administrative staff. Subsequently, the candidates were interviewed by the hiring managers. More often than not, these interview sessions did not involve any HR personnel.*

*The HR team thought that, regardless of job level, we could conduct evidence-based interview and assessment approaches, such as identifying the personalities to match the organisational culture. Having a better way to determine the right fit would be crucial given the nature of work where the newly hired staff were to deal with beneficiaries from the vulnerable groups”.*

Attraction and selection of talent is a key aspect for SSAs who often find themselves short of staff at all levels: professionals, administrative and support. In fact, the sector has been growing at a pace in excess of 7% in the last 10 years, whereas the increase in the national workforce is more

closely aligned to growth of the population (slightly over 1%). One challenge our protagonist was facing related to the need for people to join the SSA vis-à-vis the shortage of qualified – and willing – personnel to fill the vacancies. With the Nanyang Technological University (NTU), NCSS conducted a study to assess the current state of recruiting practices in the Social Services (Yu, Chin & Diez, work in process). The results of the study provided several key insights:

- **Work values**, such as altruism, work relationships and job security, are often more important to potential talent entering the sector than other elements of the job. However, pay is still a consideration, and more so for mid-career candidates.
- Potential employees contemplating entering the sector rely more on the word of friends and relatives currently in the sector when gathering information on social service jobs.
- ITE and Polytechnic students interested in social service as a career tend to be more thorough in their search, pointing to an additional pool of candidates
- Conversely, individuals in related programmes do not have enough awareness about jobs and careers in SSAs
- There are many “**myths**” associated with social service jobs: Among them that the sector offers low levels of pay and limited career opportunities.
- 21st century modern career attitudes are quite prevalent across younger candidates, meaning they are quite willing to work across organisations, switch roles and manage their own careers.
- The recruiting and selection operations in most SSAs are small, with limited budget, resources and tools.
- Traditional forms of recruitment like job ads still are most prevalent. However, digital platforms - like social media - are gaining acceptance.
- Organisations also seem to be aware of the need for an **employer brand/employee value proposition**.

At any given point in time over the last few years, there could be between 500 and 1000 posted job openings in the sector. The majority of these openings refer to professional jobs (Social Workers, Therapists, Special Education and Early Intervention Teachers, Nurses, Clinical Psychologists, Counsellors, etc.).



Given the data from the NTU study, NCSS initially began to set up a recruiting agency within its Sector Manpower area, which would address the lack of experience, resources and tools in the SSAs and help them recruit the staff needed. The initial results were promising, but it was soon apparent that NCSS was doing the fishing, instead of teaching the SSAs to fish.

Thus, the efforts moved to four other areas to improve talent attraction and recruitment in the sector:

- **Salary Guidelines:** One of the points mentioned in the NTU study was the need to dispel some of the myths surrounding Social Service jobs. One such myth was the levels of pay. NCSS began to post sector salary guidelines on its website which potential as well as current sector employees could access. The intention was to provide public information that the sector pay was competitive with similar roles in related fields such as Education and Health. Initial reactions were mixed. Employees appreciated the transparency and potential entrants had a clearer idea of what to ask for and expect. However, some HR Heads in organisations raised concerns about their organisation's ability to pay. Over the years, the latter concern has subsided while the "myth" of low levels of pay has begun to dissipate.
- **People Practice Consultancy (PPC):** It was important that SSAs figuratively learned to fish, as stated earlier. To achieve this end, NCSS secured the services of HR advisors to provide support, training and hands-on tools to SSAs wishing to improve their recruiting practices. More than 90 Agencies availed themselves of these services (more on PPC later).
- **Social Service Tribe:** It was clear from the NTU study results that there was a sector-wide need for an Employer Brand. Each of the SSAs could have (and some have) created its own Employer Brand. However, as a sector, we compete for talent with larger sectors such as Education and Health Care. To have a stronger voice, NCSS created the Social Service Tribe Employer Brand for the entire sector, aimed at attracting employees to join anywhere in Social Service. Having a single Employer Brand (which SSAs can customize to fit their specific needs) allows SSAs to have a unified voice and a clear message with regards to communicating sector-

wide values (such as working with like-minded individuals). In the three years since its launch, the number of followers to the Social Service Tribe website has exceeded 18,000, while the number of unique job applicants has reached 5,800 people (a more than 25% increase in three years).

- **Job Portal:** Linked to the Tribe website, and in partnership with e2i, NCSS launched a job portal which SSAs can access to support their recruiting efforts. This portal has posted more than 3,000 jobs from over 200 SSAs and is proving to be a key tool in recruiting for the sector. Current plans include adding an on-line assessment tool (developed in association with the National University of Singapore) to help in screening candidates. Other related ideas are to support the deployment of online recruiting tools which SSAs can use directly. The latter is part of an overall digitalization plan currently in development for the whole sector.

## Performance Management

Ms. Dee continues to relate the experience of working in the HR Department. This time, the focus is on performance management practices:

*“The performance appraisal is often completed by both manager and staff, as an annual affair for the purpose of performance bonus payout. Goals set at the start of the year were not always challenging and were often easily attainable. For example, in a job training facility, managers avoided giving goals such as successful placement of beneficiaries into the workforce. They supported this rationale by justifying that it depends on the social functioning of the beneficiaries. However, this practice runs the risk of instilling in the organisation the belief that changes in the receptivity for our beneficiaries in the workforce are not possible, rather than finding the strengths in every individual. For instance, one of our students continually rejected all jobs, until a trainer found that he enjoyed eating tofu and suggested to place him into the tofu factory. He has now been in this job for 5 years. A more appropriate goal setting process could drive staff to seek more and better solutions.”*

The research findings of the study conducted for NCSS by SMU (Ferrin et al., 2018) show the following trends:

- The analyses identified a set of factors that encouraged commitment of social service professionals. These include ‘traditional factors’ (e.g., flexibility and autonomy, work-life balance, professional development, leadership, and organisation culture), and factors that are specific to the sector (passion, purpose, calling or faith, transformative life experiences, societal recognition for sector work)
- The analyses also identified factors that undermine social service professionals’ commitment to the sector. These included ‘traditional factors’ (e.g., remuneration and benefits, heavy workload and poor work-life balance, poor leadership, and organisation culture factors including not valuing staff, lack of a supportive team, poor work environment and politics). Commitment was also undermined by factors that are specific to the sector, in particular burnout arising from compassion exhaustion, insufficient funding, involvement of volunteer board members, and insufficient recognition and appreciation by both the social service organisations and society at large for the work that social service professionals do.

Resolving as many of these factors as possible has been a key pursuit for NCSS. Specifically, through the PPC project, an area of concern was the SSAs abilities to set individual and team targets (KPIs) and link these to pay. More than 60 Agencies have undergone changes in their pay strategies to develop merit increase and annual incentive programmes to better align pay, performance and competency development. This effort alone should help to significantly improve the SSAs ability to attract and retain staff, improve engagement and increase the level of HR maturity of the function. Furthermore, an additional research done by SMU helped to identify how mindfulness practices can help reduce burnout in sector professionals and training programmes have been instituted for this purpose. NCSS also created a programme aimed at improving Board effectiveness in SSAs (currently run in partnership with the Singapore Institute of Directors - SID). The Tribe branding efforts have addressed the area of appreciation by society at large of the work done by sector professionals. This effort has

also expanded to include a sector-wide recognition programme which we are rolling out soon.

Regarding the more ‘traditional factors’ mentioned in the SMU study, the PPC reviews of pay policies and the publication of salary guidelines have already contributed to increase attraction, retention and engagement. There has also been considerable work done to improve leadership and culture (see sections below about retention and about leadership).

## **Talent Development**

The attention of Ms. Dee now turns to initial reactions to existing training and development practices in the SSA:

*“There are many low-skill workers in the social service industry, who serve with great intent. HR could do a better job in ensuring talents like them remain relevant and contributing to their organisations. For instance, as they are the front-facing employee with the beneficiaries, they should be actively sent for training and courses such as first aid, customer service, etc. Taking another step, they could be sent for programmes to understand the abilities and disabilities of their beneficiaries. Going for useful trainings gives employees a sense that they are valued. Upskilling the workforce is beneficial to both the organisation (more productive) and individuals.*

*My organisation did not have a team dedicated to learning and development. Employees initiated their own training needs and identified courses on their own. The greater availability of courses at SSI [Social Service Institute] is a positive move. This allowed the employees to find relevant courses to attend and upskill. However, without proper needs analysis, employees may attend courses that might not be relevant, or the employees are unable to transfer the skills to their field of work. For instance, while the basis of behavioural management is similar, a less highly educated employee might not be able to apply the same skillset to the youth and elderly alike. Similarly, with little differentiation,*

*some employees might find the courses too simplified and less meaningful.”*

SSI has increased the number of training places by more than 40% (from 9,901 in FY2013 to 14,163 in FY 2018) to accommodate the need for more training for sector professionals. To address the question of the relevancy of courses, SSI has implemented courses that are tightly aligned to the sector-wide skills frameworks (the first one was for social workers, and more are on the way for therapists, psychologists, counsellors and teachers) that allows individuals to “peg” their skills to their current level of expertise and thus choose courses that suit them to either increase their skill level in the current job or better prepare them for the next career level. Furthermore, SSI is currently conducting a thorough Training Gaps Analysis of the sector to determine which courses are needed (or not needed) by sector professionals.

Other initiatives to improve the SSI’s reach into the sector include a substantial investment in e-learning to allow for on-line, any-time skills improvement programmes. More than 40% of SSIs programmes now include an on-line component, making training more accessible. SSI has also entered into a number of partnerships both with SSAs that can provide training programmes to other SSAs in their areas of expertise, and with Institutions such as SID, Singapore University of Social Sciences, other Universities, etc.

## **Talent Retention & Turnover**

Next, Ms. Dee’s attention turns to retention of staff:

*“In some organisations, employees who are constantly rated as low performers are placed on performance improvement plans and closely monitored to either improve or be dismissed. This practice is not evident in my organisation. Poor compensation practices often result in low performers being rewarded nonetheless, and yearly increments are distributed. These provide little incentive or motivation for improvement. High performers are often given more tasks to cover the gaps in the low performers. Instead of a progressive organisation, we remain status quo. Subsequently, the high performers face*

*burnout and find little motivation. Eventually, the high performers leave the organisation, resulting in a talent drain.”*

Earlier, we have mentioned that NCSS has addressed compensation practices (PPC, Salary Guidelines), commitment (burnout, board effectiveness, etc.) and social recognition (Tribe).

With greater understanding of the sector’s workforce data, NCSS has determined that the rate of leakage in the sector (leakage refers to individuals leaving the sector to go work elsewhere – a key metric to ensure sector growth can keep pace with the increase in societal needs) has also decreased over the 5-year period 2013-2017 by a factor of 47%. These are encouraging signs that SSAs are now better able to recruit for fit, pay more competitively, provide more training, address turnover and, generally, that sector employees are increasingly finding their work in the sector is recognised and is rewarding.

## **Leadership and Culture**

Ms. Dee comments on her perceptions of the state of leadership in the sector during her early years:

*“Sometimes, it is poor management that results in dissatisfaction. For instance, a team of fund-raising employees were hired, with key responsibility to raise funds. However, instead of raising funds to support the services as advertised, the operational staff were fully responsible to engage their own donors or corporates. As a result, it drained the operational staff and reduced the capacity to deliver quality services to the beneficiaries.*

*Also, from the ground the sense we have is that the board and senior management are often not aligned. It is clear that the board is constantly intervening in operational decisions. In our case, a board member vets the expense accounts, even taxis, for all senior staff, and the CEO can’t hire anyone without their interviewing and approving the staff, even at lower levels.”*

An area of particular attention for NCSS has been the improvement of leadership skills in the sector. Four specific initiatives have been launched in the last six years to address this gap:

- **Milestones and Capstone:** SSI has developed and launched a suite of programmes aimed at improving leadership in the sector, patterned after Ram Charan’s “Leadership Pipeline” (Charan, Drotter & Noel, 2011). The programmes are all built around the leadership competencies developed by the Centre for Non-Profit Leadership (CNPL) specifically for non-profit organisations in Singapore. Starting with the first programme, “Leading Self”, and continuing with “Leading Others”, “Leading Teams”, and finally the Capstone Programme “Leading Organisations”. Sector professionals can progressively learn the right skills and competencies to turn them from practice professionals (or out-of-sector transfers) to become effective leaders of people and resources, as well as to develop and implement a vision and strategies to guide their teams and organisations. To date, more than 400 professionals have attended these programmes, and we aim to cover over 1,800 middle managers in the next three years to accelerate this process further.
- **GLS:** Another area of attention over the last three years has been to bring globally recognised social service leaders into Singapore to bring new ideas to the sector that can take root and yield fruit in due course. Areas such as innovation, fund-raising, governance, service quality, productivity and talent management have been addressed in these 2-day events, attended by an average of 250 senior executives and board members each time.
- **Sun Ray:** The Sun Ray programme has been a flagship in the last six years to develop leaders for the sector. Similar to a High Potential programme, Sun Ray participants are carefully selected and groomed for eventual leadership roles in the sector. There are currently close to 120 Sun Rayz (as they are called) in 42 different agencies in the sector. Over 70% of them come from outside the sector, allowing for “new blood” to come in and assist in the overall sector transformation.
- **Scholarships:** NCSS provides approximately 40 scholarships and awards each year to deserving students to pursue undergraduate or master’s programmes in professions of interest to the sector. The returning scholars also aid in improving the quality of practices as they rotate through various SSAs.

## Measuring Success

Have all these interventions by NCSS worked? Would Ms. Dee be satisfied that the work done by NCSS has paid off? There are metrics in place at three levels:

- **Individually:**

SSI uses Level 3 Kirkpatrick (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 1996) measurements to ensure all skills imparted are implemented 6 months after the staff completes the course. So far, results show that over 80% of participants have achieved this level as assessed by their supervisor. This addresses a crucial need in ensuring that training helps to increase the quality and quantity of people needed.

- **Organisationally:**

The PPC Index has shown that overall HR maturity of the sector is currently at the developing level, with smaller agencies (less than 30 staff) falling below this level. The intent is for all organisations to improve at least one level in their HR maturity, to an overall “capable” level. This is a key metric to ensure attraction, retention, engagement and leadership are all moving in the right direction.

In addition, recently NCSS has embarked on an Organisational Development journey (ODJ) with 28 SSAs. The impact of the work done at this level will be measured by Enterprise Singapore’s Business Effectiveness Model, which has been modified by NCSS for use in non-profit organisations.

- **Sector-wide:**

A key metric to address the need for more services due to the ageing of the population (among other trends) in the face of a workforce shortage is People Productivity: NCSS has embarked on a series of initiatives aimed at introducing productivity-enhancing technology and process redesign to aid in this respect. Initial results have shown productivity improvements in excess of 30% for the technology that has been introduced to date. iShineCloud, a Shared Services Organisation for Non-profits, launched in partnership with Singapore Pools, is another initiative aimed to improve productivity, efficiency and effectiveness of administrative and IT related tasks.



We are currently developing organisational metrics to determine overall social impact of the SSAs (akin to profitability or growth in the corporate sector)

## Conclusion

Ms. Dee leaves us with these thoughts:

*“Despite the things that are being done to improve current HR practices, I also recognise the limitations that some of these social service organisations might face, especially the smaller setups. Some organisations have more established and structured Human Resource strategies. The presence of these human resource structures and strategies adopted by these organisations serves to remind other organisations within the sector that human resource is a relevant and important component of an organisation’s strategy”*

*Working in HR in the sector today is vastly different than when I first started as a volunteer over 10 years ago. It is clear that there is now greater professionalism in the sector, greater recognition by boards and senior management of the importance of proper HR practices in the delivery of services to our clients. Today we have better tools and support to recruit, train, develop, pay and manage our staff. I enjoy my job much more now. I tell my HR colleagues in other sectors that they should join us: Social Service is a people sector with purpose!”*

Progress is being made, and there are currently several areas being addressed:

- **Automation/Digitization** needs to be accelerated to better support the growing needs in the sector to provide more efficient and effective services to beneficiaries and include all stakeholders (e.g. caregivers, volunteers, donors, regulators, etc.).
- More attention needs to go into **engagement**, particularly if we want to improve the Net Promoter Score (In-Service Professionals

recommending the sector as a place to work to their friends and families).

- The work started to address both **Leadership and Boards** needs to scale up to reach more of these individuals in a shorter amount of time. In fact, there are many skills needed on our boards, and a key one is Human Resources Experience. Perhaps more HR Professionals should consider joining the boards and the HR committees of the SSAs, and the SSAs, in turn, should look for this expertise in incoming board members.
- There is still a need to develop more in-sector (e.g. across SSAs) **Career Opportunities**. NCSS has recently started a Career Development Panel pilot with 15 SSAs willing to do joint people planning for their staff to address this need.
- There is also a need to improve **collaboration and cooperation** among SSAs. GatherHere, an online closed platform for sharing among participants, is a pilot in this direction.

If you are an HR professional, it is a good time to be in the Social Service sector!

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