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Kenneth T. GOH

Singapore Management University, kennethgoh@smu.edu.sg

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3 groundless myths that get in the way of workforce inclusivity

Workers from disadvantaged groups generally find it hard to succeed in the workforce. Sadly, misconceptions about them are often to blame.

Kenneth Goh

Singapore and other developed economies have ramped up efforts to enhance workforce inclusivity, spotlighting individuals who often face obstacles in securing and retaining employment due to their personal circumstances. This demographic includes single mothers, former offenders, individuals living with disabilities, and those tasked with extensive caregiving responsibilities. In other words, economically vulnerable groups.

Of late, there have been major efforts to expand employment opportunities for disadvantaged groups. Part of this is fuelled by tight labour markets. But there is also a mindset change as companies try to appeal to a younger, more socially conscious generation, and corporate leaders try to foster an equitable form of capitalism – one that is less exploitative and more generative.

Singapore has taken steps to support the employment of workers from disadvantaged groups by implementing measures like the Senior Employment Credit, the Enabling Employment Credit and the Uplifting Employment Credit. These schemes provide wage offsets for employers hiring Singaporeans from disadvantaged groups such as older people, persons with disabilities and former offenders.

The Republic is playing catch-up when it comes to workforce inclusivity. It ranked second last in the 2019 Kantar Inclusion Index survey, which is an indicator of how inclusive and diverse workplaces are. Such efforts will help address this issue.

However, to complement these measures and enhance workforce inclusivity, there are still myths and misconceptions that deter companies from hiring individuals from disadvantaged groups. I want to debunk some of them.

MYTH 1: WORKERS FROM DISADVANTAGED GROUPS ARE UNRELIABLE

This is a generalisation that simply ignores the fact that many workers from disadvantaged groups are as conscientious, hard-working and reliable as any of their peers in the workforce. Yet, despite their best efforts



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and intentions, some workers from disadvantaged groups may find it hard to perform to the level of their peers in the workforce on account of their complicated personal circumstances. Just as how people with unique neurological or physical conditions often require assistive technology to perform their jobs, such cases can be addressed by thoughtful work design, enabling employers to reap the benefits of engaged and committed workers.

Take, for instance, a single parent juggling a job and childcare. Parents in such circumstances struggle with jobs where shift schedules are inconsistent, as that can clash with their child-related obligations. Matters can get worse in low-income households that lack strong support networks and in jobs requiring physical presence like retail or food service. In such cases, employers need to account for the constraints faced by these workers, and reorganise work so that workers can continue to perform their jobs instead of being penalised.

It is critical to understand that someone appearing to be “unreliable” is more likely the result of a mismatch between employee constraints and the resources provided by the employer.

Employers who can provide such resources or help are likely

to gain committed and motivated workers they can rely upon.

MYTH 2: MAKING ACCOMMODATIONS UNDERMINES MERITOCRACY

The myth that making accommodations for disadvantaged groups undermines meritocracy stems from a narrow understanding of fairness. Scholars in organisational studies highlight three types of fairness principles – equality (everyone should receive the same), merit (those who contribute more should receive more), and need (those in greater need should receive more).

There is a common misconception that these principles conflict, suggesting that when leaders strive for fairness based on one principle, they invariably compromise the others. This understanding, however, overlooks that these principles can, and ideally should, coexist and mutually reinforce each other.

Take the example of furniture brand Scanteak, which reinforced the different fairness principles by attending to the needs of a disadvantaged group.

The firm’s chief executive Jamie Lim shared an instance when a valued staff member wanted to return to her home country to meet her caregiving responsibilities. The company

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responded to this by digitalising more work processes, which allowed the employee to work remotely.

The company also uncovered a broader demand for remote work options among its staff. It stepped up its digitalisation efforts so that more could work from home. In doing so, it was upholding the fairness principals of merit, need and equality.

The payoff came when the pandemic necessitated remote work. The digitalised workflows were already in place and made it easy for Scanteak and its workers to switch to the new working conditions.

MYTH 3: ACCOMMODATIONS ARE EXPENSIVE

A pervasive misconception is that making workplace accommodations for disadvantaged groups is burdensome and costly. While implementing changes of any kind usually incurs some costs, the assumption that companies should therefore avoid doing so is short-sighted.

In fact, some accommodations do not even require an upfront cost. For instance, the non-profit organisation Daughters of Tomorrow collaborated with corporate partners to put its beneficiaries – many of whom are single mothers – on midday shifts. This simple yet effective accommodation helps these women balance their work commitments and caregiving responsibilities.

Also, when looking to adopt a new practice, companies should not look at costs alone, but at costs relative to benefits. While costs are often paid upfront, the benefits may be realised only in the future. And yet, these benefits could be fundamental to the long-term health and success of an organisation, especially when it comes to accommodating disadvantaged groups.

Consider the experience of Mr Hamdi Ulukaya, the founder and CEO of Chobani, an American food company famous for its

strained yogurt. He hired buses, translators and language tutors so that the company could employ refugees who lived near one of his plants.

He said the benefits far outweighed the costs, as the life experiences of these individuals had a profound impact on staff empathy and morale. Companies may not be able to directly translate these benefits in financial terms, but they indirectly influence the bottom line by shaping the firm’s culture.

Sometimes the benefits can be tangible, too. For instance, Mr Goh Jia Yong, a partner at EY’s People Advisory Services, recounted the case of a client in the wholesale food business that hired individuals with autism to expand its frozen seafood business. This was a new line that the company’s existing workforce struggled to cope with. But it turned out to be the perfect fit for this new, so-called disadvantaged group.

BEYOND THE MYTHS

The myths and misconceptions that stand in the way of people from disadvantaged groups need to be debunked. These misconceptions make it appear as if it is the individual’s fault if he needs to be accommodated. They overlook how the current work structures are rigid and can inadvertently marginalise certain individuals.

There are, of course, practical benefits for companies in making it convenient for people from disadvantaged groups to work for them. For one thing, this helps to ease staffing shortages in a tight labour market.

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However, companies must approach this transition to inclusivity prudently. No one is asking them to spend their resources recklessly to pursue inclusivity, as such an approach would be unsustainable.

Instead, the companies could seek expert advice from relevant agencies. They can also explore partnerships with institutions of higher learning, such as the Singapore Management University (SMU). SMU provides its students opportunities to work with companies and examine the feasibility of their inclusivity initiatives as part of their coursework.

Taking such calculated steps can let companies do good pragmatically – both for themselves and the people from the disadvantaged groups they hire.

• Kenneth Goh is associate professor of strategy & entrepreneurship (education) at Singapore Management University’s Lee Kong Chian School of Business.