

CASE STUDY: PUBLIC UTILITIES BOARD (PUB)

Introduction

As the national water agency, PUB is responsible for the collection, production, distribution and reclamation of water in Singapore. With some 3100 dedicated officers, PUB manages Singapore's water supply, water catchment and used water in an integrated way.

With about 47% of its employees over the age of 50, PUB actively promotes work-life initiatives that encourage active ageing. The organisation has taken the lead in the employment of older employees with age-friendly policies and practices. These include enhancing the employees' health and well-being and preparing them for retirement / re-employment through initiatives such as the Transition Training Programme (TTP) and Education Upgrading Programme. The TTP ensures that older employees are better able to make informed decisions that enable them to stay happily engaged, financially secure and independent well into their later years while the Education Upgrading Programme provides opportunities for employees to acquire the requisite qualifications to remain employable.

Issues and challenges of an ageing population and workforce

A common problem faced by many organisations is the early exit of older employees. This is viewed as a waste of experience and human resources, and of the investment organisations have made in the workforce. Many companies recognize that labour shortage is a looming crisis unless new sectors of the population, such as the unemployed older employees, are attracted back into the workforce. With an ageing population and a declining birth rate, businesses in Singapore need all the talent available to meet the demands in today's 24/7 economy. This issue is prevalent across all industries, and no entity is immune regardless of their size and years of establishment.

There is hence a need for organizations to introduce measures that can better capitalise the capabilities of our mature workforce. PUB does this through three key approaches, which are re-employment, life-long learning and staff well-being.

Targeted Work-life Programmes for Older Employees

PUB has been proactive in its approach towards the re-employment of older employees. The organisation has been re-employing its employees way before the upcoming 2012 re-employment legislation mandate.

The organisation went another step further by introducing the Transition Training Programme (TTP). The TTP is one of the many training initiatives which was co-developed with the PUB Employees' Union. The programme aims to better prepare its older employees for employability and/or retirement well before they reach the compulsory retirement age. The programme covers topics such as change management, managing one's financial and health.

Besides TTP, PUB has various schemes and programmes to facilitate lifelong learning amongst staff. The intent is to ensure that staff adopts a mindset to continually improve their competency levels, through skills training or educational upgrading. One programme that has benefited many of its mature employees is the Education Upgrading Programme which allows staff to upgrade themselves through certificate and diploma programmes and various sponsorship schemes. With the right qualifications, employees are equipped and have the opportunity to expand their job scopes and be better positioned to stay relevant and employable.

In addition, to prepare its employees for retirement/re-employment, PUB interviews the employees to discuss their future roles and expectations a year prior to their retirement. Three months before their actual retirement, employees will be notified of their job posting and duties. Some employees may continue with their current job whereas others may be redeployed to a new job, depending on the needs of the organisation. When that occurs, the employee will be trained and equipped with the necessary skills for them to excel in their new roles.

Summary of Work-life Programmes

PUB has a comprehensive array of work-life programmes for all age groups as the organisation recognizes that its employees are individuals with different commitments and concerns. PUB has a Staff Well-Being Committee, led by a member of the senior management team, to help employees lead a healthy lifestyle through various health programmes and activities. There is a Recreational Club dedicated to promoting recreational and well-being activities for staff. To encourage employees to keep fit and stay healthy, there are also fitness centres located at major installations where PUB officers are stationed.

Besides this, PUB has an integrated staff well-being framework, grouped into the 4 strategic thrusts – **social, physical, economic** and **mental** well-being.

Social Well-Being focuses on pro-family initiatives that facilitate social and recreational interaction. This includes celebrating various festive events where staff can bring their family members along.

“Transition Training Programme is an eye opener as we realise how unprepared we are when we approach our retirement. Topics like financial investment and managing the emotional and physical aspect of growing old are useful to me. For those who are planning a second career, this programme shows what needs to be done now to prepare for career change. It is very useful for me.”

- Lionel, Senior Technical Officer

Under Physical Well-Being, there is a wide array of programmes and policies to ensure that employees stay healthy, productive and happy. Activity Hour (i.e. one hour time-off every Friday) and monetary subsidies for coaching fees/rental of sports facilities are given to incentivize employees to stay active and fit. Employees also participate in various sporting activities that enable friendly competition amongst work units, and targeted health and fitness intervention programmes.

Some of the physical well-being initiatives that have benefitted the older officers include the health screening programme. PUB provides free annual basic health screening to all its employees. With effect from this year, in addition to the free basic health screening, employees will now be eligible for a comprehensive health screening programme on a biennial basis. Under the programme, PUB will co-pay a portion of the comprehensive health screening package. The comprehensive health screening programme complements the various staff well-being activities to improve employees' physical health. It will also enable employees to take personal responsibility of their health and preventive care so that they can continue to be productive.

PUB also takes care of employees' economic well-being. One of the initiatives/schemes is the tripartite insurance scheme. Under the scheme, the employer, union and employee each pays one-third of the premium. PUB also has a flexible benefits scheme which employees can utilise for childcare, travel, membership for fitness centres etc.

Mental Well-Being is yet another employee support scheme to help employees manage the non-work aspects of their lives – i.e. to take care of employees' mental health. To help employees manage their personal issues or crises, PUB has an external counselling service for employees to seek counselling through the telephone or face-to-face. Other activities, such as family day, inter-department games etc. are organized to encourage bonding and promote mental well-being.

Besides having a systematic approach in its work-life and staff well-being initiatives, the framework includes key drivers and stakeholders to ensure success in its work-life initiatives. The Senior Management supports the initiatives and participates in some of the activities. Communication is vital to ensure that officers participate in the programmes and feedback is obtained so that review and fine-tuning of activities and policies can be done.

Evaluating the effectiveness of age-friendly work-life programmes / practices.

Companies that actively help people steer clear of the collision of their personal and professional lives by providing elder care arrangements, healthcare talks and even recreational activities tend to outperform those which do not have a comprehensive work-life programme. Needless to say, PUB's work-life programmes have reaped handsome rewards. The accolades earned by PUB are a testimony of the management's faith and trust in its work-life programmes.

PUB won the Platinum Award in the Singapore Helping Employees Achieve Life-Time Health (HEALTH) Award in 2010. This is the highest recognition given to companies that have implemented staff well-being programmes which are sustained, focused and innovative. PUB was also conferred the Service Quality Award in 2008, the highest national award given to organisations that have achieved all-round organisational excellence. As a winner of the 2010 AARP International Innovative Employer Award, PUB is among the world's top 15 best employers for adopting innovative human resource and workforce practices to engage older employees.

Employees in PUB are appreciative of the benefits and work-life programmes available to them. In the 2009 PUB Employee Opinion Survey, 87% of the respondents were happy that they have work-life integration and employee engagement took a high score of 81%. To remain as an employer of choice, the organisation will remain sensitive to the needs of employees and continue to invest in work-life programmes that are impactful and cost effective in the long-run.

“It makes business sense to engage the older employees as they are experienced and knowledgeable. They also tend to be more dependable and task focused. The re-employed older employees also require minimum training and are able to commence work quickly and professionally. They are able to help us meet organisation's short term manpower needs as their flexible work arrangements allow for flexibility in manpower management. Besides, the older workforce has valuable experience and expertise which we can tap on. Given their vast experience, they can be mentors and trainers to our younger officers.”

*Lawrence Tan, Director, Human resources
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