

Asia business

Business



Singapore, a small country with no natural resources, realised from the day it attained independence the critical role productivity would play and that workers, employers, and government had to pool their efforts and strive for continuing increases in productivity and output in all enterprises. Since then, there has been a continuous push for greater efficiency and effectiveness. The knowledge workers will be the protagonist of the future since their skills will shape innovation and the growth of competitiveness that economies are claiming.

Companies need to be prepared for the future changes and need to have sound strategies in place in order to benefit from them. At the same time, the public sector will experience the same challenges, but including also the need to facilitate the establishment of a flexible working environment.

Singapore has no choice but to join the network. The nations that can ride the fast-moving waves of information technology are the ones that will succeed. The Republic's President, His Excellency S. R.

Nathan in his address at the opening of the second session of the ninth parliament, Singapore legislative body, in 1999 said, 'the new millennium brings exciting challenges. In the last four decades we have laid a firm foundation for the future. Now we have to build on it; we have to respond creatively to the challenges of globalization and the knowledge-based economy' (Bawany 2002). According to a survey conducted by PricewaterhouseCoopers (2010), despite the current downturn, 99% of CEOs in the Asia-Pacific region still believe that attracting and retaining key talent is critical to sustaining long-term growth for any business.

The Singapore Human Resources Institute (SHRI) has also reported that the demand for knowledge workers will remain throughout the region (SHRI 2010). Then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in an interview with the Far Eastern Economic Review in 1998 said, 'given the small geographical size of Singapore and the competition that we face in the region, we just have to emphasise on upgrading the human resources. There will be more emphasis on education, skill upgrading, and preparing Singapore for a more intensely knowledge-based economy' (Bawany 2002).

Similarly Dr Tony Tan, then Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence delivered a speech in 1999 at The Business Week President's Forum, where he spelt out the Singapore Government efforts in the transition of Singapore into a knowledge-based economy. Dr Tan stated, 'in a knowledge-based economy, the key resource of a country is skilled people and the products of a knowledge-based economy are directly based on the production, distribution and use of knowledge and information.

Intellectual Capital becomes the key source of competitive advantage for a nation' (Bawany 2002). Essentially, it refers to a transformed economy where investment in knowledge based assets such as R&D, design, software, and human and organisational capital has become the dominant form of investment compared with investment in physical assets - machines, equipment, buildings and vehicles. Thus, the term KBE captures the subsequently changed industrial structure, ways of working, and the basis on which organisations compete and excel.

According to a labour force survey (refer to Appendix A) done by Ministry of Manpower (MOM) Singapore, the professionals, managers, executives and technicians (PMETs) form a total of 64. 2% of the nations employments, and has been rising at a steady rate since the late 1990s (refer to Appendix B). With human capital as its only resource, Singapore has depended on education and training as critical cornerstones of its productivity strategy.

The Skills Development Fund, Institute for Productivity Training, on-the-job training (Ministry of Trade and Industry 2010), and critical enabling skills training are only a few of the initiatives developed to equip workers with the foundation and technical and managerial skills to enable them to perform better. The aim is to develop workers who are not just highly skilled but multi-skilled and not just passive technicians but knowledge workers who are able to think, use information, and be innovative.

With the knowledge content of all work increasing steadily, all workers will require more knowledge to perform their jobs. Jobs at the lower end will need higher minimum skills than before. At the higher end, managers must be able to manage knowledge better in the organization. Facilitating infrastructure and systems must be put in place to ensure that the skill requirements are met and to provide organizations with a systematic process for reviewing their human resources practices and developing people to achieve better business results.

Associate Professor Thomas Menkhoff of the Lee Kong Chian School of Business said, 'there are opportunities for local companies to specialise in knowledge-intensive services, whether it's in the health industry or port

maintenance industry. There are many fields where Singapore has gained lots of experiences which could be captured and brought to those who need it' (ChannelNewsAsia 2010). Experts said Singapore is in a good position to share its soft skills to help knowledge-based development among its ASEAN neighbours.

Dr Derek Chen, Economist, World Bank Institute, stated, 'many of them are not really able to create new knowledge so we need to show them how to use existing knowledge to develop its own economy' (ChannelNewsAsia 2010). It can be concluded that knowledge workers do occupy a privileged position in today's economy, and evidently, Singapore is no exception. The push towards knowledge-based industries is set to sustain Singapore's economic growth in the next five to ten years, according to experts at a knowledge governance conference organised by Singapore Management University (SMU).

Knowledge-based development has become the driving force behind modern economies and Singapore is among those making the push towards knowledge-based industries and higher research and development (Barney 2002). In order to become a KBE, Singapore will need human and intellectual capital to create, absorb, process and apply knowledge, a strong technological capability, an entrepreneurial culture, an open cosmopolitan society attractive to global talent, and connections to other global knowledge nodes.

In short, success increasingly depends on individual and collective abilities to produce and use knowledge, and knowledge workers are a key factor in helping to realise this vision.

REFERENCE LIST

1. Alvesson, M 2004, Knowledge work and knowledge-intensive firms, Oxford University Press, Oxfordshire, England.
2. Anderson Consulting 1998, Knowledge Workers Revealed: New Challenges for Asia, Economist Intelligence Unit, Hong Kong.
3. Barney, J 2002, 'Firm resources and sustained competitive advantage' Journal of Management, vol. 3, no. 17, pp. 99-120.
4. Bawany, S 2000, 'Managing In The Knowledge Based-Economy', Hay Learning Services Asia Business Unit, Singapore, 2 January 2002.
5. ChannelNewsAsia 2010, Knowledge-based industries set to sustain Singapore's growth, viewed 8 February 2010, .
6. Cortada, J 1998, Rise of the knowledge worker: Resources for the knowledge-based economy (Knowledge Reader Series), Butterworth-Heinemann, United Kingdom.