

SkillsFuture Level-Up: Policy Suggestions to Improve Success

The SkillsFuture Level-Up programme introduced during the Budget 2024 is commendable. It aims to encourage and support Singaporeans to dedicate significant time, energy and resources to upskill and reskill, as they develop their potential and have productive, purposeful careers. However, mid-career reskilling is not without challenges, even with the generous support from the Government. Thus, we would like to provide some suggestions to improve success.

The Mid-career Conundrum: Time away from the workforce

In a tight labour market, it may be more practical for workers to remain employed while upskilling and reskilling to avoid exacerbating labour supply issues. Employees considering a career-break for skills upgrading may also be concerned that doing so would affect their career prospects. Yet, the downsides of not upskilling and reskilling are dire. Consequently, with the newly introduced Mid-Career Training Allowance capped at \$3,000 monthly, up to 24 months, administrators of this scheme will need to play a critical gatekeeping role to ensure these are genuine learners who seek to upgrade their skillsets and not those looking for a “paid break” away from work, at the expense of taxpayers’ monies.

Alternative Pathways for Skills Refresh

Currently, the Mid-Career Training Allowance only applies for full-time long-form training programmes up to the undergraduate degree level. As suggested in the Singapore National Employers Federation’s (SNEF) response to the Ministry of Education (MOE)’s Committee of Supply (COS) Debate 2024, it would be useful to create another pathway for individuals to take on a part-time diploma, even as they are engaged in part-time work. This will help to reduce labour demand pressures. These individuals should similarly be supported with a training allowance that commensurate with the income reduction from full-time work. This will benefit workers with greater family needs, to work, learn and apply their skills and gain practical industry experience, while earning an income from their part-time job.

Employees are encouraged to discuss how best to manage time away from work in an open and constructive manner and come to a mutual agreement with their employers. Employers can then decide on such training requests given the impact on the individual, team or organisation’s productivity, and work out win-win arrangements for all parties involved.

Employers are also well placed to design and offer on-the-job (OJT) training to their employees, and such training not only ensures skills portability across the organisation, but it also helps to increase business productivity and minimise time-away from the workforce. SNEF and the National Centre of Excellence for Workplace Learning (NACE), led by Nanyang Polytechnic (NYP), renewed our Memorandum of Understanding to promote workplace learning activities. Employers are encouraged to build their capabilities to create structured OJT blueprints and even attain the Certified OJT Centre (COJTC) certification from the Institute of Technical Education (ITE). MOE can consider funding, developing and recognising OJT provided to employees.

Full-time Courses should include an Industry Component

To keep abreast with the industry demands, full-time diploma courses should be complemented with an industry attachment to ensure the learner's job readiness. Polytechnics offer Work-Study diplomas which ensure both quality and relevance of courses.

The Career Conversion Programmes (CCPs), which range between 3 to 24 months, are also a key enabler in helping mid-career individuals make a productive and meaningful career switch with an active industry training component. Individuals are hired by a participating employer before undergoing training or being provided with training and work attachments prior to job placements. CCPs also offer a Job Redesign (JR) Reskilling option, which has been expanded during Budget 2024 for any existing employee taking up jobs in growth sectors. SNEF, as the national trade union for employers, is one of the programme partners that administers the CCP and equips mid-career workers with adjacent or new skills to take on new job roles.

Flexibility in learning delivery

In January 2024, Education Minister Chan Chun Sing spoke about the importance of andragogy and the need to design bite-sized and asynchronous modules for working adults that are accessible anytime, anywhere, for various topics. For working adults, it will be helpful if they can learn conveniently, such as through online bite-size learning, as well as apply their learning and skills effectively at their workplaces and roles. To support reskilling and upskilling efforts in the Training and Adult Education sector, technology and resources such as ClassIn's digital and hybrid learning solutions help deliver high quality learning that enhances the ecosystem for lifelong learning in Singapore and beyond.

Maximising productive longevity

Employers welcome the SkillsFuture enhancements aimed at maximising our human capital. Already, Singapore faces a declining resident population growth rate, an ageing population, and longer lifespans. We would need to maximise the productive longevity of our workforce by upskilling and reskilling our workers for growth sectors, such as the digital and green economy.

First, there needs to be a closer education-industry nexus to ensure industry relevant skills acquisition by learners and not a purely academic pursuit. Therefore, we support Member of Parliament Ms Foo Mee Har's call during the 2024 MOE COS debate to nurture industry-linked training providers who are responsive to the evolving trends and skills demands of each industry. SNEF and Singapore Polytechnic will also be collaborating to establish a new centre that helps students, including mid-career switchers, gain industry exposure and secure employment opportunities. Such efforts ensure that individuals have certainty that their efforts towards skills retraining will lead to positive career outcomes.

Second, employers can take advantage of these enhancements by investing in redesigning jobs for the future economy, especially as jobs get impacted by automation and artificial intelligence. Employers can promote relevant courses to their employees which will result in positive business outcomes. According to the Ministry of Manpower, in 2022, close to 8 in 10 private-sector

employers provided structured training to their employees. Employees in turn should take these courses to continue staying future-ready.

Third, as employees restart their careers at later ages, employers and HR professionals can take steps to strengthen inclusivity within the workplace. Employers should adopt the Tripartite Standard on Age-Friendly Workplace Practices and implement progressive age-friendly practices such as age-friendly jobs in a multigenerational workplace. This will enable line managers to manage diverse teams, appreciating each employee's skillsets and life experiences.

Finally, Singapore could benefit from having a nationally integrated Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)¹ - one that systematically recognises learning outcomes acquired by individuals outside of typical classroom hours, such as at workplaces. Currently, the Singapore Institute of Technology Teaching and Learning Academy (STLA) and Ngee Ann Continuing Education and Training (CET) recognise learner's previously acquired skills and knowledge during their course application.

A skilled workforce, a competitive Singapore

The SkillsFuture Level-Up programme will ensure that Singapore deepens its competitiveness regionally and globally with a skilled and future ready workforce. To make these efforts work, we would need to streamline the reskilling journey towards strong business outcomes, make effective use of andragogy, technology and available resources, as well as allow for flexibility in reskilling options to make it an inclusive effort.

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¹ RPL is a process used by regulatory bodies, adult learning centres, career development practitioners, human resources professionals, employers, training institutions, and universities around the world to evaluate skills and knowledge acquired outside the classroom for the purpose of recognizing competence against a given set of standards, competencies, or learning outcomes.