

PM's call to rethink engineering lauded

Govt to hire more while many in profession bemoan poor prospects, lack of recognition

Calvin Yang

Engineers are hoping for more opportunities to innovate as they progress in their careers, and welcome Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's recent call for Singapore to rethink what engineering means.

They told The Straits Times that their jobs are limited to behind-the-scenes roles and their salaries do not match up with market benchmarks. Some raised concerns that mid-level engineers are not adequately compensated, unlike those in the financial sector.

During a visit to Silicon Valley in California last week, PM Lee met engineers – including Singaporeans working there – who expressed concerns about the situation here.

He agreed that Singapore firms do not always treat engineering as the core of the business, an attitude which needs to change. "They see it as a support function – my computer is broken, call an engineer and fix it... we really need to reposition our conception of what engineering is about, and how important engineering is to us."

Mr Lee's remarks come as the civil service pushes for more engineers in its ranks.

The gross monthly starting salary of engineering graduates from the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technological University (NTU) who started work

in 2014 was \$3,000 to \$3,770, according to the Manpower Ministry.

Despite his starting pay of \$3,300 being higher than most of his peers from other professions, process engineer Chua Qiru, 28, who works for an engineering procurement and construction firm, is worried that his increments as he progresses may not be as promising.

Some engineers with a few years of experience said their annual pay

increase can be as little as \$100.

Ms Eve Yap, director of marketing and corporate communications at ManpowerGroup Singapore, said the income gap between professional engineers and other professionals like doctors and lawyers "may be at least 1.5 times" as their careers progress.

People tend to shun the profession for other fields like banking as they perceive it to be dull, not as high-paying in the long term and involving work that gets their hands dirty.

Computer engineer Kevin Ong, 34, said engineers put in long hours but receive little recognition.

"Singapore is not suited for engineers who are innovators," said Mr Ong, who has been with a multinational corporation for the past four years. "There's this perception that engineers maintain things and do mundane tasks but we consider ourselves to possess more than that."

However, engineering courses continue to attract steady intakes. Last year, NTU took in more than 2,700 engineering students, and NUS accepted over 1,400, figures similar to those in previous years.

Other universities such as the Singapore University of Technology and Design and Singapore Institute of Tech-

nology, as well as private schools, also offer engineering courses.

Earlier this week, Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean said the Government will hire 1,000 engineers this year, expanding the existing pool by over 13 per cent. There are about 7,700 engineers in the public service. The Government will also review the salaries of public-sector engineers.

Mr Liu Fook Thim, 54, who was in the pioneer engineering class at the then Nanyang Technological Institute in 1981, hopes these new hires can be tapped to "lead and apply new technologies".

Mr Chong Kee Sen, president of the Institution of Engineers, Singapore, pointed out that the future economy will be driven by technology, and requires people with such expertise. He said job satisfaction has to be looked at too.

Engineers in the public service are doing more project management and coordination than hands-on engineering, he noted.

"The job itself must be interesting and challenging," he added. "If they don't have passion for their jobs, then it may be hard to retain them."

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