

Construction sector must attract more Singaporeans to build strong local core

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THE construction industry must do more to attract Singaporeans so that the sector is anchored by a skilled and competent local workforce at the core, said Zaqy Mohamad, Minister of State for National Development and Manpower on Wednesday.

He called on the private sector to invest in local graduates in order for business growth to be sustainable for the future.

Speaking at an industry seminar, he said the government wants to build a pipeline of skilled local graduates from the country's institutions of higher learning (IHLs), and mid-career professionals in particular in engineering and project management.

He noted that the sector has made significant progress in its transformation journey.

"We now have more developers, construction firms and facilities management companies on board that have built capabilities to deliver projects that involve DfMA, IDD as well as green buildings," said Mr Zaqy.

DfMA and IDD refers to Design for Manufacturing Assembly and Integrated Digital Delivery respectively.

Local builders have the expertise and capabilities to undertake complex, large-scale projects such as Jewel Changi Airport and Gardens by the Bay, he said.

"To sustain the good progress we have made in our transformation journey, the built environment sector also needs to be anchored by a skilled and competent local workforce at the core," he said.

Over the years, construction was always perceived to be a 'brick-and-mortar' industry.

Compared to manufacturing, services, banking and technology, many locals opted to join sectors that seemed to have better working environments and less manual work.

Using traditional design and construction methods, employers could readily find less-skilled, lower-cost foreign workers to fulfil these jobs in the industry, he said.

Putting the two factors together, we have observed that the proportion of the construction industry's professionals, managers, executives and technicians (PMETs) jobs taken up by locals has been less and less, he said.

"We have seen that fall over the past decade, even though our total local PMET population has increased," said Mr Zaqy.



The construction industry has made significant progress in its transformation journey, with local builders acquiring the expertise to deliver large-scale projects. BT FILE PHOTO

The government is investing significantly to transform the sector to create better jobs for Singaporeans and improve the productivity and output of all our firms, he said. "Therefore, it is important that we ensure that the sector continues to be driven by a skilled and capable Singapore core, to lead and drive the sector into the future."

At the PMET level, many new and attractive jobs have been created such as "digital delivery manager" and "buildings digital lead", high value-added jobs that allow local PMETs to take on meaningful roles.

Besides building a pipeline of skilled local graduates, the government is also bringing buyers and developers on board, to create a healthy environment where contracts are awarded based on quality, he said.

Competency-based procurement will create conducive market conditions that reward professionals who are prepared to upgrade and enhance their skills, he said. These will be supported by initiatives such as iBuildSG Scholarships and Sponsorships and IHLs work-study programmes.

The government has worked with the industry and IHLs to develop the Built Environment Skills Framework, which will be launched later this year. The framework will chart out career progression pathways for key job roles in the sector.

But more remains to be done, he said. For example, in 2018, the Building and Construction Authority launched the Building Information Modelling (BIM) professional conversion programme (PCP), which supports mid-career PMETs to acquire the necessary competencies to embark on a career as BIM professionals.

"However, few firms have taken

this up, as compared to the PCPs in other sectors such as healthcare and manufacturing. So, we will need to work with you to help more fresh graduates and mid-careers enter the sector," said Mr Zaqy.

The nature of the construction business is that firms have to start work immediately after clinching a project, said Kenneth Loo, immediate past-president of the Singapore Contractors Association Ltd (SCAL).

Most projects take two to three years to complete and the countdown starts straight after the job is awarded, he said. "When you get the job – you're off running straightaway. You don't have the luxury of actually training people," he said on the sidelines of the seminar.

Most construction firms "need ready-made personnel" while training can take a couple of months, added Mr Loo, who is also executive director at Straits Construction.

To attract more locals and, critically, retain them in a sector which is seen as more demanding than other industries, some practices have to change in line with what's expected by job seekers, said Mr Loo.

The industry needs to make jobs and prospects as attractive as other industries, he said.

Giving an example, he said it used to be a seven-day working week, which has now been reduced to six days. Work sites operate on a six-day week. But this may need to move to a five-day week as work-life balance is important for young people, though he stressed that the five-day week is not a "silver bullet".

SCAL will be coming out with a career progression programme for the industry, he said.