Four ways to raise productivity

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From around 10 per cent a year in the 1960s and 1970s, our rate of economic growth dropped by almost half to around 5 per cent a year in the 2000s. The Government forecasts this year's growth rate to be less than 2 per cent. Clearly, the future will be challenging.

The Committee on the Future Economy is working hard on a plan for our future economic growth.

It surely is hearing a lot about the Internet of Things, machine learning, robotics and 3D printing.

But we can also enhance productivity and increase growth more simply and more prosaically by refocusing on desired outcomes.

Let me present four suggestions, none of which involves any costly investments in technology, just a change of thinking.

Sick leave, currently, people who seek medical leave from work must visit a registered medical practitioner to get a medical certificate, even if they need just one or two days to get over a cold. This practice consumes physicians' resources as well as patients' time and travel expenditure. Worse, it exposes people to cross infections from other sick people at the clinic.

Now consider people who run their own businesses. Do they require a medical certificate to take a few rest days? Surely not. Why can't we change our system of short-term medical leave to an honour system?

The Heritage Garden at the Botanic Gardens. The greenery throughout the island distinguishes Singapore from many other cities but there is also a huge amount of maintenance work, says the writer, who suggests that rather than clear flat areas and slopes and plant them with grass, it would be much cheaper to leave them to grow wild. ST PHOTO: CHEW SENG KIM

Let workers decide whether or not to take sick leave, subject to some administrative limits. We could apply the same to schools and possibly save parents and students time and effort, and improve health.

Landscaping the greenery throughout our island distinguishes Singapore from many other cities, and helps to make our homeland very liveable. However, our Garden City depends on a small army of foreign workers to maintain trees, trim bushes, cut grass, and so on. All those trees, bushes and grass add up to a huge amount of maintenance work.

Rather than clear flat areas and slopes and plant them with grass, wouldn't it be equally green (indeed, ecologically more authentic) and much less costly to leave them to grow wild? National University of Singapore architecture professor Hwang Yun Hye has demonstrated that this works on campus.

If rolled out nationally, we could save thousands of man-hours of foreign labour.