

COMMENTARY

Silent majority must speak out: Anti-foreign sentiment is detrimental to the economy

Most businesses are doing the right thing by their Singaporean talent, and they work hard to successfully integrate local and foreign talent in their teams

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The vast majority of businesses in Singapore do right by their employees, customers and the community in which they live and work. BT FILE PHOTO

TEN years ago, Singapore saw its first outbreak of anti-foreign sentiment, or xenophobia, since independence in the run-up to, during and after General Election 2011. Then, the issue was rapid population growth in the first decade of this century without enough infrastructure to support it.

Today, the business community and society are experiencing another bout of anti-foreign sentiment caused by the economic fallout of the pandemic. This is dangerous to Singapore's hub status for business and talent. It undermines the exceptional Singapore brand and, consequently, is detrimental for employment opportunities for the Singaporean core. The silent majority needs to speak out against anti-foreign sentiment now with one voice. This is important and urgent.

Who are the silent majority?

The vast majority of businesses in Singapore do right by their employees, customers and the community in which they live and work. They do not need to be convinced that it is morally just as well as cheaper to employ suitably qualified Singaporeans rather than import talent.

However, where there are capabilities and skills gaps locally, businesses do need access to the right talent internationally in order to compete, grow and serve their customers. This has always been the case for Singapore and, even with major skills enhancements, such a gap will - due to the way businesses and technologies evolve - always be the case. To pretend otherwise is to deny the last 200 years of economic development and history and, indeed, to lie.

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No country and certainly no city-state can produce all the human capital it needs to drive its economy. A city-state has no option but to be open to global talent. That talent can create knowledge transfer and jobs for Singaporeans.

The best businesses know this and work hard to integrate local and foreign talent in their teams. When done well, all learn from one another and contribute to the success of the business they work in, the customers they serve and the community at large.

These businesses do not talk publicly about what they do. They are too busy serving their customers and developing their teams. However, they need to change that approach to counter a vocal minority in this country who are peddling untruths about talent and driving division. Now is the time for all businessmen and women of goodwill to speak up.

Who are the vocal minority?

Social media gives everyone a voice. Not only the carefully considered one, but also the unenlightened individual who should know better, the bad actors whose sole aim is to sow discord just for the sake of it and those people who genuinely believe they are losing out to foreigners. Why do the latter feel this way?

They feel this way when they lose their jobs and seek someone to blame. That is basic human nature. I felt like that initially too when I was retrenched nine years ago.

Unlike nine years ago, there is now so much help available to job seekers and especially to mature job seekers. When I calmed down, I realised that being retrenched was not the end of the world and that it is very often a blessing in disguise.

It was an opportunity to change. All of us when faced with a life or job crisis need to first look into the mirror before looking out the window as Jim Collins, author of, among others, Good To Great reminds us. We need to look into the mirror and take responsibility for our attitudes, our achievements, our failures, our strengths and our weaknesses before we look outside ourselves - or out the window - to find someone else to blame.

What can be done?

Foreigners will not displace Singaporeans because the government and its policies will not permit it. The Singapore government's sole aim is to provide the maximum benefit to the maximum number of its citizens.

We are lucky to live in Singapore and lucky to have a government which has a razor-sharp focus on delivering optimal outcomes in the best long-term interests of Singapore and of Singaporeans. These include this city-state remaining open for business and open to global talent.

But, I hear you say, what about those 47 companies recently placed on the watch list by the Ministry of Manpower? My response is - do not look for absolute perfection in the business community because you will not find it any more than any of us are perfect.

There are hundreds of thousands of companies in Singapore run by humans who sometimes err. Some businesses will try and get away with what is convenient, just as we will always have to deal with frauds and thefts.

The difference today is companies like those 47 on the watch list will not get away with their bad practices any longer. The government is not afraid to act and has done so.

In the spirit of improving matters for everyone in Singapore, I have two suggestions for the Ministry of Manpower to consider.

The first is to act sooner. Would it not be possible to upgrade systems and monitor each company's employment pass applications to ensure that no one foreign nationality is favoured and foreign talent does not form the majority of a company's workforce? An early intervention would be far better than having to manage a watch list both for the ministry and for the companies concerned.

The second suggestion is that the ministry comes clean about the Singaporean core. It is a good idea or aspiration but it is not achievable across all sectors. The government and companies are hard at work with constant skills upgrading, but technologies and businesses evolve and there will always be a skills gap that requires international movement of talent.

It is also a fact that there are many jobs which Singaporeans do not want to do. Our economy has a very high percentage of PMET roles when compared to many other countries. Would it not be far better to ensure that Singaporeans are enabled to work in their preferred sectors and allow businesses to import a controlled number of foreign workers for other sectors?

In conclusion

To build a better Singapore and sustain a vibrant economy, Singapore needs all the quality local and foreign talent it can attract and retain. We as a society need to accept the constraints a city-state like ours has to live with and manage.

I call on the Tripartite Partners to speak up against the current counter-productive and downright dangerous anti-foreign sentiment. I call on the silent majority of businesses to speak up and let more people know that most businesses are doing the right thing by their Singaporean talent and will continue to do right by them.

Businesses need to highlight the amazing development journeys so many Singaporeans experience as a result of a diverse and inclusive workforce. Rather than navel gazing or tearing at each other, we all need to come together to find, develop and exploit those new capabilities, skills, products and services which will keep us relevant to the rest of the world. This is the goal to which our collective energies must be devoted.

- **The writer is chief executive of Singapore International Chamber of Commerce. Born in Northern Ireland, he arrived in Singapore in 1985 as an international bank executive and became a naturalised Singapore citizen in 2012.**

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