

Workplace Success and Soft Skills: Bridging the Gap Between Youths' Perceptions and Employers' Expectations

(APL-0344-2025-EXP-01)

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- **Youth Openness to Job Changes:** Across all age groups of youths currently in employment, about 68% reported being either actively or passively open to new job opportunities.
- **Least Satisfied Areas At Work:** Key factors include team culture, career advancement, and salary.
- **Employment Priorities:** The top two financial priorities for youths were financial gain and job stability, followed by flexible working arrangements. Priorities differed slightly across education and age groups, with younger post-graduates (aged 18–25) emphasising meaningful work, and secondary-educated youths prioritising flexible work across all age groups.
- **Motivations to Perform Well:** Motivational factors of youths to perform well at work include flexible working arrangements, financial incentives, and career advancement opportunities. More specifically, younger youths (aged 18–25) ranked autonomy as a motivator above career advancement opportunities.
- **Soft Skills Valued:** Employers prioritise problem-solving and soft skills more than youths in all age groups realise, with younger youths (aged 18–25) specifically, placing greater emphasis on emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills, compared to problem-solving.
- **Soft Skills Acquisition:** Youths generally prefer learning through experience and formal courses, with the latter especially valued by older youths and those with higher qualifications. Employers, however, emphasise mentoring and coaching.



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The study, "*Workplace Success and Soft Skills: Bridging the Gap Between Youths' Perceptions and Employers' Expectations*", addresses what youths believe is necessary for success and what employers actually expect, especially concerning soft skills, which were defined as personal attributes that enhance an individual's interactions and his/her job performance.

Background

This project is co-funded by Tote Board.

Importance of the Problem

Today's youths, often termed 'digital natives', are immersed in an environment characterised by rapid technological advancements, structural changes, and global economic uncertainties, which has profoundly shaped their outlook on life trajectories.

Given that youths make up more than a quarter of Singapore's workforce, this makes it critical to understand their priorities and challenges, and how these align with employer expectations. Past studies in this space tend to generalise youths, which may overlook youth differences across life stages and educational backgrounds. For instance, approximately 40% of youths are expected to pursue alternative educational pathways other than university* (Ministry of Education, Singapore, 2025), reflecting diversity in skills, experiences, and perspectives of the younger workforce. Tailored insights would help organisations foster stronger, more productive relationships with their younger workforce.

The current study looked to segment youths by age and educational level while also incorporating employer perspectives. This dual approach provides a nuanced understanding of youth employability and generates actionable insights for organisations, educators, and policymakers.

*Ministry of Education, Singapore. (23 Sep, 2025). *Learn for Life: Forging Our Collective Future*. Retrieved from Ministry of Education, Singapore: <https://www.moe.gov.sg/news/press-releases/20230301-learn-for-life-forging-our-collective-future>

Purpose of this Research

The primary purpose of the research bridges the gap between what local youths perceive as essential for workplace success and what employers expect in Singapore, specifically focusing on soft skills.

The study adopted a more nuanced approach by segmenting youth into distinct age brackets (18–25, 26–30, and 31–35) and educational backgrounds (Secondary, Post-Secondary, Diploma/Bachelor, and Post-graduate) to provide a tailored and accurate understanding of their needs. It also included the voice of employers (represented by hiring managers) to share a balanced perspective and to catalyse future conversations relating to the topic at hand.

Focus of Study

Relevance of the Study

Policymakers and the Nation

The study helps reinforce Singapore's dedication to equipping youths with future-ready skills and supports the SG60 vision of building a resilient workforce. It helps policymakers recognise what youths and employers are looking out for, in designing policies that are more precisely aligned with the diverse and evolving needs of the younger local workforce.

Employers and Organisations

The study provides employers with critical insights needed to better attract, nurture, support, and retain youth employees, through the shaping of effective talent management strategies and interventions.

Educational Institutions

The findings can help institutions prioritise key soft skills when preparing youths for the workplace, while supporting stronger collaboration with industry.

Youths in Singapore

For youth employees, the study provides valuable clarity on the skills, competencies, and attributes required for successful employment.

Interventions as Next Steps

This project is designed as a first step in a multi-year effort to develop research-informed solutions in youth employability and skills development. The findings are intended to drive meaningful action to address the disconnect between youth perceptions and employer expectations. The subsequent years will see SUSS working closely with the four self-help groups in Singapore namely, Chinese Development Assistance Council (CDAC), Eurasian Association (EA), Singapore Indian Development Association (SINDA), and Council for the Development of Singapore Malay/Muslim Community (MENDAKI), to co-design contextualised initiatives that will meet the evolving needs of different youth segments, for a more responsive and resilient younger workforce.

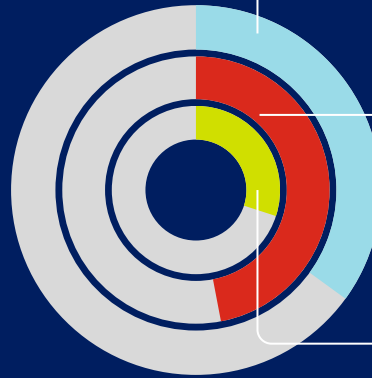
KEY FINDINGS

Youth Openness to Job Changes

68%



of local youths in jobs are actively or passively job hunting.



35%

Aged 18–25 in jobs had the highest proportion actively seeking new jobs.^{#^}

47%

Aged 26–30 in jobs had the highest proportion passively open to new jobs.[#]

30%

Aged 31–35 in jobs had the largest share not considering a job change.[#]

These figures highlight notable differences in mobility across age groups, providing a nuanced view of workforce engagement at different career stages.

*# Percentages based on respondents within the same age group
^ 94% of those surveyed (18-25) are employed*

Least Satisfied Areas at Work

Recurring themes suggest that workplace concerns extend beyond pay, with interpersonal dynamics and growth opportunities playing an important role in shaping overall job satisfaction for retention.



Team Culture & Relationships



Career Advancement



Salary & Benefits

More Observations

Aged 18-25

Post-graduate youths dissatisfied with the lack of opportunities to learn and grow.

Aged 26-30

Post-Secondary/ Professional Qualification youths dissatisfied with work-life balance over career advancement.

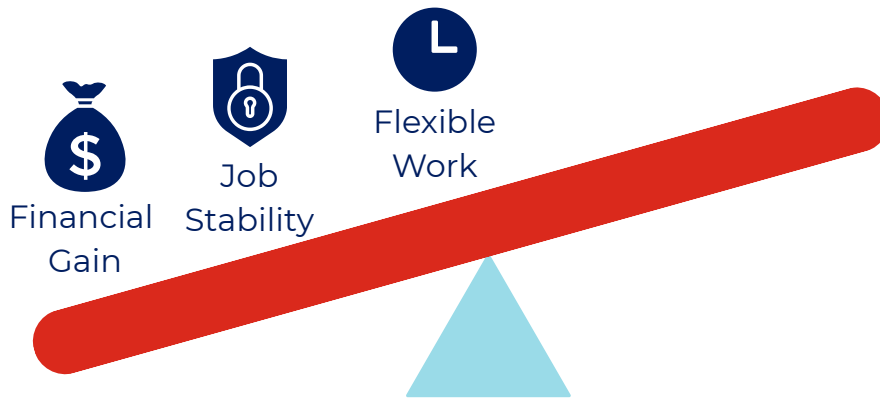
Aged 31-35

Post-graduate youths dissatisfied with purpose and impact of their work.

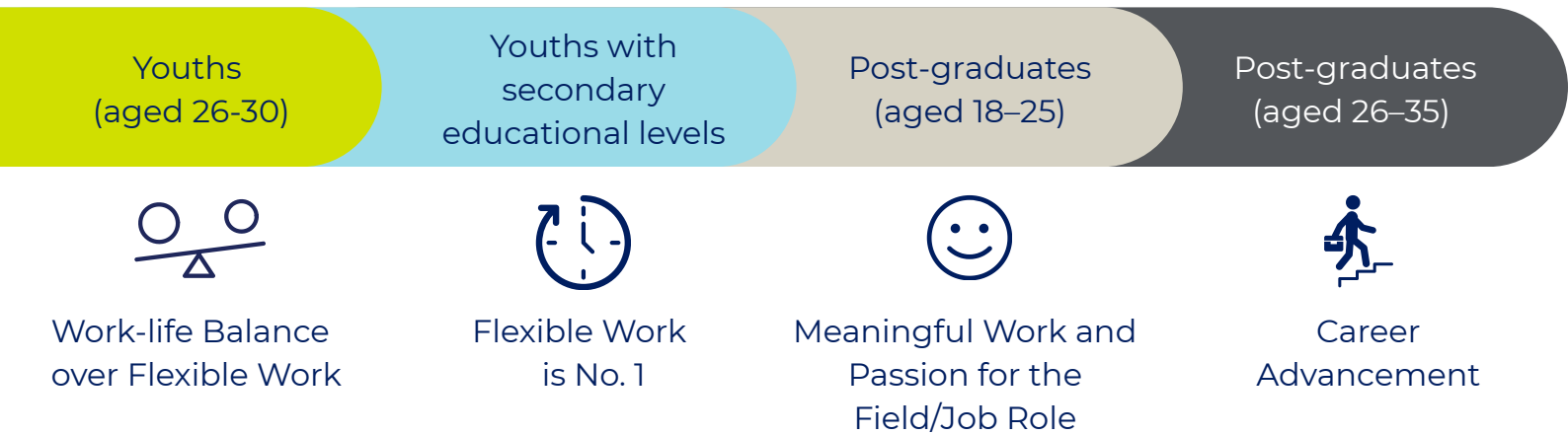
For postgrad youths, career advancement does not feature.

Employment Priorities

What youths prioritise in employment



More Observations



Motivations to Perform Well

Across all age groups, flexible working arrangements and financial incentives consistently emerged as the main motivators for youths to perform well at work.

Differences also emerged by education level: secondary-educated youths valued recognition from supervisors and supportive bosses, underscoring varied engagement needs.



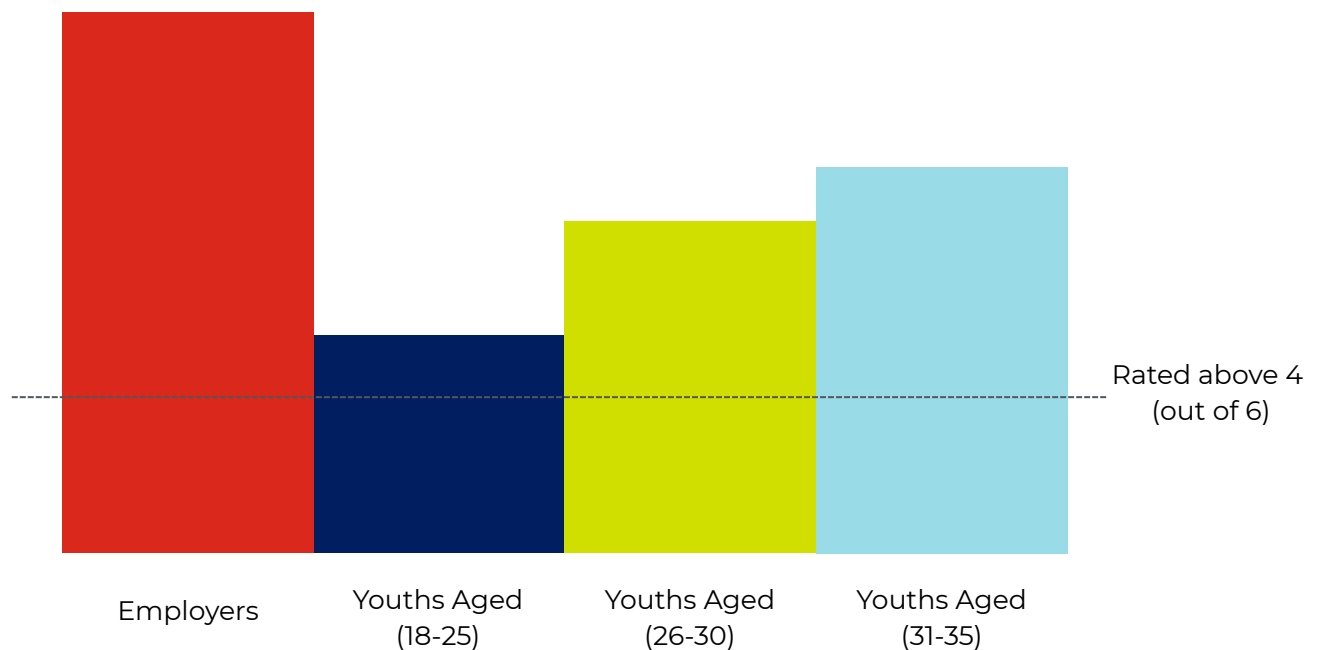
Being entrusted with a personal project also gives me like a sense of motivation... I think that gave me a sense of motivation, because I know that if the product is successful, it might be in the market... and people could build on my work and develop it.

– Verbatim from a Youth (21-year-old, Diploma holder) during a Focus Group Discussion

Soft Skills Valued

Both employers and youths recognise the growing importance of soft skills in today's workplace. While all age groups of youths value soft skills, employers place an even higher emphasis on them, highlighting the need for communication, adaptability, and teamwork alongside technical know-how.

Importance of Soft Skills (vs Hard Skills)



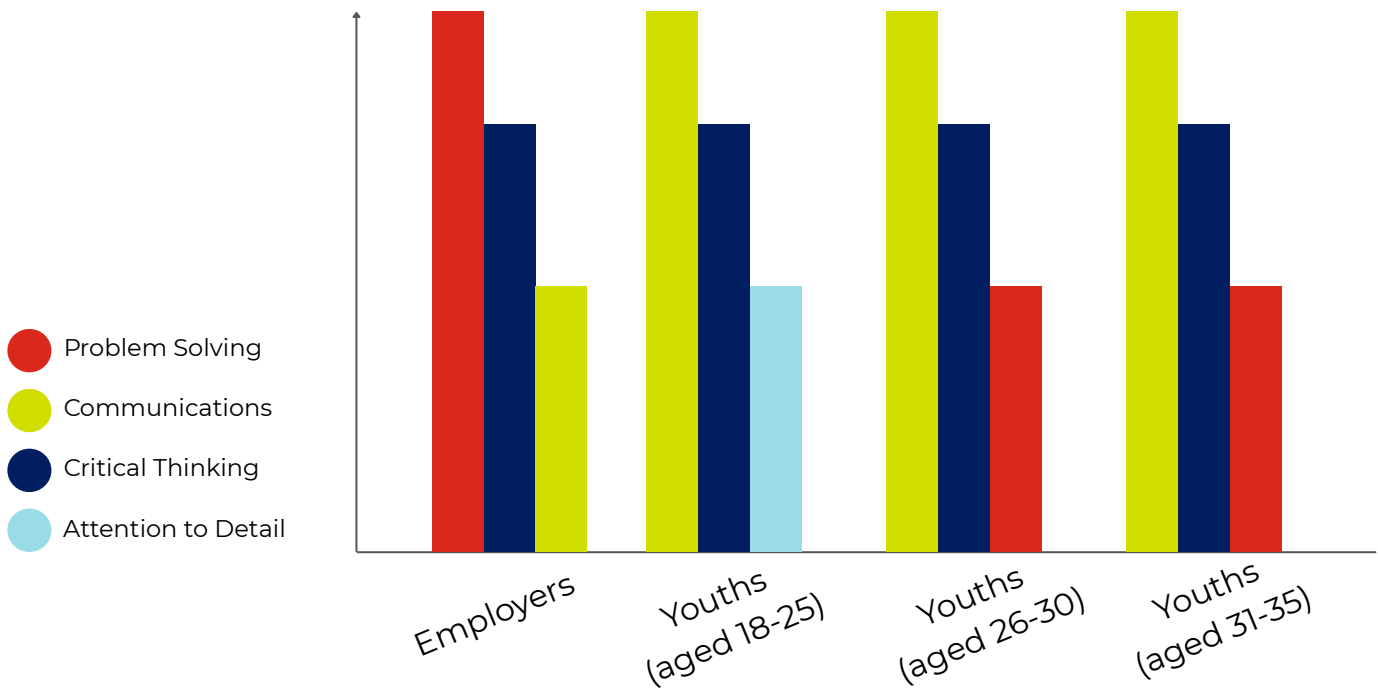
Note:

Soft skills: Defined as personal attributes that enhance an individual's interactions and his/her job performance.

Hard skills: Defined as skills related to technical aspects to do some tasks in the job and frequently requires the acquisition of knowledge.

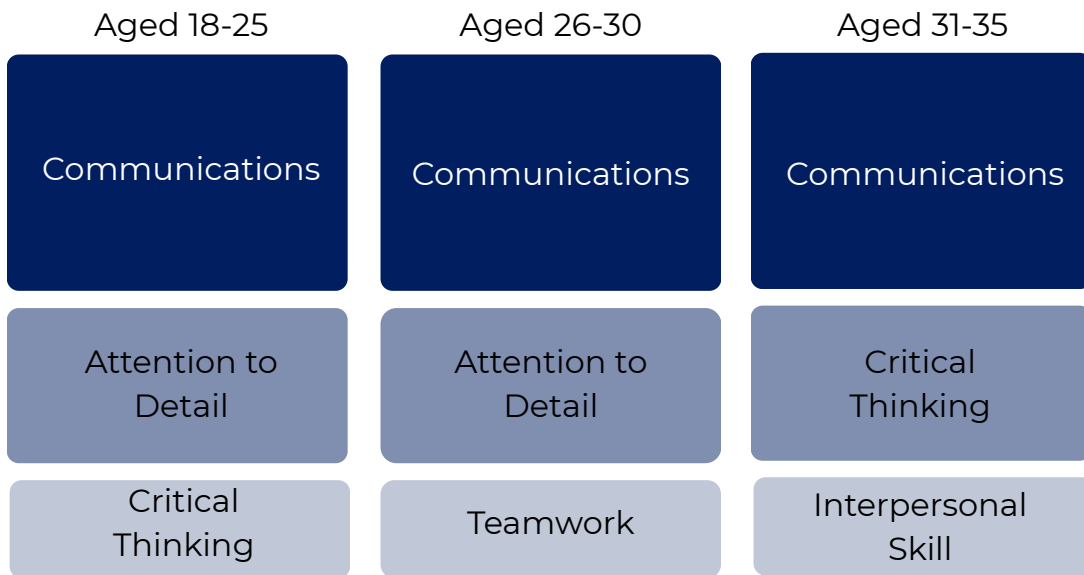
Soft Skills Valued

Ranked Importance of Soft Skills



Compared to youths' perceptions, employers prioritise problem-solving and soft skills more than youths in all age groups realise.

Perceived Strengths By Youths



Communication leads across all ages, with younger youths emphasising detail orientation, while older youths lean on people skills.

Soft Skills Acquisition

Best Learning Methods



Youths (aged 31-35) and those with higher qualifications prefer



External courses

Youths (aged 18-30) with Secondary Qualifications prioritise



In-house training

Post-secondary Youths (aged 18-30) emphasise

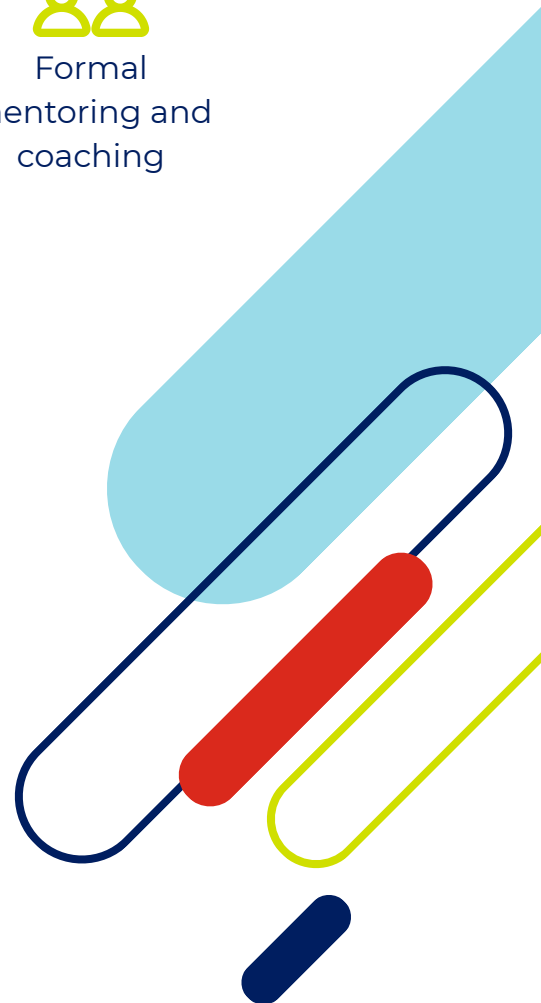


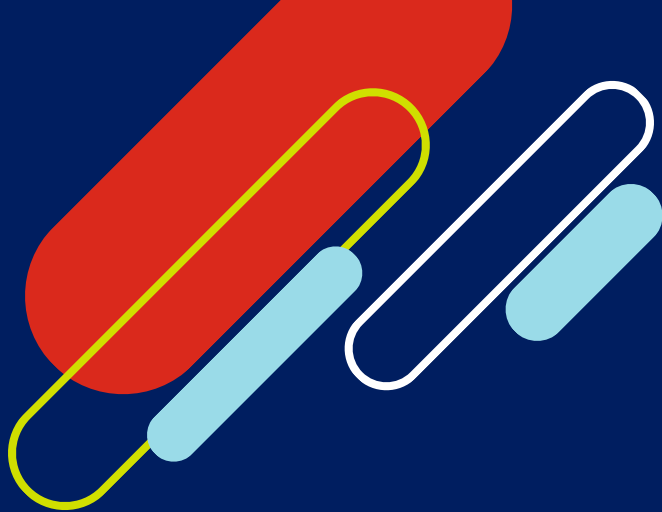
Self-directed learning over peer learning

Additional emphasised method



Formal mentoring and coaching





SIGNIFICANCE OF FINDINGS

Policymakers and the Nation

The findings highlight the need for policies that strengthen youths' soft skills, support structured mentorship, and create meaningful work opportunities. Targeted initiatives that address the diverse priorities of youths across ages and education levels, such as balancing financial stability with autonomy and purpose would aid in creating a more future-ready and resilient younger workforce.

Employers and Organisations

Employers can tailor attraction, engagement and retention strategies to the motivations of youths. Entrusting younger youths with meaningful roles and a reasonable degree of autonomy in tasks would encourage innovation and new ways of doing things. Strengthening internal capabilities for contextual in-house training and structured coaching, given these are identified as most effective approaches for building soft skills, would better support capability development. Additionally, focused development in problem-solving, emotional intelligence, and interpersonal skills would help close gaps between employers' expectations and youths' competencies, enhancing workforce readiness and retention.

Educational Institutions

Educational institutions should give deliberation to the integration of soft skills development and experiential learning into curricula. Continued collaborations with employers through internships, projects, and mentorship programmes would ensure youths acquire workplace-relevant skills and are better prepared for employment.

Youths in Singapore

Youths in Singapore often underestimate how much employers value problem-solving and interpersonal skills. Focusing on developing these skills can significantly enhance career readiness and opportunities.



RESEARCH DESIGN

The study adopted a mixed-methods approach to examine alignment between youths' and employers' views on soft skills.

Qualitative phase:

- Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted with youths, segmented by age (18–25, 26–30, 31–35) and highest educational qualification (Secondary, Post-Secondary, Diploma/Bachelor, Post-graduate). One FGD per segment (12 total, 6–8 participants each) explored attitudes towards workplace success and soft skills.
- In-depth Interviews (IDIs) were carried out with 12 employers across six Industry Transformation Map (ITM) clusters to capture expectations of youth competencies.
- Transcripts were then thematically analysed to identify key themes and tensions.

Quantitative phase:

- Insights from the qualitative phase informed a survey targeted at Singaporean/Singaporean Permanent Resident youths aged 18–35.
- A stratified sampling approach was taken, with youths divided into three fairly distributed age groups: 18–25, 26–30, and 31–35 respectively.
- The survey also sampled employers (represented by hiring managers) across the 6 MTI clusters in Singapore: Manufacturing, Built Environment, Trade & Connectivity, Essential Domestic Services, Modern Services, and Lifestyle.
- The sampled employer composition comprised 52% Small and Medium-sized Enterprises, 35% Multinational Corporations, 10% of Government/Government-linked Organisations, and 3% of other types of organisations.
- The final dataset yielded more than 1,000 youths (aged 18–35) and over 260 employers.

This sequential design allowed in-depth exploration of perspectives to inform the framing of the survey questionnaire that was administered at scale, providing both nuance and breadth.

Note:

- *Subgroup differences by education should be interpreted as indicative due to smaller sample sizes, while still offering valuable insights into nuanced perspectives.*



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NOTES ON KEY FINDINGS

Youth Openness to Job Changes

Across all age groups of youths currently in employment, about 68% reported being either actively or passively open to new job opportunities. The question asked had a valid response rate of approximately 93% among all youths surveyed (after including those not currently employed). Among them, the 18-25 age group in employment had the highest proportion actively seeking new roles (35%), while the 31-35 group had the largest share not considering a job change (30%). These figures highlight notable differences in mobility across age groups, providing a nuanced view of workforce engagement at different career stages.

Least Satisfied Areas at Work

When asked about areas of least satisfaction in their current jobs, youths across all age groups most frequently cited three factors: team culture and relationships, career advancement, and salary and benefits. These recurring themes suggest that workplace concerns extend beyond pay, with interpersonal dynamics and growth opportunities playing an important role in shaping overall job satisfaction for retention.

However, education level shaped responses in distinctive ways. Among post-secondary/professional qualification holders aged 26-35, work-life balance ranked as a greater source of dissatisfaction, above career advancement. For post-graduate youths aged 18-25 and 26-30, dissatisfaction also surfaced around opportunities to learn and grow, while those aged 31-35 expressed concerns about purpose and impact of their work.



NOTES ON KEY FINDINGS

Employment Priorities

Across all the age groups, financial gain and job stability were top youth priorities. Flexible working arrangements also remained a key consideration, particularly for those aged 18-25 and 31-35, while those aged 26-30 prioritised work-life balance over flexible arrangements. Among secondary-educated youths, flexible working arrangements emerged as the highest priority across all age groups. Post-graduate youths at the older spectrum of ages 26-30 and 31-35 instead, placed more emphasis on financial gain, job stability, and career advancement. For younger post-graduates (aged 18-25), meaningful work and passion for the job role/field surfaced distinctively.

Motivations to Perform Well

Across all age groups, flexible working arrangements and financial incentives consistently emerged as the main motivators for youths to perform well at work. Differences were, however, observed in additional top factors valued by different groups, with younger youths (aged 18-25) also motivated by autonomy, while those aged 26-30 and 31-35 placed greater emphasis on career advancement opportunities.

“Being entrusted with a personal project also gives me like a sense of motivation... I think that gave me a sense of motivation, because I know that if the product is successful, it might be in the market... and people could build on my work and develop it.”

- Verbatim from a Youth (21-year-old, Diploma holder) during a Focus Group Discussion

Distinctions also appeared across education levels: Secondary-educated youths stood out for valuing recognition from supervisors and supportive colleagues. These patterns point to varied priorities that organisations may need to account for when designing engagement strategies.



NOTES ON KEY FINDINGS

Soft Skills Valued

Overall, employers rated soft skills as more critical than hard skills, with older youths showing greater alignment with this view than their younger counterparts. Across all ages, youths identified communication and critical thinking as the most important soft skills. Younger youths (aged 18-25) additionally highlighted attention to detail, whereas older youths (aged 26-30, 31-35) placed greater emphasis on problem-solving. Notably, younger youths (aged 18-25) also highlighted interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence more strongly than problem-solving. When looking across education levels, post-graduate youths across all ages did not emphasise problem-solving. Employers, by contrast, prioritised problem-solving above all other skills (followed by critical thinking and communication), and did not cite attention to detail as strongly.

When asked about their own strengths, youths most often pointed to communication, with variations across age groups such as critical thinking (aged 18-25, 31-35), attention to detail (aged 18-25, 26-30), teamwork (aged 26-30), and interpersonal skills (aged 31-35).

Soft Skills Acquisition

Both youths and employers identified on-the-job experience as a key method of acquiring soft skills, with peer learning also common to both groups. A notable difference is employers, however, had also placed stronger emphasis on formal mentoring and coaching, while youths had highlighted external courses instead. Looking deeper, it is the older youths (aged 31-35) and those with higher qualifications that showed a stronger preference for external courses. Differences also emerged by education level: youths (aged 18-25, 26-30) with secondary qualifications preferred formal in-house training, whereas those with post-secondary or professional qualifications in the same age groups expressed a stronger preference for self-directed learning over peer learning.