OPENING ADDRESS
BY MINISTER OF STATE FOR MANPOWER FOO CEXIANG
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PEOPLE BEHIND PEOPLE FORUM
THURSDAY, 24 SEPTEMBER 2026, 9AM

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NTUC Assistant Secretary General Mr Patrick Tay
IHRP CEO Mr Aslam Sardar

Distinguished Guests

1. Good morning.

2. Let me begin by congratulating IHRP on its 10th anniversary. 10 years ago, IHRP was established by our tripartite partners, and it has spent the past decade elevating the HR profession and building a strong community of HR professionals, and I am delighted, as IHRP CEO Aslam shared earlier, that today's conference sees the biggest in-person gathering of HR professionals.

3. The title of today's Forum, People Behind People, points us to the question at the heart of many discussion and many minds. In an age when artificial intelligence is changing what people do, how can the people behind our people help ensure that every worker continues to have a place, a pathway and a purpose in our economy?

4. This question matters because work is much more than a means of earning a living. It is where people build confidence, purpose, and ultimately, better lives for their families. A good workplace sees people not just for the roles they hold today, but for what they can grow into tomorrow.

5. AI can unlock new sources of productivity and growth for Singapore and our businesses. But growth alone is not enough. We must guard against a future of jobless growth, where businesses may become more productive, but workers see fewer pathways to enter, progress and build meaningful careers.

6. Our ambition here in Singapore must be different. As firms transform, our jobs must become better. As technology advances, workers must have opportunities to build new skills and take on higher-value work. Growth must continue to translate into stronger careers and better lives.

7. These outcomes do not happen automatically. As suggested in today's conference theme, you need to architect it, you need to design it, you need to be purposeful about it. They depend on how organisations design jobs, treat people and support them through change, . This will require business and HR leaders to approach transformation as both an economic but also a people imperative.

8. This is the ambition behind the Tripartite Workgroup on Human Capital Capability Development, or TWG-HC. Today, the Workgroup launches its report, "Opportunity by Design: Strengthening Human Capital in Every Workplace for Every Worker".

9. The report is an important blueprint for how Singapore can achieve growth with opportunity. The recommendations within show how we can make the quality of opportunities more visible, redesign work so that productivity and people progress together, and strengthen the professional and leadership capabilities needed to make workforce decisions.

10. I thank the Tripartite Workgroup for its recommendations and for the depth of engagement with tripartite partners, employers, HR professionals and workers. The Government accepts the recommendations and will work closely with tripartite partners to take them forward.

11. Today, I will highlight three thrusts of the report.

THRUST 1: UNLOCK BETTER OPPORTUNITIES FOR SINGAPOREANS

12. When I think about an employer, I think – will my employer invest in my skills or leave me to keep pace on my own? Will I be recognised by the company and be promoted? As my needs change, can my company help me to grow and build a meaningful career?

13. The answers are not always visible from a job title or salary figure. This is what the Singapore Opportunity Index, or SOI, seeks to address. Launched last year at this forum, the SOI gives workers and jobseekers a clearer view of which organisations create opportunities to learn, advance and build meaningful careers. It also helps employers understand the workforce outcomes their practices create.

14. Let me share a story about Mr Hussien Bin Mahmood, who works at SATS is one example. After more than two decades in cargo operations, he has benefited from a redesigned, multi-skilled and digitally enabled role. He developed new capabilities, broadened his experience and progressed into a supervisory role.

15. But SATS' ambition goes beyond a single career story. Its Chief Executive Officer, Mr Kerry Mok, has challenged his HR team to build a pathway through which an ITE graduate joining SATS could progress through the organisation and, one day, take on a position within the senior management team.

16. To make this ambition a reality, SATS partners Institutes of Higher Learning to build talent pipelines, invest in mentoring and skills development, and redesign jobs to create meaningful pathways for employees to learn, grow and progress.

17. That is an inspiring vision of opportunity: a worker's starting point need not determine how far the worker can go. Employers can deliberately build pathways that allow aspiration, ability and hard work to carry people forward. SATS' commitment is reflected in its SOI recognition as a Career Builder.

18. Mr Hussien's journey shows what progress can look like today. Mr Mok's ambition shows what an organisation can make possible tomorrow. Good workforce practices do more than fill jobs. They widen horizons and shape careers.

19. I encourage workers to look at the indicators in the SOI, beyond salary and job titles when evaluating opportunities. I encourage employers to use the SOI not as a scorecard, but as a catalyst for improvement. Firm-level reports and advisory support can help firms translate insight into action.

THRUST 2: TRANSFORM WORK, GROW PEOPLE

20. Second, productivity and people must progress together.

21. AI is changing not only how work is done, but also how jobs are designed and how firms grow. The question is whether transformation will simply remove tasks, or redesign work so that people can take on new and more valuable ones.

22. These are business decisions and people decisions at the same time. Business leaders understand where technology can create value and how operating models must change. HR leaders understand how jobs, skills and learning pathways must evolve with them. Both must work together from the start, so transformation strengthens the business while creating better opportunities for workers.

23. I had lunch with a group of HR and business professionals earlier, and shared one common insight. The approach for AI should differ for experienced and new workers. Experienced workers can often use AI to move faster because they already possess the operational knowledge, inter-firm context and judgement to assess its outputs.

24. New workers need a different approach. They must still have opportunities to understand work from the ground up, practice core skills, learn from feedback and build the relationships and foundations on which sound judgement rests. These are critical foundations upon which sound judgement rests.

25. If we automate every entry-level task, we may improve efficiency today but weaken the pipeline of expertise for tomorrow. I encourage firms to redesign jobs and learning pathways together: using AI to augment experienced workers, while giving newer workers structured exposure and progressively more complex responsibilities. There is no shortcut to judgement.

26. As Aye Wee from OCBC, who is also an IHRP Master Professional, shared – before workers can connect the dots, they must first have the opportunity to collect them. I am glad we have wonderful Master Professionals like Aye Wee, and I am very glad too, that today we will welcome four new Master Professionals to the class.

27. To support firms in this endeavour, IHRP and SNEF will share practical guidance and real-world examples. SMEs without strategic HR expertise in-house can also access experienced HR advisers through an ongoing pilot by co:grow and IHRP.

28. We will also be rolling out PATH, a multi-agency effort to enable People-Centred AI Transformation for HR through practical starter kits and training.

29. Beyond the TWG-HC recommendations, Ngee Ann Polytechnic will also be unveiling its new Centre for Workplace Well-being, or coWELL, later in today's event to help organisations to support workers through change and build a more resilient workforce.

30. DBS shows how these capabilities can come together. Guided by its philosophy of "save people, not jobs", its business and HR leaders worked together early to understand how AI would change operating models, workflows and roles.

31. One of its employees is Ms Shahnaz, who works in customer service, investigating a case previously once meant listening to lengthy call recordings, reviewing interactions manually and piecing together what had happened. Today, technology helps summarise calls, identify customer sentiment and surface key insights more quickly.

32. But the aim was not simply to do the same work faster. DBS redesigned the role and supported Ms Shahnaz to build the skills needed for broader responsibilities. AI has created capacity for Ms Shahnaz to focus on higher-value work such as identifying customer trends, driving process improvements and working with stakeholders to address problems in depth. It has also enabled her to take on an expanded job scope, including governance and risk-related responsibilities that require greater judgement and decision-making.

33. This is what growth with opportunity looks like. Technology improves productivity. Business and HR leaders redesign work and build pathways together. If we work together, we will be able to ensure that AI does not become an elevator for the few, but an escalator for everyone.

THRUST 3: ENABLE PEOPLE LEADERS AND HR PROFESSIONALS TO LEAD THE FUTURE OF WORK

34. Finally, growth with opportunity depends on the quality of the people decisions made within every organisation.

35. Every worker will, at some point in their career, be affected by an important HR decision, from hiring, to promotion, and redeployment. Workers and employers alike must have confidence that they are made professionally, fairly and with sound judgement.

36. That is why the Government agrees with the Workgroup's recommendation to establish a trusted baseline for HR practice. Certification gives employers confidence that their HR teams can advise leaders well. It gives workers greater assurance that decisions affecting their careers are guided by recognised professional and ethical standards. As technology makes workforce decisions more complex, this foundation of trust matters much more.

37. The need was recognised in 2020, when the NTUC-SNEF PME Taskforce recommended that large firms be equipped with HR certification. Building on a decade of capability development, we are now ready to establish a new baseline.

38. From 1 July 2028, organisations with more than 200 employees will be required to have at least one suitable HR professional who is an IHRP-Certified Professional or higher. Alongside concerted tripartite efforts, this is expected to grow the pool of certified HR professionals from 9,000 to around 18,000, or 40% of the HR workforce, by 2030.

39. The requirement has been calibrated with tripartite partners to be practical and flexible. We will also extend subsidies to encourage early adoption.

40. Certification is the baseline, not the ceiling. Singapore also needs senior people leaders who can shape long-term workforce strategies and lead transformation alongside business leaders.

41. Too often, business transformation and people transformation are treated as separate conversations. But they are two sides of the same challenge. When business leaders and HR leaders make decisions together from the start, firms are better able to grow, transform and create better opportunities for their workers.

42. Future people leaders must therefore speak both the language of business and the language of people. HR leaders need to understand strategy, operations, technology and value creation. Business leaders need to understand skills, job design and workforce outcomes. Together, they can see the whole picture and make better decisions.

43. The Workgroup therefore recommends two complementary steps. First, broaden people leadership skills through IHRP's programmes. Second, develop the next generation of senior people leaders through an inaugural human capital programme by HCLI and its partners, launching next year. The Government will provide substantial funding support for Singaporean HR and business leaders. I encourage business leaders and chambers to nominate suitable participants when applications open.

44. By 2030, the Workgroup aims to have over two million employees working in organisations with strong people capabilities, support at least 2,000 enterprises, and uplift around 20,000 HR professionals and people leaders.

Conclusion

45. The Government will support this effort, but the transformation itself happens in our workplaces. It happens in the jobs that businesses redesign, the skills that workers are given the opportunity to build, and the people decisions that leaders make.

46. Our goal is not growth at any cost, nor growth without jobs. It is growth that opens new pathways for people, enables businesses and workers to progress together, and gives every worker the opportunity to contribute and find purpose through work.

47. This is how the people behind our people can help shape a future of work worth building together.

48. Thank you, and I wish everyone a fruitful and inspiring People Behind People Forum.