



# Productivity Can Soar If Workers Are Well Trained



By **Ong Ye Kung**  
NTUC Assistant Secretary-General

This is a story which I have been repeating to people in the past few months. I had heard it from the principal of Northlight School. Earlier last year, Northlight School sent a third-year student, a boy, for industry attachment at a company that repairs and maintains air-conditioners. As a student, he did not know very much about air-conditioners, and so he was paired up with an experienced air-conditioner technician, who is a Chinese national. Both of them made house calls in the company van.

One day, they came to a big house in a prime district. The owner had some specific instructions on how to service his air-conditioners.

Unfortunately, the owner could only speak

English, which the Chinese national could not understand. Fortunately, the Northlight boy could, and translated the instructions to his colleague. By working together – that is, one doing the repairs and one communicating with the owner – they got the job done. The owner was happy.

There are two lessons to this story. First, if local and foreign workers can work together and leverage on each other's strengths, we will do better as a country and as a workforce. Second, which is more important, is that we are a long way from becoming a high productivity economy. The Chinese national needs to learn how to communicate in English. The local boy in time to come must learn how to repair and maintain air-conditioners. Both need to learn how to drive the company van. In other words, they need to up-skill, re-skill and multi-skill. With that, they can serve twice the number of customers. To achieve this, the company plays an important part. It must make serving its customers better, and training its workers a top business priority, and put in place the systems to support its workers.

Such stories abound in Singapore. Just take a closer look in our daily lives and we will find glaring examples of low productivity. At a road construction site, two workers will be turning "Stop-Go" lollipops and another one or two will be waving cars on; at a hawker centre a team of cleaners will be picking up after diners instead of doing high-value added work of maintaining overall hygiene and cleanliness standard of the facility; visit a department store during peak and off peak periods, and often you find a shortage of staff during the former and too many staff during the latter; when your water cistern at home gets clogged up, a plumber will become the most productive person for the moment – but it will not be easy to find one. I am sure there are many more examples in the industries and offices.

We have some way to go in raising productivity. It is high time for government agencies, industries, companies, unions and workers to dive deep and sharpen our saw. This is the most sustainable way to grow Singapore and benefit workers and businesses.

## Small Step Takes Big Leap

### NTUC LearningHub All Geared Up To Teach English Language Proficiency



By **Vanessa Teo**

NTUC LearningHub Private Limited's small start to teach guest workers Basic Conversational English so that they can communicate better with their employers and customers is expanding in a big way.

Currently, 800 guest workers have signed up for NTUC LearningHub's classes. As a top choice for quality training and education, NTUC LearningHub can expect a surge in its number of students now that the Ministry of Manpower requires Work Permit holders in the hotel, food and beverage and retail industries to have English Language proficiency.

NTUC LearningHub Chief Executive Officer Zee Yoong Kang said: "We have the largest group of trainers in Singapore and therefore we are able to optimise the use of these resources."

"With 60 trainers, NTUC LearningHub can train close to 1,000 trainees a month, which is a huge capacity as we are talking about training more than 20,000 trainees a year. By better utilising our trainers, the number can increase even further."

Miss Wang Shuang, 24, a Junior Guest Service Executive at Conrad Centennial Singapore, said: "I have improved a lot. The trainers encouraged us to think more, do more, and practise more. My trainer was friendly



A Taste Of English... Minister of State Lee Yi Shyan checks out the drinks and Miss Wang Shuang's English.

place in Conrad definitely makes it more convenient for our staff, and this is why so many of them are keen to sign up to improve their English. The fact that there are government initiatives to support this as well is simply fantastic," said Mr Grafe.

On 23 January 2010, MOM announced that guest workers have to pass a "Service Literacy Test" before they can qualify for skilled levy status. This is on top of meeting other skilled levy requirements, and will come into effect on 1 July 2010.

Minister of State (Manpower, Trade and Industry) Lee Yi Shyan, who made the announcement, said: "English language skills are particularly important in hospitality

industries as workers interact regularly with international and cosmopolitan customers."

In line with efforts to improve service standards and raise productivity across the broader services sector, MOM has appointed the Singapore Workforce Development Agency to develop and implement the Service Literacy Test.

and encouraging. If given the chance, I want to continue upgrading my language skills with NTUC LearningHub."

Conrad's General Manager Heinrich Grafe is impressed by NTUC LearningHub's flexibility to conduct in-house lessons.

"The outcome of the training is very good and we are very happy. To have the training take

#### Must Speak Good English

**English Language proficiency should be a pre-requisite for the Service Sector. It is important that employers ensure the guest workers they bring into Singapore have basic conversational English skills."**

Yeo Guat Kwang, NTUC Alignment Director (All Nationalities, Quality Worklife)