

Where are the green jobs in Singapore?

More young job seekers want careers that align with their values such as protecting the environment. Employers can do more to meet this demand.

Kelvin Law

This was a post on Glassdoor by a fresh employee this June: "This focus on sustainability aligns with my personal values and provides a sense of purpose in my work... I feel proud to be part of an organisation that actively works towards reducing its environmental footprint and promotes sustainable practices."

I have been reading job reviews as part of a research project and have found thousands of similar posts with positive experiences like this. Such reviews by employees of employers seem to point towards a sustainability-driven attitude when it comes to job search these days.

They are part of a growing shift in attitudes among job seekers.

A SHIFT IN EMPLOYMENT VALUES

Various surveys have consistently shown that young job seekers are increasingly making career choices guided not just by monetary concerns, but also by their deeply cherished ideals.

A recent survey by Deloitte highlights this broader shift on a global scale. The survey of Gen Z and millennial participants from 44 countries including Singapore showed that younger generations have high expectations for employers in areas such as work-life balance, environmental sustainability and societal impact.

Other surveys, such as those by CNBC and Qualtrics, echoed similar views. The former found that more than half of workers would not work for a company that does not share their values, while the latter reported that more than half of surveyed employees would be willing to take a pay cut to work at a company with better values.

A recent Accenture report also revealed that some 77 per cent of the young in the Asia-Pacific aspire to get a job in the green economy within the next decade. But meeting such expectations appears to be a tall order for companies in Singapore, especially when it comes to the aspirations of green job seekers.

This emerging group can be divided into two main categories: those who are "skills-driven" people technically trained for a sustainability-focused role; and those who are "values-driven", people keen to help the environment but may not have the relevant technical skills yet.



Globally, including in Singapore, Gen Z and millennials make up the majority in the category of values-driven green job seekers, says the writer. They have a heightened awareness of climate issues, expect companies to practise social responsibility, and are attracted to non-traditional industries such as technology and finance. ST FILE PHOTO

If we do not meet the demands of both types by expanding green jobs across more functions or providing green job training, we risk discouraging potential green job seekers, putting a dent on Singapore's efforts to move into the green economy under the 2030 Green Plan.

Currently, the demand for green jobs significantly outpaces supply in Singapore. According to LinkedIn's Global Green Skills Report, workers with green skills increased by 14 per cent between 2022 and 2023, mostly within the skills-driven category. Yet, jobs requiring them grew just 1 per cent between the same period.

Clearly, there is a disconnect, and to close the gap we need to rethink hiring strategies and address the issues companies have with creating green jobs.

So how do we do this?

MISPERCEPTIONS ABOUT GREEN JOBS

Globally, including in Singapore, Gen Z and millennials make up the majority in the category of values-driven green job seekers. They have a heightened awareness of climate issues, expect companies to practise social responsibility, and are attracted to non-traditional industries such as technology and finance.

For them, working for a tech company focused on energy-efficient solutions is just as appealing as a role in an automotive manufacturer expanding into the

electric-vehicle market.

But one common reason hindering the growth of the corporate green job market is misperception.

When people think about green jobs, industries like solar and wind energy come to mind. Companies tend to think likewise, limiting green jobs to specific industries or to compliance functions only. However, this narrow mindset can lead to missed opportunities in identifying a broader range of job positions that can potentially contribute to sustainability.

Take a financial accountant working in a solar energy company, for example. Is this a green job? What about a corporate finance executive in a bank that issues sustainability-linked bonds? Can we consider this a green role? These examples illustrate the difficulty over where to draw the line for green jobs. Should the focus be on the company operations or job function?

A reasonable starting point should be for companies to review their products and operations to find out which job functions and what skills in these job functions can genuinely contribute to greater sustainability in the long term. When posting job advertisements, companies should clearly state the required green skills for each position. Regular sustainability audits can also help quantify the "greenness" of each role and measure the gap between the current and in-demand green skills for each position.

Companies can create a "Green Skills Index" or "Green Score" to identify the opportunities of their job positions for narrowing the gap. To show commitment,

companies can set the tone by linking top executives' bonuses to specific benchmarks to narrow or even close the gap.

Another misperception lies in the view of sustainability as a cost. Businesses worry that their investments in green human capital may not be generating any immediate returns, erasing their bottom lines. They also worry that promoting a job as "green" might inflate the expectation of salaries and benefits. Hence, they are hesitant to advertise roles in the proper way, even if the jobs are sustainability-related.

In the context of sustainability, this is a systemic misunderstanding of the true nature and opportunities of corporate green jobs.

THE VALUE OF GREEN HUMAN CAPITAL

Recent research co-led by Nanyang Technological University and the National University of Singapore has shown that investment in green human capital is far from just an expenditure.

Firms stating more green skills in their job advertisements are more innovative in the form of green patents, and make higher profits than others, regardless of industry. This indicates that investment in green human

capital is not only environmentally necessary, but also economically vital.

An example is Patagonia, an outdoor clothing and gear brand known for its unwavering commitment to environmental protection and sustainability. Patagonia's job advertisements articulate its environmental mission clearly. Its recent job advertising for a sales associate stated that the role is to help the company save the planet by "creating an amazing experience for our customers and making a positive impact in the community", while also bringing home the message that the employee can be a vehicle for change, whether inside or outside of the store.

Business-wise, Patagonia has been performing well. Its sales have quadrupled over the past decade, passing US\$1 billion (S\$1.36 billion) per annum, and the company is currently valued at an estimated US\$3 billion. In terms of research and development, Patagonia has filed several patents, such as using recycled materials for its apparel, in line with its sustainability commitments.

Companies ought to figure out their sustainability goals, and map out precisely the green skills necessary for each job position to achieve the goals. For example, a grocery store with a goal to be zero waste may seek out job applicants skilled in communications to promote its aspirations to consumers. To

reduce its carbon footprint, a hospital could hire a data analyst skilled in environmental modelling to optimise electricity consumption for air-conditioning.

By infusing green skills into their job roles, a company can tap the opportunities created by the current scarcity of green jobs in Singapore, boosting its competitive edge as an employer of choice while creating positive consumer reputation.

However, here's the kicker: A mere sprinkling of token green skills or rebranding existing jobs as green will not work for companies. With time, consumers and job seekers will eventually catch up with hypocritical behaviour, inflicting reputational damage.

We may be witnessing a global generational shift in priorities. It appears that young job seekers are demanding a career that not just pays the bills, but also brings purpose aligned with their values and beliefs. Embracing this shift is not an option but is perhaps the only way for companies to remain competitive and successful in the future.

Greening our jobs is not just planting a seed for a sustainable future, but a whole new forest of opportunities for our next generation.

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