

26 SEP 1989

Singapore Government

PRESS RELEASE

Information Division, Ministry of Communications & Information, 36th Storey, PSA Building, 460 Alexandra Road, Singapore 0511. Tel: 2799794/5.

89-725-44

Release No.: 05/SEP
06-2/89/09/02

SPEECH BY DR TAY ENG SOON, SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE
(EDUCATION), AT THE LAUNCHING OF TECHNOLOGY MONTH 89 AND
OPENING OF NTI MANUTECH SYMPOSIUM/OPEN DAY
AT NANYANG TECHNOLOGICAL INSTITUTE, LECTURE THEATRE 2
ON SATURDAY, 2 SEPTEMBER 1989 AT 9.30 AM

I am very pleased to be present at the opening of Technology Month and also the opening of MANUTECH '89. This year, Technology Month will focus on "Automation" and the MANUTECH Symposium will discuss the theme "Automation in Manufacturing".

Our venue for today's opening could not be more appropriate. The Nanyang Technological Institute, soon to become the Nanyang Technological University, is "Industry's University". NTI or NTU is associated with industrial and technological development in Singapore. Its commitment as a centre of excellence for industry is already evident by the quality of the graduates it sends out each year into industry and by the research interests of its faculty members. NTU, I'm sure, will continue to link itself closely with the economic development in Singapore.

Recently, two Swiss organisations, IMEDE and the World Economic Forum published a report called the World Competitiveness Report. Some of the findings were highlighted by our Prime Minister in his recent National Day rally talk.

The section on human resource is of most interest to us. It compares the quality and availability of human resources in 22 developed countries and 10 developing countries. We are included among the latter, which also include the other three NIE's Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea.

Among the 10 developing countries, we are ranked first in four out of six areas, namely in vocational training, quality of skilled workers, in education and training, and in managerial adaptability. But in two areas, we are ranked 2nd and 4th. These are in managerial talent and in availability (or quantity) of skilled workers. In managerial talent, which is a measure of the drive and entrepreneurship of the manager, we are second to Hong Kong. This is not surprising. But in the quantity or availability of skilled workers, according to the report, we are behind India, Taiwan and Malaysia, even though our quality ranks highest amongst them.

In comparison with the developed countries, we rank second highest in vocational training after Germany. But in quality and availability of skilled workers, we rank fourth and ninth respectively.

This report is consistent with the BERI report which ranks the Singapore workforce as the best, but reveals that level of education and training of our workers is still not high enough. If we can remedy this and improve the training of our workforce, we will have an unbeatable workforce for many years to come, since we are already top in the other areas assessed by BERI, namely, our labour laws and labour relations.

The issue seems to boil down to this. In our present workforce of 1.24 million, we still have gaps in the skills and education of our workers. We still have many workers who have little or no skills. This is what the Swiss report is pointing out.

The problem appears to be at the post-employment and not at the pre-employment level. At the pre-employment level, most of our school leavers today go on for further education and training after they leave secondary school, before they join the workforce. I estimate that at least three-quarters of each cohort do so before they join the workforce. Thus the young worker today is well-prepared when he starts work.

In contrast, many within the present workforce particularly among the older workers lack adequate skills and even basic education. According to the 1988 Labour Force Survey, 42 per cent of our workforce have less than secondary education. This is better than what it was five years ago when it was 53 per cent. Even if we were to discount the 100,000 work permit holders, the percentage is still high.

This is the group which is the focus of attention of the BEST, WISE, MOST and COSEC mass education and training programmes run by VITB and NPB in conjunction with companies and the NTUC/PAP Centres. The NPB highlighted the same problem in its report "Initiatives for Reskilling the Workforce".

This means that even as we continue to improve and expand our training institutions for school leavers, we must seek new approaches to train and retrain those who are already in the workforce. Since this involves people who are working, we will need the maximum cooperation and support from employers, without which, the task of reaching out to the workforce would be most difficult. Recently, we created a new framework for reskilling workers in the service sector. The first programme was launched together with the Singapore Retail Merchants Association to train retail sales workers. This new framework can be used by other industry groups to meet the training needs of their workers.

Another area that should be further developed would be training programmes within companies and training centres run by industry groups. Shatec and the Precision Optics Training Centre are good examples of the latter. The task ahead is to extend the scope and new opportunities for the training and reskilling of the many hundreds of thousands in our workforce so that ours will become one of the best workforces in the world. This would be a goal worth achieving for Singapore. Its success will raise the quality of work that Singaporeans can do and thus raise their income and standard of living.

What has worker education and training to do with the theme of "Automation"? The two are indeed closely related. Automation will not only help in our tight manpower situation. It will also enable us to achieve higher levels of quality, precision and productivity. But automation is feasible only if there are well-educated and trained workers who can operate and maintain the sophisticated machinery involved in automation. Thus, I am pleased to note that Technology Month will focus on both the technology and the preparation of people to make the technology work for us.

Technology Month also has mass public education as one of its objectives. This is important. We need to stimulate the interest and enlist the support of the public, not just specialists and employers. Your exhibitions, open seminars, etc., should help in this promotional effort.

May I conclude by congratulating the organisers and wishing them success in all the events planned for Technology Month 89.

@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@@