

# WHAT EMPLOYEES

# WHY WANT

**T**he purpose of the first-ever *What Employees Really Want* survey has been to discover the true ranking and value of selected employee benefits/working motivators for staff. And to see how accurately these employee realities match HR's own take on *what employees really want*. For added interest, we also polled a number of Singapore's leading search and

recruit personnel and included their comparative views within the findings.

The results have been compiled using the responses of over 3,000 employees, HR professionals and recruitment specialists, between August and December 2005. *HRM* partnered with JobsDB.com to gain the views of numerous employees and jobseekers alike and would like to thank them for partnering on this lengthy project.

### Hits and misses

The findings reveal an intriguing dichotomy of both close alignment and wide disparity between the three camps (employees, HR and recruiters) as to the value of 10 specific employee benefits/motivators. The summary findings are reflected in the charts opposite.

### Results

Our standout finding – as far as employees are concerned – is that pay is not at the top of the list. It is certainly high on the agenda, but it is not at the top. Employees rated personal development and self esteem factors as the highest motivators. Top of the list – before pay – came career and learning development opportunities. Second came the desire for recognition.

Annie Yap, president, of the Singapore Staffing Association says, “Surveys in developed economies have constantly shown that pay drops down the list of priorities as the economy becomes more advanced and more sophisticated. What employees are reflecting in this survey shows that the pattern here is repeating the trend in the advanced economies of the world.”

The economic success of Singapore means that employees need more than pay to be motivated. Lim Boon Heng, secretary general, National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) says, “Pay is still important, but it ranks below other factors because our wage levels are already high and people are now looking at the fulfillment of other factors higher in the Maslow hierarchy of needs.”

Looking at employees’ top five ratings, apart from pay, personal fulfillment and relationship issues occupy four of the top five positions in the employees’ ranking order. Career learning and development opportunities, recognition, relationship with the manager and relationship with colleagues all rank higher than job security and the work itself.

FIG.1

EMPLOYEES SAY (IN ORDER OF RANK)	
1	Career/ Learning development opportunities
2	Recognition
3	Pay
4	Relationship with manager
5	Relationship with colleagues
6	Job security
7	Work itself
8	Non-pay related benefits
9	Work-Life balance
10	Company brand

HR SAY (RANK ORDER)		DIFFERENCE TO EMPLOYEES
1	Recognition	+ 1 Place
2	Career/ Learning development opportunities	- 1 Place
3	Relationship with Manager	+ 1 Place
4	Pay	- 1 Place
5	Work itself	+ 2 Places
6	Relationship with colleagues	- 1 Place
7	Job security	- 1 Place
8	Work-Life Balance	+ 1 Place
9	Non-pay related benefits	- 1 Place
10	Company brand	Same as employees

RECRUITERS SAY (RANK ORDER)		DIFFERENCE TO EMPLOYEES
1	Career/ Learning development opportunities	Same as employees
2	Recognition	Same as employees
3	Relationship with Manager	+ 1 Place
4	Work itself	+ 3 Places
5	Pay	- 2 Places
6	Relationship with colleagues	- 1 Place
7	Job security	- 1 Place
8	Work-Life Balance	+ 1 Place
9	Non-pay related benefits	- 1 Place
10	Company brand	Same as employees

## A meeting of minds

The fact that employers and recruiters placed pay below the top of the ranking may indicate they are in partial alignment, at least, with employees. Worrying might be the fact that employers and recruiters both undervalued the actual ranking of pay when compared with the attitudes of employees. Employers undervalued pay by one place and recruiters by two places. This shows that, while employers

of views about the overall importance of career and learning development opportunities shows there is evidence that better communication is taking place within companies.

Yap comments, "HR is much better connected with the employees than it was five years ago. I think the role of MNCs in Singapore and the more open communication styles in many of those companies is a reason for this."

But before we all rush off to indulge in

their personal views and expectations about their own situations," he says.

Learning and career development opportunities rate so highly in the minds of employees because they can be seen as the modern form of job security. By guaranteeing your personal employability – no matter what might become of your employer – you achieve the same result as what was once sought in a cradle-to-the-grave employment contract. Instinctively, people know there



NTUC's Lim Boon Heng



Talent2's Andrew Banks



Singapore Staffing Association's Annie Yap



Philips' Elizabeth Martin-Chua

**"The feedback from unions is that, apart from a minority of companies, the communication within companies is poor. Too many managers are uncomfortable addressing their employees."**

*Lim Boon Heng, secretary general NTUC*

recognise the approximate banding of pay in the ranking order, they still do not see the issue exactly through the eyes of employees.

"There are some interesting factors with attitudes to pay. I don't think that employees' attitudes to the importance of pay are uniform throughout the workforce. Much may depend on the stage of their career that they are in," asserts Elizabeth Martin-Chua, executive director, country management and vice president, Human Resources, Philips Electronics.

On the other hand, the alignment

a round of too much self congratulation, the counter view about improving communications must be registered. NTUC's Lim asserts: "The feedback from unions is that, apart from a minority, the communication within companies is poor. Too many managers are uncomfortable addressing their employees."

Lim believes the strong alignment in these factors may not indicate good communications so much as it indicates the expression of HR's view of the world. "The strong alignment may well indicate that the respondents were just expressing

are no guarantees about job security and so it is best to aim for the concept of income security rather than the narrow concept of 'job' security.

"There is not a company on the planet that can say we'll never go bust," asserts Andrew Banks, managing director, Talent2. "So, instinctively, learning and development are some of the only forms of insurance an employee has. Employees know that survival is about learning and growing and that survival is not about being tied to one company."

## 24 carrots and counting

All groups rated recognition highly, proving that the need for it is fundamental in today's employment place and can be identified even before undergraduates enter the workforce.

Chung Yuen Kay, senior lecturer, HRM Unit, Dept of Management and Organisation, NUS Business School reports, "I find that undergraduate

students of mine, who were placed in an internship with a company, reacted strongly after the experience when they felt their work had not been recognised. The negative impact of lack of recognition or poor relationships with manager and colleagues can outweigh the positive impact of what would otherwise have been interesting work. The reverse is also true," he continues, "Undergraduates who report that they were given boring work during their internship tell us that they enjoyed the experience where the human environment – the quality of the recognition and the quality of the relationships – was good."

Martin-Chua agrees, adding, "I am not surprised that pay ranks below factors such as recognition, career development, learning opportunities, etc. When people join us, they obviously have agreed on the pay. What they are hoping for is a good environment where they can use their capabilities and talent to good advantage and then be recognised for it."

### Other ranking conclusions

What is also clear is that employees are not buying several of the major lines of thought popular with the HR consultancies at the moment. One of these – the

importance of company branding – comes in firmly as number 10 in the list for employees.

This shows that the branding advocates – those who believe all employees want is to work for a big name company – are way off target when it comes to their judgment about what employees really want. "Employees don't care much about what a particular brand is about. They want to know what it's like to work there," says Talent2's Banks.

In another interesting case of the three groups seeing eye-to-eye, they all ranked work-life balance and non-pay related benefits poorly. The strong implication here for HR is that

**"Employees don't care much about what a particular brand is about. They want to know what it's like to work there"**

*Andrew Banks, managing director, Talent 2*

employee engagement strategies based on throwing a few more non-pay trinkets at the employees may be utterly futile – as with often discussed work-life balance propositions.

### Examination of first responses

When we looked more closely at the respondents' first responses (see fig.2) – indicating their most important opinion - we found some close alignments and some woeful divergences of opinion between the three groups.

Highest on the alignment score was relationship with manager with only a 7% differential between employees and HR.

But the analysis of first responses is also where divergence of opinions started to open out in other areas. The greatest disparity was on the perceived importance of relationships with colleagues. Fifty-five per cent of employees rated this as a high importance factor. Only 26% of HR rated it highly.

Liu Fang Joo, senior vp, HR/Communications, NatSteel Asia (S) Pte Ltd, says, "This was an interesting finding of the survey. The only explanation I can offer is that interpersonal relationships are perhaps viewed by HR as a personal domain which is difficult to be directly influenced by the organisation and hence not perceived by HR managers as a significant factor in what employees want."

But NTUC's Lim believes there is a simple explanation for the poor recognition of this factor by employers. He believes the mismatch here is symptomatic of the poor communications between HR and employees. "HR personnel would expect the operating departments to settle how the employees relate to each other rather than get to understand it themselves," he says.

Interestingly, recruitment firms were closer to the minds of the average employee with 45% of them rating relationships with colleagues highly.

## COMMENTS FROM SURVEY PARTNER, JOBSDB.COM

**W**ith regards to the two factors which finished in the top three positions for all parties surveyed - 'career/learning development opportunities' and 'recognition of job performance', the former is probably due to employees' need for continued learning and self-improvement in order to stay relevant in today's markets. For the latter, recognition from the top could very well motivate and possibly make them feel that the organisation cares about them and their work.

This could also explain the next-placed factor - 'relationship with manager'.

However, one factor - 'company's brand' - was a surprise as it came up last in the list for all parties. We thought that it should have gotten a higher rating. Perhaps, this goes to show that most people would rather have a job today, be it in an SME or MNC, than not have one at all!

*Rosmadi Mahmood, editor, JobsDB.com*

### Job security

Another big mis-match was on the issue of job security which showed 54% of employees valuing this highly, compared with 31% of HR and 39% of recruiters. This was a clear case where the level of understanding by HR and recruiters fell well short of the actual aspirations of employees.

Singapore Staffing Association's Yap says, "This is a good case where the mind of the employer can be quite different from the mind of the employee. The economic fluctuations in Singapore in the past five years have left their mark on employees' psyche. Employees remember the retrenchments and lay-offs that occurred and this is a fear factor that still persists."

At the moment policy makers and other stakeholders in the employment relationship in Singapore are focusing on the concept of 'employability'. The concept here is that actual long-term job security might be hard to guarantee, given the turbulent environment and its attendant

Lim shares his views on why this should be: "Recruitment firms may be rewarded for their successes. So they pay more attention to what makes a successful match. HR personnel are rewarded differently, so they do not have the same motivation."

Mark Ellwood, director, Robert Walters, opines more diplomatically, "Recruiters are interviewing people on

a daily basis and they have no agenda so candidates are very frank about their feelings and frustrations. Employees are probably a little bit more reserved when talking to their employers as they may feel that it is difficult to be totally honest. So it is no surprise to me that recruiters are very much in tune with what employees are feeling, it would worry me if we were not in tune!"

## BAR CHART ANALYSIS OF FIRST RESPONSES

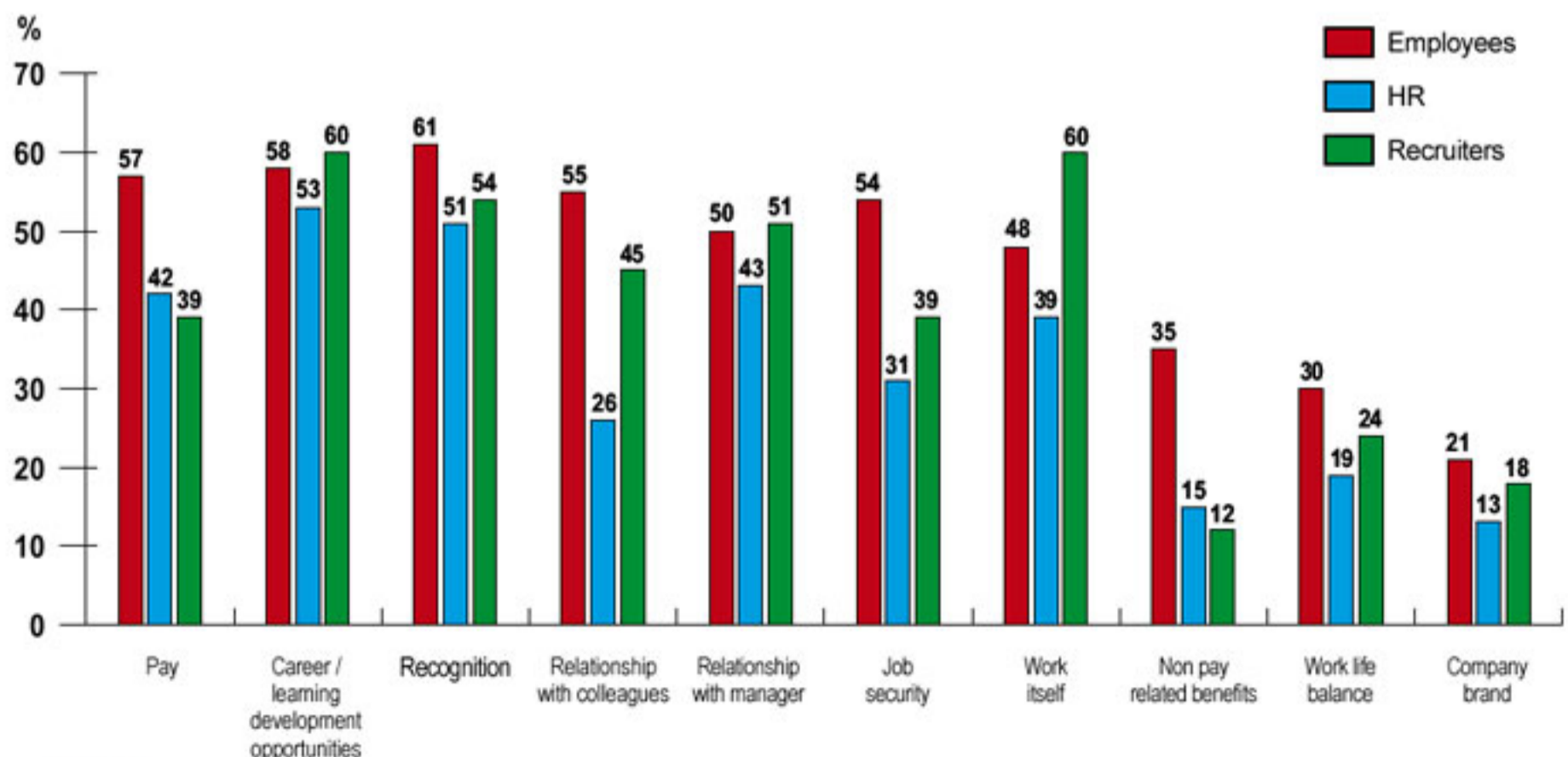


FIG. 2

economic uncertainties. The concept of employability is closely aligned with the concept of income security, that is, your income security depends on your having skills and competencies which are relevant and transferable across



jobs, thus making you employable, rather than your continuing job security with one employer.

#### **So what does all this mean?**

Above all, HR is advised to listen to

their own people. “General surveys like these give a sense of general labour market trends and are useful in recruitment, selection and in reviewing current HR policies and systems.

**“If your people are being poached, if you are losing talent, if you are finding it hard to recruit talent, there’s just a chance that you may be missing something and need to listen harder to what your employees may be trying to say.”**

*Chung Yuen Kay, senior lecturer, HRM unit, dept of management and organisation, NUS Business School*

Some companies, like NatSteel Asia, commission their own employee engagement surveys to find out what their employees want and feel, within the context of their own corporate culture and workplace needs,”

NatSteel’s Liu recommends.

But don’t start thinking that these results will not apply to your organisation. “If your people are being poached, if you are losing

talent, if you are finding it hard to recruit talent, there’s just a chance that you may be missing something and need to listen harder to what your employees may be trying to say,” NUS’ Chung concludes. **HRM**