

A helping hand for people with autism in the workforce

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SINGAPORE — Where employers once shunned from hiring people with autism, there is now unprecedented interest in hiring these workers and the need to support such employers who might not know where to begin.

Hence, the Autism Resource Centre (ARC) is planning to start a job centre early next year, to provide support such as an assessment of the applicants' abilities and employability training for those out of school but not yet job-ready, said ARC president Denise Phua yesterday, at the sidelines of the 4th Ideas for a Better World Forum hosted by Singapore International Foundation.

A similar initiative was also mooted by the Young Men's Christian Association of Singapore (YMCA) yesterday, which plans to partner Danish social organisation Specialist

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Autism Resource Centre president and Moulmein-Kallang MP Denise Phua

People Foundation to match autistic workers with high-skilled jobs.

Ms Phua, who is also Member of Parliament for Moulmein-Kallang GRC, said there has been growing interest among employers compared to five years ago, due to greater awareness of autism and more Special Education schools focusing on vocational training.

Along with a manpower crunch and restrictions placed on hiring foreign workers, this has created opportunities for people with autism, she said.

There was "no shortage of compassionate employers" willing to employ special needs staff, but there is still insufficient work-ready and skilled employees, said Ms Phua.

The job centre could also offer services such as job matching and preparing workplaces through awareness talks and training, but Ms Phua noted that the initiative faces financial constraints and there is a shortage of trained manpower to support the autistic workers.

And there remain many firms out there which have yet to be part of the Enabling Employers Network — an alliance of employers championing the employment of people

with disabilities.

"They may think that hiring people with special needs is charity ... (But) they may not be aware that if planned and executed well, the special-needs workforce can be a reliable and valuable workforce," said Ms Phua.

Meanwhile, the YMCA's partnership with the Specialist People Foundation will replicate the foundation's business arm and provide training, short-term work exposure and work placements, as well as negotiate with companies on making allowances for their autistic workers.

"There should be room for everyone in the society and not just for those who fit in ... and these people have the potential to contribute, just like everyone," said the foundation's founder Thorkil Sonne, who was speaking at the forum. NG JING YING



Mr Thorkil Sonne, Founder of Specialist People Foundation being greeted by a Pathlight student during his recent visit to the school.

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