

NATIONAL ENVIRONMENT AGENCY

Background

The National Environment Agency (NEA) is the leading public organisation responsible for improving and sustaining a clean and green environment in Singapore. The NEA develops and spearheads environmental initiatives and programmes through its partnership with the People, Public and Private sectors. It is committed to motivating every individual to take up environment ownership and to care for the environment as a way of life.

NEA's Long-term HR Strategies

1. **A**ttract, develop and retain talent with a passion for the environment.
2. **B**uild a work environment where staff are highly engaged and feel cared for.
3. **N**urture a cohesive workforce with strong ethos.

Strategic Management of the Older Workforce

While organisations in Singapore and globally are still grappling with the impact of a rapidly aging workforce, the NEA is ahead of the older workforce management curve. For many years now, they have been actively attracting, retaining and engaging older employees through a slew of innovative HR and work-life, age-friendly programmes. NEA strongly believes that a robust work-life framework,

incorporating elements of its HR strategies, is integral to employee attraction and engagement. To demonstrate their commitment, they currently employ 1,610 employees aged 50 and above, making up 47% of its total workforce. 8.5%, or 290 employees are aged 62 years and above.

For its enlightened HR practices, the agency is the winner of some prestigious HR awards. This includes clinching the 2011 AARP (American Association of Retired Persons) for Best Employers for Workers Over 50 Award in the international category, which makes NEA one of only two winners from Singapore in 2011. NEA is also one of the two statutory boards that have won this award to date.

When asked about the approach NEA takes towards the management of its older employees, NEA's Director of HR, Ms Gloria Chin aptly summarised the NEA's philosophy, "We are age-blind in our HR and work-life practices. It is all about putting the best man to the job. "

A Robust Work-Life Framework

NEA has set up a work-life framework that seeks to address the needs of the staff as an individual, and his relationship with his family/friends, community and work (see diagram below). While its work-life schemes and programmes are coordinated by the Human Resource Division (HRD), it also involves the work of various committees that sits outside of HRD, to execute the different aspects of NEA's Work-Life Harmony framework. These committees include the NEA Sports and Recreation

Club (NEASRC) and the Panel of Employee Engagement and Recognition (PEER). It has also appointed a work-life ambassador to look into the welfare of staff (including those above 50 years old) and engaged a Sports Convenor to organise monthly sports activities.

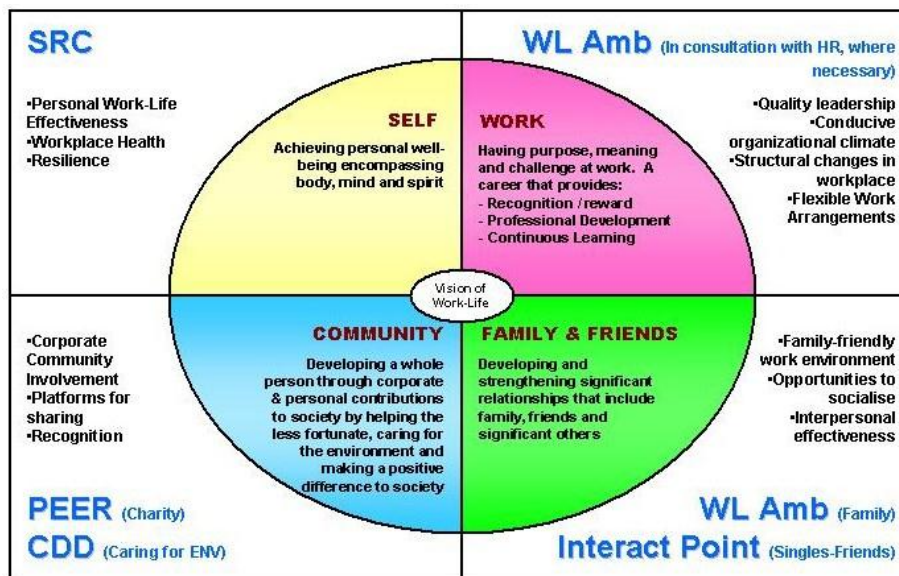


Figure 1: NEA's Work-Life Framework

Age-Friendly, Work-Life Programmes

NEA boasts a comprehensive set of work-life practices and programmes, from health talks to recreational classes, flexible working arrangements and innovative leave schemes. These programmes and policies are an extension of NEA's corporate core value, "Caring, where every individual is valued." While these programmes are implemented to meet the needs of staff across all age groups, they have been effective in reaching out to the older employees as well. NEA's management views its older employees through a holistic lens - beyond merely paid employees. Programmes are designed to cater to their physical, social and emotional needs, while tapping on their wealth of experience to create win-win for both the organisation and individual.

Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs)

There are several forms of FWAs in place to enable its staff to harmonise between personal and work commitments. While it has adopted the new Re-employment Guidelines, where retired staff at the age of 62 years old can be offered re-employment for up to 3 years, other forms of FWAs are also in place for them to tap on.

Engagement of Retired Officers as Consultants

Executive staff who have reached retirement age can be re-employed on full-time or part-time as consultant. With a global demand for the expertise that NEA has built up over the years, the arrangement was introduced in 2007 as an avenue for senior retired staff to continue to mentor and impart their expertise and knowledge to their younger or international colleagues, working on a project basis.

Mr Tan Joo Thai, 66 years old, has been working as a Medical Inspection Specialist in NEA's Centre for the Radiation Protection and Nuclear Science. He was re-hired in 2011 as a full-time consultant.

"I like to keep an active lifestyle and this (arrangement) I find my current work meaningful as I get to share knowledge to the younger officers and continue to contribute to the healthcare community."

Adjunct Fellowship Scheme

In many organisations, people lament the loss of institutional and technical knowledge with the retiring of senior people. NEA overcomes this by hiring retired employees as adjunct fellow. Under this scheme, retired employees with good experience are hired on either a full-time or part-time basis to tap on their knowledge – they conduct training, ensure proper knowledge management and pass on skills and knowledge to other staff.

Telecommuting Scheme

Employees can also opt to go on the telecommuting scheme which gives staff the flexibility of working from home. All Div 1 officers and selected officers are issued with laptop with Virtual Private Network (VPN) to access their emails and intranet from home, thus facilitating the telecommuting work arrangement.

Part-Time Scheme

Under this scheme, employees have the flexibility to choose from the various options of working between 11 and 36 hours per week. This scheme would meet the needs of older employees who may want to continue to be in the workforce, but prefer to scale down on their working hours to free up time for other commitments.

Staggered Working Hours

The staggered working hours is an FWA that is made available to all staff. All staff and older employees are able to select their preferred start and end time to meet their life-stage needs.

Employee Support Schemes

Flexi-Benefits Scheme

All employees in NEA are entitled to a specific amount annually under the Flexi-Benefits Scheme (FBS). The money may be used for health and wellness, pro-family or continuous learning activities. Regular roadshows, featuring various health vendors, are also held in NEA premises so that staff can easily tap onto their flexi-benefits to purchase health products and equipment.

Learning and Development Opportunities

Older employees are constantly encouraged to upgrade themselves, with access to sponsorship programmes and training courses. In fact, to prepare its older employees for retirement, staff who reach the age of 55 would automatically be enrolled in the “Plan Now for Retirement and Re-employment” course. Older employees on the daily-rated schemes are within the organisation’s radar. To increase their professionalism and employability, many of these daily-rated employees who are aged 50 and above were enrolled in 3 training programmes – “Personal Effectiveness”, “Communication & Relationship Management”, and “Workplace Literacy Comprehensive”. With training and good performance, these staff are in turn eligible for promotion, taking on larger job scopes and being paid higher salaries.

Health & Wellness Programmes

This is an organisation brimming with life and vitality, as evidenced by the many sports and recreational activities organised by its Sports & Recreation Club (SRC) or its Panel for Employee Engagement. The SRC runs fitness and wellness programmes such as aerobics, yoga and line-dancing classes. Its Tai Ji class which has been running for over 20 years now is especially popular with the older employees and continues to attract even the retired staff. Retirees are also entitled to enjoy the facilities of the Sport and Recreation Club with a low monthly fee of just \$2. To encourage retirees to sign up, NEA has even waived off membership fees for the first 3 years.

Educational Talks

Beyond programmes and activities, NEA regularly conducts health talks and talks relating to managing finance for retirement. These talks are typically made available to older employees at no cost to them.

“NEA is a good employer. It takes good care of its employees over 50 years of age. Most of such employees have been happily working in NEA for many years, taking pride in their work... Besides providing good service benefits relating to medical and health, it (NEA) also implements good work-life balance policy. This enables employees, particularly those above 50 years, to take steps to set aside time for their social and family life, and particularly for their health.”

**Mr Ma Wei Cheng,
General Secretary for Amalgamated Union of Public Employees (AUPE)**

Leave Schemes

NEA offers up to 3 days of paid leave to staff who needs to bring their parents for doctors' appointments or simply to care for them when they are unwell. This scheme is especially helpful for older employees whose parents are ageing and need the family support. Other innovative leave schemes beneficial to older employees include the birthday leave and time-off – where all officers are granted 1-hour time off each week to exercise, unwind and keeping fit.

Engaging the Older Employees

Engaging older employees does not come without its set of challenges. When crafting policies and programmes, NEA is always mindful of the need to cater to the wide spectrum of staff whose needs span across the different life stages. Even within the older employees group, their needs can also differ depending on their education, financial and physical health profile – thus explaining the different types of work arrangements NEA has in place for older employees. Despite the challenges, NEA continues to recruit and engage older employees as it recognises the wealth of experience and value they bring to the organisation. They are especially suitable for positions such as Environmental Health Officers, Vector Control officers or Hygiene officers. In these roles, they bring with them their past work experience and by virtue of their age, they can better relate to the public. Ms Chin explains, “The older Vector Control officers who go house to house checking on mosquito breeding grounds tend to be more patient in engaging and educating the public. This is especially so when they interact with older residents”

Work-Life Outcomes

For its work-life efforts, NEA has scored well in its latest Organisational Climate Survey conducted in 2011. 74% of its staff (across all age groups) indicated that their work arrangements have allowed them sufficient flexibility to meet their personal and family needs, a 9% increase from the 2008 survey and 14% higher than Public Service norm. 79% of its older employees say they feel happy working in NEA and 80% of them are motivated at work. More tellingly, NEA has a low attrition rate of 5.11% compared to the Singapore Statutory Board norm of 7.6% in 2010.

Next Steps

From the organisational perspective, NEA is undergoing a transformation exercise and it sees itself transforming from an enforcement-centric organisation to one with a greater focus on educating and engaging the public. This represents a need to review the type of capabilities required in the new environment. To this end, NEA has again taken a proactive stance, embarking on a strategic workforce planning exercise. Ms Chin explains, “The older employees especially those with lower qualifications will be part of our consideration as we see how we can scale up their capabilities so they do not get left behind. And in the same vein, we are also studying the impact of the ageing population on our manpower requirements – reviewing how we can structure our jobs better and leverage on technology to make our jobs age-friendly.”

Conclusion

Organisations cannot ignore the impact which an aging population can have on the workforce. Hence, utilising effective work-life practices, in particular FWAs, are one of the many ways organisations can leverage on to extend the working life of an older employee. In this respect, many organisations have much to learn from NEA, which has done well in being proactive and strategic in managing and harnessing the gold that is found in its older workforce.