

Jobs for many Singaporeans in growing infocomm sector

Huge opportunities over next three years, but people must be ready to train, reskill: Vivian

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Jobs are available for Singaporeans in the infocommunications space over the next three years, with the Republic facing a huge shortage of professionals, said Minister-in-charge of the Smart Nation Initiative Vivian Balakrishnan.

Singaporeans can secure these well-paying jobs if they are prepared to train and reskill, said Dr

Balakrishnan, who is also Foreign Minister, in an interview with The Straits Times.

He said digitalisation and disruption had already taken root when the current crisis struck. Covid-19 accelerated these trends.

While Singapore's immediate priority is to save jobs, that is not enough because "jobs are going to change", he added.

That is why the bulk of the Covid-19 support measures totalling almost \$100 billion in the four Bud-

get announcements had focused on getting companies to re-engineer their processes and workers to learn new skills "so that they are ready for the new opportunities when the crisis recedes".

Citing the infocomm space, he said it currently employs around 200,000 professionals in Singapore and would require another 60,000 over the next three years. But the education system is producing only 2,800 infocomm graduates each year.

"You do the math... If you are graduating 2,800 (a year) and I tell you that over the next three years we need 60,000, can you see there's an obvious shortage?"

This is why the Government is also encouraging mid-career switches, he said. "That is why we are also trying to persuade thousands of people willing to learn to come into this sector."

Meanwhile, Dr Balakrishnan said, the Government is looking into subsidising opportunities for Singaporeans to take up temporary assignments, attachments and traineeships during this down period, while waiting for permanent jobs to open up. It also wants training institutions to step up and for employers to change their mindsets.

"We should not have to apologise that we are tilting the playing field in favour of our own citizens," said

Dr Balakrishnan. "We may need foreigners to supplement us or to help us expand the overall pie, but the core and the bulk of the opportunities must come to our people."

Even now, Dr Balakrishnan said, there is a shortage of engineers and it is not a matter of paper qualifications. "I don't really need to look at your degree. I just need to look at your code. I just need to know what projects you've worked on," he said. "The shortage will become more acute as the economy recovers."

More broadly speaking, Dr Balakrishnan said he saw job opportunities springing up in what he called "high-tech, high-touch and high-art" areas.

"If you're a programmer, a UX (user experience) designer or an expert in Python, artificial intelligence and machine learning... or better still, you create robots, you have no shortage of jobs," he said.

There would also continue to be a demand for workers in the "high-touch" areas that require face-to-face interactions with other human beings – such as the healthcare, education and social service sectors.

Nor did he see machines taking

over "high-art" jobs such as painting, writing, video recording, directing, scripting, and sound and light engineering.

But he was less sanguine about sectors such as food and beverage, and retail. "The answer to when (they) will recover depends on when we will be rid of Covid-19... You speak to doctors. Nobody is in a position to give you that warranty yet."

The Government will help ease the short-term pain, said Dr Balakrishnan. "But remember, we have a medium- to longer-term agenda to transform ourselves... upskill humans, transform our enterprises, restructure our economy – and that has to be our focus, going forward."

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