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Programme seeks to improve lot of toilet cleaners

I REFER to the feature on elderly cleaners and subsequent letters from the public.

The cleaner's plight with regard to low wages and wage stagnation can perhaps be attributed to the fact that the nature of the job has not changed over the years.

To improve the lot of existing cleaners and attract new and younger recruits, wages need to rise sustained by productivity gains. There is, however, limited scope for mechanisation, particularly in indoor cleaning work. A possible approach is to enlarge the job of a cleaner and create a career progression for them.

The Building Custodian Job Re-design Programme, an initiative supported by the Singapore Workforce Development Agency and the National Trades Union Congress, seeks to enhance the skills of the cleaner to value-add in work such as changing light bulbs, clearing chokes and custodial checking involving the sighting and reporting of defects, pests and killer litter among others. Building custodians/multi-skilled cleaners can thus take better pride in their work, which provides job enrichment and a break from the monotony of cleaning. This professional job also comes with a \$1,000 starting wage, compared to the \$700 to \$800 of a cleaner. (Details of the programme can be found at www.recc.com.sg/news.htm and www.recc.com.sg/building-custodian.htm)

While younger new entries and substantially higher retention has been achieved, due in part to career progression opportunities from cleaner to building custodian, senior building custodian, building supervisor and beyond, there has been limited success with extending the skills of existing cleaners.

Building custodians provide building owners, town councils and managing agents with a cost-effective additional layer of checking on the ground and contribute to improved service delivery to building occupants and users. Employers, in turn, benefit from having a multi-skilled workforce and higher retention. The building custodian concept can also be viewed in the additional light of a corporate social responsibility to improve the welfare and wages of cleaners.

We urge more decision makers to consider adopting building custodians in cleaning tenders and contracts. We also encourage cleaners to upgrade themselves through the skills, literacy and numeracy continuum provided in the Building Custodian Job Re-design Programme.

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