

Visitors check out a sensor toilet exhibit at the World Toilet Summit, where experts are gathering to discuss the promotion of clean toilets, sanitation issues and hygiene. ST PHOTO: JOYCE FANG

Green restroom

The World Toilet Summit and Expo and the Pulire Asia Cleaning Solutions Expo started at Suntec City on Wednesday and will end today. The Straits Times looks at one of the exhibits.

AT THE URINAL

- "Smart" sensor regulates flushes when traffic is high, for example flushing only once for every two users
- Troubleshooting screen can be linked to the building's monitors to alert maintenance crew if something is not working

COMBO HAND WASHER AND TOILET BOWL

- New design combines sink with water tank
- When a person flushes, water is drawn up to the sink first
- Water in the sink drains into the tank, recycling water for flushing

IN THE CUBICLE

New water tank design

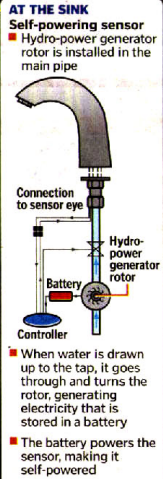
- Traditional tanks have small valves that release water into the toilet bowl continuously to clean it
- New design uses a larger valve to flush more water into the toilet bowl at once, covering a larger area more forcefully
- This reduces water per flush from 4.5 litres to 3.5 litres

One-flush mechanism

- Stops water from flowing continuously even if the flush button is jammed

Dual flush option

- Lets people choose between a half flush of 2.5 litres or full flush of 3.5 litres



PHOTOS: RIGEL TECHNOLOGY, ST GRAPHICS

Cleaning industry 'needs a makeover'

Forum speakers say cleaners in short supply due to low pay, stigma

By AMRESH GUNASINGHAM

DEMAND for cleaners is expected to increase as the economy picks up over the next three years - but the industry is struggling due to its unglamorous image and a perceived lack of professionalism, said a gathering of industry experts here yesterday.

The opening of the integrated resorts alone will create thousands of jobs over the next few years, said Mr Milton Ng, vice-president of the Environmental Management Association of Singapore. "But if no one is interested...where are we go-

ing to find the workers to do the work?"

The cleaning industry, which employs around 100,000 workers here, is worth \$600 million a year, almost double the figure a decade ago.

But the labour-intensive nature of the job - more than 80 per cent of costs are related to manpower - means contractors often drive down workers' pay to attract business. This, coupled with the stigma attached to the job, means workers from abroad are often sought to fill the positions.

To attract more to the industry, Mr Ng said stricter rules should be introduced to prevent rogue companies from giving the industry a bad name.

"The problem we are facing today is that there seems to be more workers exiting rather than entering the industry," he said.

Mr Ng was a plenary speaker at Pulire

MORE ARE LEAVING

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Mr Milton Ng, vice-president of the Environmental Management Association of Singapore

Asia, a forum held as part of the World Toilet Summit at Suntec City yesterday.

Regional experts speaking at the forum highlighted a lack of professional standards - for example, a poor working envi-

ronment, low wages and undervalued service contracts - as the perennial bugbear facing the sector.

Mr Noruddin Idris, president of the Malaysian Association of Cleaning Contractors, said basing the prices of cleaning contracts solely on the number of workers employed overlooked other factors such as the need to improve training standards and the use of technology to enhance worker productivity.

Mr Ng said government initiatives such as the Best Sourcing Initiative (BSI) - a programme where contracts are awarded based not just on price, but also service quality and the performance of the bidder - have helped to boost the industry here.

But what is also needed is proper career development paths and health and safety programmes to attract more people into the industry, he added.

Such workers earn up to \$1,000 a month on average and are generally above 40 years old.

The panel also expressed the need for the adoption of a regional standard to determine the quality of training provided to cleaners as well as equipment and salaries.

Mr John Laws, executive director of the Australian Cleaning Contractors' Association, said: "Each country...has its own problems, but to me, there are general issues facing the industry worldwide, such as cost pressures, environmental considerations and the need for more professionalism."

In Australia, he added, the constant pressure to drive down the bottom line has meant more workers are being made redundant.

The summit ends today. amresh@sph.com.sg