

# Tidying up hiring practices

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WHEN Ms Khuzaimah Muanan began as a general cleaner at the National University Hospital four years ago, she mopped the floor and washed the toilets. But with job redesign and training, the 47-year-old – who has a Primary 6 education – now also does inspection management and team supervision.

She also earns 35 per cent more. And, the once computer-phobic employee of ISS Facility Services adds: "I use a PDA at work to inform nurses that beds are ready so that patients can be admitted faster".

To improve the jobs and lives of cleaners, two initiatives were introduced yesterday at the first Cleaners' Day here. To curb the problem of hirers who award contracts to cleaning companies with the lowest bids – a practice which erodes the skill levels and income of cleaners – the labour movement is helping hirers to defray costs.

The Best Sourcing Initiative (BSI) Early Adopters Scheme will subsidise hirers by up to \$75,000 per contract; grants are given for up to three years. NTUC will work with hirers to list desired standards and practices in their tender documents.

Said NTUC secretary-general Lim Swee Say: "Many customers in this industry do not value good quality service. All they want is cheap ... As a result, many cleaning jobs are not awarded on the right basis, at the right price." Indeed, cleaners and labourers' wages have dipped by 0.9 per cent over the last decade, according to the Ministry of Manpower's wage report for 2008. Their median wage in June that year was \$975.

Mr Lim said many hirers today specify headcount

Mr Lim Swee Say serving cleaners. WEE TECK HIAN



when calling for cleaning tenders. "They do not specify cleanliness and performance standard. Why? Because they mistakenly believe headcount equals performance."

The scheme hopes to change such attitudes. And the reward for cleaning companies would be contracts clinched – with costs like training, mechanisation and workers' CPF factored in. "Once you have a longer term contract, where the price is reasonable to a service provider, it gives a lot of opportunities for service provider to invest back into the contract ... be it in staff training or mechanisation," said Mr Woon Chiap Chan, country managing director of ISS.

The second initiative launched yesterday was the Guidelines on Workplace Safety and Health for cleaning and custodial services.

To honour their contributions, 300 cleaners were treated to high tea, games and photo shoots at Swissotel the Stamford. "Cleaners are very important. Without us, places would resemble a rubbish dump," said Mdm Loo Wai Fong, 55.