

Grades still good indicator of candidate quality, employers tell student forum



File photo showing university students in Singapore attending a graduation ceremony. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG



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SINGAPORE - Companies are still drawn to candidates with good grades as they are a strong marker of capability, leading employers told students on Wednesday (Jan 30). But other factors are increasingly being considered in the hiring process.

Speaking at a forum on employability organised by the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) Students' Union, Economic Development Board (EDB) managing director Chng Kai Fong said: "Everyone is trying to shift away from an emphasis on grades but there is no substitute."

However, he stressed that "good grades" do not need to equate to a perfect score, adding that even a candidate on the shortlist may not necessarily get the job.

Chief executive of DBS Group Piyush Gupta, who delivered a keynote speech, said that from a human resource perspective, grades still provide the easiest way to shortlist candidates.

He also explained how the bank is using a new "virtual recruiter", a chatbot called Jobs Intelligence Maestro (Jim), which he claims has changed the way the bank shortlists applicants.

It can also review CVs, collect applicants' responses for pre-screening questions and conduct psychometric profiling assessments.

Other employers said they look for different character traits such as curiosity, humility and a willingness to learn.



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Singapore Tourism Board chairman Chaly Mah said more companies are assessing candidates through internship programmes, workshops and team projects.

Mr Chng told the 250 students and 300 employers who attended the forum that he frequently comes across candidates who come out with "textbook answers" to interview questions.

He then brought up a scholarship candidate who did not get a perfect score, but during his interview displayed "curiosity, and a desire to explore".

"He wrote about bitcoin in his essay and I engaged him in conversation about the different cryptocurrencies," said Mr Chng. "I learnt he lives in a two-room flat... but he saves up his own money to invest."

"That's what employers are looking for. Part of that is reflected in your grades and CV, part of it in your answers during the interview."

"Think of what it is that drives you. As you assemble your CV, be multi-dimensional. The world is full of opportunities and you can assemble three to four different skills to make yourself a unique character."

However, some in the audience questioned whether these responses were enough. Among them was Education Minister Ong Ye Kung.

"If everyone thinks like that, why is it that in society, among students, they feel like grades are still so important?" he said in response to the discussion.

"Are those the only answers, and do we therefore have to settle with the situation today, or do we still see HR practices evolving further today? Is there scope to further evolve?"

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Mr Danny Yong, chief investment officer and founding partner of Dymon Asia Capital, said: "A lot of learning is done on the job and not in school. So the most important ingredient for success is opportunity."

He threw out a challenge to the other employers - to hire up to 10 per cent of employees "blind on resumes and grades, but instead choose the best person based on their traits".

"If you change the way you hire, you will allow students to take up things they are really passionate and interested in, rather than padding up their CVs," said Mr Yong, who started an initiative called Tangent that hopes to get firms to hire staff who may not possess the relevant experience or qualifications, but have the attributes to do well.

It is part of a philanthropic organisation, The Majority Trust, which Mr Yong also founded.

In his opening speech earlier, Mr Ong said: "(Students') impressions, rightly or wrongly, is that when they step into the job market... employers would still look at their GPAs. So there is a disconnect."

From the students' point of view, the education experience is different, said Mr Ong, and the "more critical question" is whether employers understand that difference.

"Every CEO, board member, chairman I speak to will say (that they have a HR policy and hiring tools that do not just look at academic grades) but students, you still feel differently on the receiving end."

One caveat, Mr Ong said, was that "this discussion is not about the relevance of meritocracy".

"It's not about whether we should lower our standards. We always want high standards. We always believe in meritocracy - that's the key governance principle of Singapore."

"What we are saying is that instead of the narrow definition of meritocracy - academic meritocracy - we need to broaden the definition, look at the holistic aspect of what the student can bring to the table, and the new techniques that we can use to gauge students' strengths in all these areas."

In a five-minute speech on the same topic, SMU undergraduate Tan Xin Hao said: "While titles and honours are impressive and look good on a resume, we should be judged based on our wisdom, skills and values.

"Titles come and go, but there's no substitute for values which define who you are and the various precious abilities which cannot be picked up within the four walls of a classroom.

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