Can Singapore's 'protect every worker' doctrine take on AI?
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Singapore's position on the global skill distribution and its long record of institutional adaptation give it a reasonable base from which to navigate the AI transition, says the writer. ST FILE PHOTO

Can Singapore's 'protect every worker' doctrine take on AI?

While we let AI in, it's worth asking more questions about direction, human learning, and our plans for the next generation of graduates.

Li Jia

Like many policymakers and researchers around the world, Singapore is grappling with what artificial intelligence means for jobs and for workers.

Prime Minister Lawrence Wong's May Day Rally speech brought together the Government's response in a single sentence that is worth pausing over: "We may not be able to protect every job. But we will protect every worker."

Behind the sentence is a considered choice: to let the technology in, to accept that the composition of jobs will change, and to direct policy at the workers who will move through that change rather than at the jobs themselves.

The institutional architecture announced alongside it – a National AI Council, a Tripartite Jobs Council, a new Skills and Workforce Development Agency, the SkillsFuture Jobseeker Support Scheme, and scaled-up Company Training Committees – gives that choice real institutional substance.

In the days since, that doctrine has moved from announcement to endorsement.

On May 6, Parliament unanimously backed a motion tabled by labour chief Ng Chee Meng affirming that Singapore must not have jobless growth amid the AI transition, with Manpower Minister Tan See Leng telling the House in words close to those of the Prime Minister: "The Government cannot protect every job, but will certainly do our best to support and protect every worker."

It is a thoughtful starting point. It is, however, also one that can be developed further as the technology and the evidence evolve.

With the broad architecture set out, three areas are worth keeping in view as the framework develops.

Heavy manual work is largely untouched in the near term. At the very high end, AI tends to augment workers and raise the value of their judgment. The pressure falls hardest on middle-tier cognitive roles – clerks, junior analysts, paralegals, routine professional work – where many of the underlying tasks are exactly the kind that generative AI can now perform.

1 THE AI DIRECTION

The National AI Council is currently expected to be a coordinator and a magnet for investment. Another role worth taking on is making decisions on which kinds of AI it most wants to encourage.

Not all AI applications are the same. Tools that automate an entire workflow have different consequences from tools that work alongside a person.

In the case of an electrician using diagnostic AI, the technology becomes a direct substitute for labour. When a nurse receives clinical decision support, AI tends to expand the task and raises the value of human work.

Singapore has natural levers in public R&D funding, A*STAR programmes and university grants. The question is whether to use them to tilt deliberately towards AI that complements workers rather than displaces them.

That conversation needs to go deeper.

2 RISK OF AI AS A CRUTCH

Offering premium AI tools through SkillsFuture is sensible – it lowers the cost of getting started. But there is a question that the research community has been raising more seriously of late: when AI is good enough, users can stop learning and simply delegate.

The effort that builds deep expertise gets short-circuited.

This is a concern in classrooms, where students who have every essay written for them never build the writing muscle, and equally in workplaces, where analysts who let AI run every model never build the modelling judgment that more experienced analysts rely on.

One way to address this is to put more weight on demonstrated competence rather than tool access. That means linking SkillsFuture certifications to assessed outcomes, having Company Training Committees track skill formation rather than attendance, and being straight with university students that AI is a complement to learning, not a substitute for it.

3 ENTRY POINT FOR YOUNG WORKERS

The piece of the puzzle that received less attention in the May Day speech is what happens to fresh graduates.

As existing workers become more productive with AI, firms face a tempting calculation: rather than hire three new graduates, run a leaner team augmented by AI.

In a competitive year, this can look rational at the firm level. Over a decade, however, the country may pay a high price because today's juniors are tomorrow's seniors, and the path to becoming a senior analyst, manager or founder runs through being a junior one first.

If too many young workers cannot find a first rung on the ladder, the human-capital pipeline narrows. This seems like a place where modest, time-bound policy support could go a long way: a hiring credit for firms that take on fresh graduates, expanded structured internships and traineeships co-funded with industry, or temporary salary support for first-job entrants.

The fiscal cost would be small relative to the cost of letting an entire cohort lose its early-career foothold.

WHEN EXPOSURE IS ALSO ADVANTAGE

According to recent research by the Singapore Management University (SMU) Resilient Workforces Institute, Singapore's economy is heavily exposed to AI.

A large share of its employment sits in cognitive tasks – finance, professional services, public administration, logistics coordination and software – exactly the activities where generative AI is most directly

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What children wish adults understood about school bullying

Impact of AI across skill spectrum is unlikely to be uniform

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capable.

Recent labour-economics research suggests that the impact of AI across the skill spectrum is unlikely to be uniform. Heavy manual work is largely untouched in the near term.

At the very high end, AI tends to augment workers and raise the value of their judgment.

The pressure falls hardest on middle-tier cognitive roles – clerks, junior analysts, paralegals, routine professional work – where many of the underlying tasks are exactly the kind that generative AI can now perform.

At first glance, this looks worrying for Singapore. On reflection, the picture is more hopeful. The U-shape describes how AI affects workers within an economy, but Singapore is not just one labour market in isolation; it is also a participant in the global one.

By several measures, the country sits relatively high on the global skill distribution – a well-educated workforce, openness to trade and talent, and institutions with a long track record of adaptation. Those features mean that, if the transition is managed carefully, Singapore has a fair chance of moving upwards overall.

A paralegal who once spent her days on document review can move into a role supervising AI-generated drafts and handling the exceptions where judgment is required.

A junior bank analyst, rather than being squeezed out by automated reporting, can step into model-risk review or AI-output validation.

This is provided the country keeps helping its workers shift to the right of the skill spectrum at a pace that keeps up with the technology. Early signs are encouraging: domestic demand for AI-related skills has risen noticeably since generative AI took off, and firms are already creating roles that did not exist three years ago.

Seen this way, the SkillsFuture push, the redesigned learning portal, and the subsidised access to premium AI tools are well-aimed. They treat training not as a consolation prize for displaced workers, but as one of the main mechanisms by which Singapore can help its workforce stay on the rising side of the U-shape.

Two design questions matter here. The first is whether training keeps pace with the jobs actually being created. SkillsFuture has scaled up fast, but the standing risk for any large training programme is that its course catalogue drifts behind the live labour market.

Closing that gap is precisely what the Tripartite Jobs Council and Company Training Committees were built to do: feed firm-level signals on what hiring managers cannot find back into curriculum design, in close to real time. How well that loop runs will matter as much as how many seats the system funds.

Universities belong in that loop too. Their continuing-education arms can move faster than a centrally administered catalogue, and faculty research often picks up labour-market shifts close to the source. The Tripartite Jobs Council will get more out of them by treating them as design partners than as downstream providers of seats.

The second is access to the AI tools themselves. Subsidised access to premium tools is currently channelled through selected SkillsFuture courses, and the logic of doing it that way is sound: course enrolment is itself a screening device, identifying workers who will actually pick up the tools and use them. Self-selection of this kind makes the subsidy go further than a blanket entitlement to working adults would.

The case for broader access is stronger one tier earlier, in schools. If AI is going to be as basic to professional work as spreadsheets are now, the cohort entering the labour market a decade from now should grow up using these tools.

A universal entitlement at secondary, junior college, ITE and the first years of university would place familiarity where it has the most leverage: while learning habits are still forming, and well before the labour market starts asking for it. The crutch concern from earlier still applies, of course: providing the tools and designing assessments that still build judgment have to move together.

What universities teach is evolving alongside this. At SMU, as at NUS, NTU and others, the scope of what gets taught – in economics, business analytics, computing, law – has been adapting to what employers are asking for.

Continuing-education programmes are becoming as important as undergraduate teaching for the country's overall skill trajectory; expertise-building has to run across a worker's whole career, not stop at age 22.

NAVIGATING THE TRANSITION

The framework PM Wong set out is a thoughtful one. The doctrine of protecting workers rather than specific jobs, the institutional architecture, and the spirit of meeting the technology rather than running from it are all things to build on.

Singapore's exposure to AI is real, but its position on the global skill distribution and its long record of institutional adaptation give the country a reasonable base from which to navigate the transition.

The three areas – the direction of AI, the integrity of human learning, and the entry point for young workers – are areas where the AI framework could usefully be extended.

Taken alongside what was announced on May Day, attending to them would help the "protect every worker" promise hold up as the technology continues to develop.

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