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Leading employers say candidates' grades are still a good indicator of ability

But participants at a forum on employability also agree that other intangible qualities are just as key in hiring

Singapore

COMPANIES are still drawn to candidates with good grades as they are still a strong marker of capability, leading employers told students on Wednesday.

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."

But he stressed that "good grades" do not need to equate to a perfect score, and that a candidate on the shortlist may still not be hired.

Chief executive of DBS Group Piyush Gupta, who delivered the keynote address, pressed a similar point – that from a human-resource perspective,

grades still provided the easiest way to shortlist candidates.

He disclosed that the bank is now using a "virtual recruiter", a chatbot called Jobs Intelligence Maestro – Jim, for short – which he said has changed the way the bank shortlists applicants for its positions.

Jim can review CVs, collect applicants' responses for pre-screening questions and run psychometric profiling assessments.

Other employers who took part in the forum said they look for character traits such as curiosity, humility and a willingness to learn.

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

EDB's Mr Chng told the 250 stu-

dents and 300 employers who attended the forum that he frequently comes across candidates who deliver "textbook answers" to interview questions.

He cited the case of a scholarship candidate who did not get a perfect score, but displayed "curiosity and a desire to explore" in the interview.

"He wrote about Bitcoin in his essay and I engaged him in conversation about the different cryptocurrencies," said Mr Chng, who was to find out that this candidate lived in a two-room flat, but saved 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 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." Some in the audience asked,

however, whether such responses were enough.

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 tossed a challenge to the other employers on the panel – to hire up to 10 per cent of employees "blind on resumes and grades, and choose instead the best person for the job 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 pad their CVs," he said.

Mr Yong is the founder of an initiative called Tangent, which hopes to persuade firms to hire staff with the attributes to do well, even if they may not hold the relevant experience or qualifications.

Tangent is part of a philanthropic

organisation, The Majority Trust, which Mr Yong also founded.

In his opening speech earlier, Education minister Ong Ye Kung said: "(Students') impressions, rightly or wrongly, are 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.

The "more critical question" is whether employers are aware of this different point of view.

"Every CEO, board member, chairman I speak to says (that they have a HR policy and hiring tools that look beyond academic grades), but students – you still feel differently on the receiving end."

The minister added that the discussion was 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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