



ENGAGING EMPLOYEES THROUGH DISRUPTION

*A Singapore Workforce
Engagement Study 2020*

FOREWORD BY EDITOR

Early 2019 saw the escalating trade war between the United States and China which impacted global trade and Singapore and the rest of Asia was not spared. Early 2019 also saw other global events like the North Korea–United States Hanoi Summit taking place and the Brexit situation escalating; the withdrawal of the UK was delayed by deadlock in the British parliament; parliament eventually ratified the withdrawal agreement, and the UK left the EU on 31 January 2020. By the end of 2019, COVID-19 was brewing and on 30 January 2020, the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak of COVID to be a Public Health Emergency of International Concern.

As these events unfolded in 2019 and early 2020, we continued to poll employees' sentiments on how they felt about their employers' workplace practices and their extent of engagement. Undoubtedly these global events have impacted business in Singapore and although every organisation may be differently impacted by these global events, we are always keen to understand changes in how companies in Singapore approach their human capital practices and ultimately the impact on individuals' sentiments on how likely they are to recommend their workplace to others.

The data gathering phase took place between Apr 2019 and Mar 2020. This annual long exercise is like our previous years' practice of polling employees across various industry sectors, age groups, position levels and tenure in their respective organisation. We have been doing our annual employee engagement study since 2011 and are happy to publish our findings. Our purpose is to provide and to share our results with industry and employers. In particular, we are always keen to uncover any differences between employees working in SMEs and non-SMEs, as 99% of enterprises in Singapore are SMEs, employing 65% of our workforce.

The aAdvantage Team is pleased to present our findings for SWES 2020. We have noted significant drops in employee engagement scores and the likelihood to recommend their companies as a good place to work. This is consistent across employees across the board, in SMEs and non-SMEs. We hope our findings will present insights on what employers need to work on amidst this unprecedented time of change and a strong call to transform our businesses to meet the global and local challenges ahead. As we work towards a "new norm", we need to rethink our human capital approaches to remain adaptable and agile.

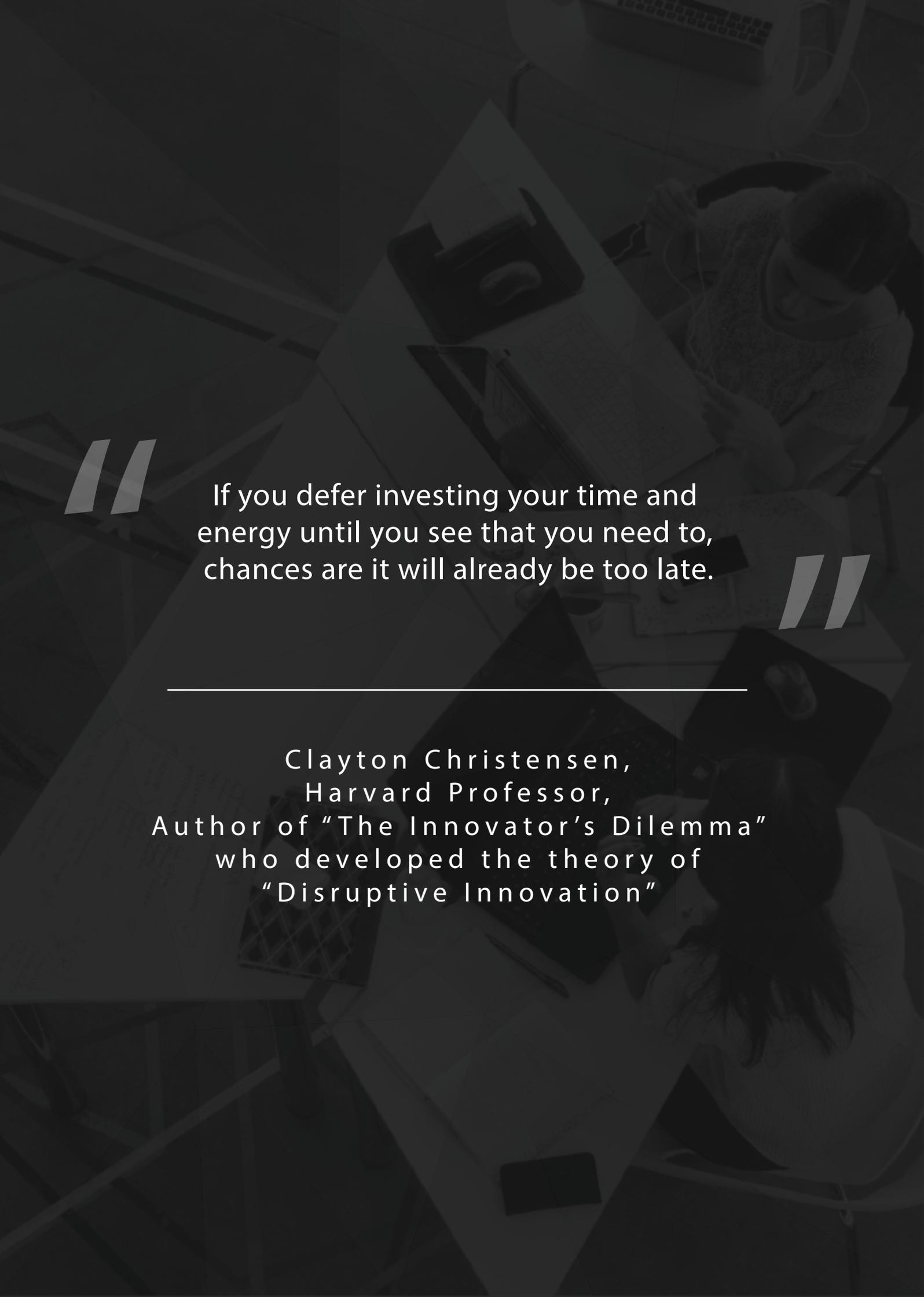


Jacqueline Gwee
Director
aAdvantage Consulting Group Pte Ltd



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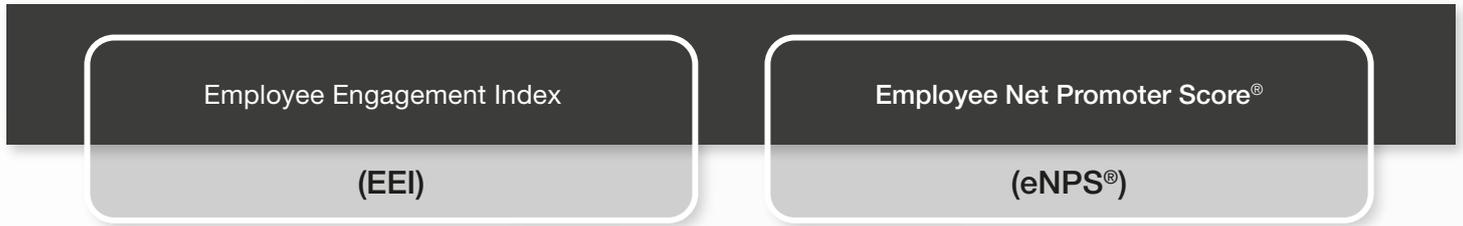


“ If you defer investing your time and energy until you see that you need to, chances are it will already be too late. ”

Clayton Christensen,
Harvard Professor,
Author of “The Innovator’s Dilemma”
who developed the theory of
“Disruptive Innovation”

Methodology

aAdvantage Consulting tracks two indicators of Employee Engagement and Loyalty in its annual Singapore Workforce Engagement Study:



Employee Engagement Index (EEI)

aAdvantage Consulting defines an engaged employee as one who:

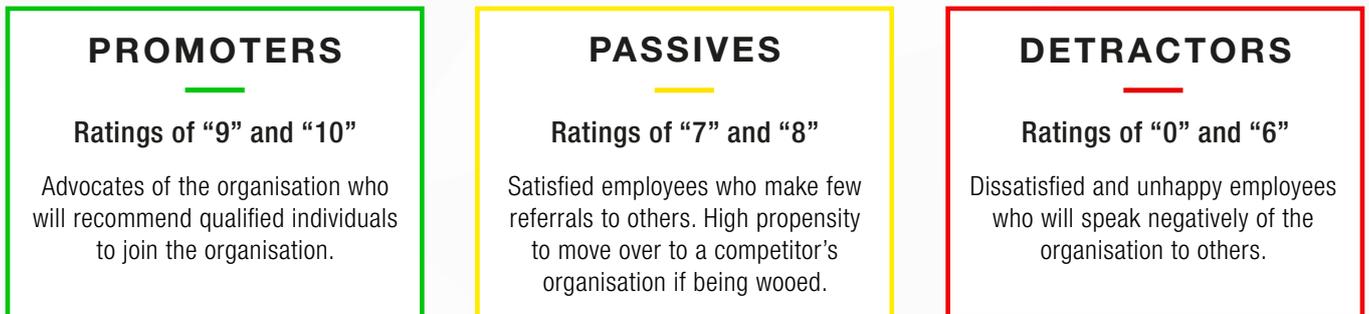
- *Feels proud and happy working for his / her organisation*
- *Experiences a sense of fulfilment in the course of work*
- *Would recommend the organisation as a good place to work*

These outcomes form our Employee Engagement Index.

Employee Net Promoter Score® (eNPS®)

Since 2011, aAdvantage Consulting has been measuring the Employee Net Promoter Score® in its annual Singapore Workforce Engagement Study. The eNPS® measures the likelihood of employees to recommend their organisations as a good place to work.

Respondents were asked “On a scale of 0 to 10, with 0 being not at all and 10 being very likely, how likely would you recommend your company as a good place to work?”



Net Promoter®, Net Promoter Score® and NPS® are trademarks of Satmetrix Systems, Inc., Bain & Company, Inc., and Fred Reichheld.

We hope that measuring and tracking the the employee engagement and Employee Net Promoter Score® indices would provide meaningful insights on the efforts and effectiveness of organisations’ policies and practices to attract and retain talent.

Key Findings of SWES 2020

aAdvantage Singapore Workforce Study 2020 was conducted from the period of April 2019 - March 2020. More than 2000 responses were collected from employees across various industries and demographic groups.

The phrase 'age of disruption' is not new to us. In 2019, the world saw major business disruptions. The US-China trade war, business restructuring and reorganisation, technology and digital disruption, and COVID-19. These disruptions forced organisations to rethink their business, operational and digital strategies.

Most organisations will claim that People is key to driving and executing strategies and changes. Given the value that employees bring to organisations, how did organisations fare in employee engagement in 2019? How should organisations continue to engage and retain their employees during transformational times? How should organisations equip employees with the necessary skills, knowledge and capabilities to stay competitive and be ahead of the curve?

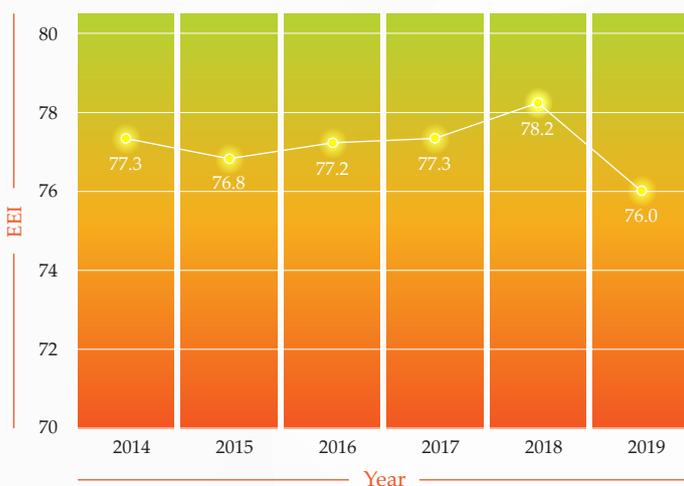
These are tough questions for organisations to address. Our whitepaper aims to shed some light on what drives employee engagement and how organisations can engage employees. However, we note that organisations have unique challenges and environments and should therefore also measure their own engagement levels and establish specific employee engagement strategies.

Employee engagement levels (EEI) in the Singapore Workforce decreased for the first time since 2013; employees were also least likely to recommend their organisation in 2019 (eNPS®). In addition, in a recent study by Qualtrics (2020), it was found that the employee engagement level in Singapore is lower than the global average¹.

Disruptive events in 2019 could possibly contribute to lower employee engagement levels. In times of uncertainty, employees who are unaccustomed to changes might experience negative emotions such as anger, frustration and feeling overwhelmed. If not managed properly by the organisation, this might lead to employees becoming disengaged. Employees do look to the organisation for increased communication, transparency and employee well-being during disruptive times.

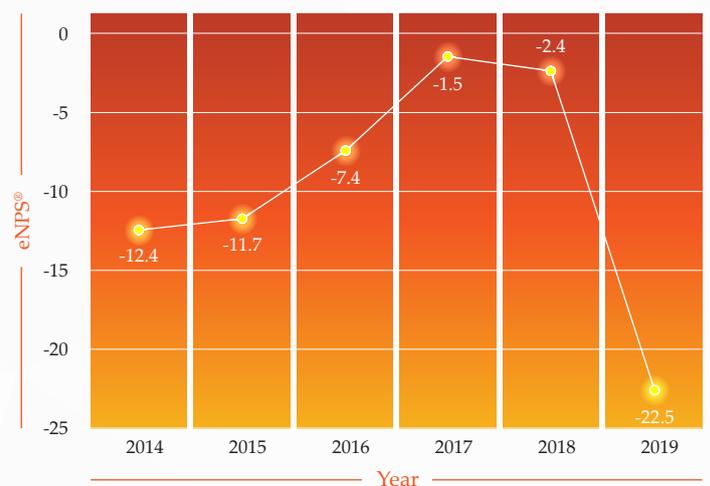
Employee Engagement Index (EEI) by Year

Employee engagement in 2019 **decreased** statistically significantly the first time since 2014.



Employee Net Promoter Score® (eNPS®) by Year

Employees were also **least likely to recommend their organisation** to others in 2019.



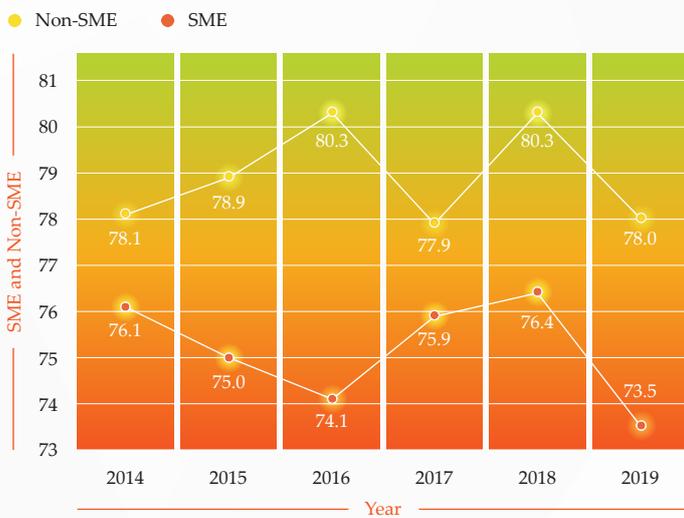
How Engaged is the Singapore Workforce?

How engaged are employees in SMEs and non-SMEs?

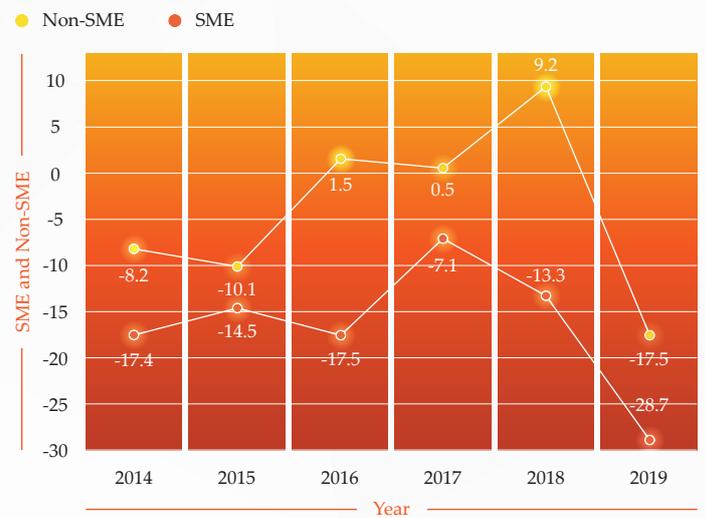
Similar to the overall results, both the Employee Engagement Index (EEI) and Employee Net Promoter Score® (eNPS®) for respondents in SMEs and non-SMEs decreased in 2019. Consistently across all years, employees in SMEs were less engaged than employees in non-SMEs.

One hypothesis is that SMEs do not place as much emphasis on employee engagement and human capital development as compared to non-SMEs in driving business results. It will, nonetheless, be increasingly more important for SMEs to focus on employee engagement to compete in the rapidly changing economy and attract the best talent for their organisations.

SME & Non-SME EEI by Year



SME & Non-SME eNPS® by Year



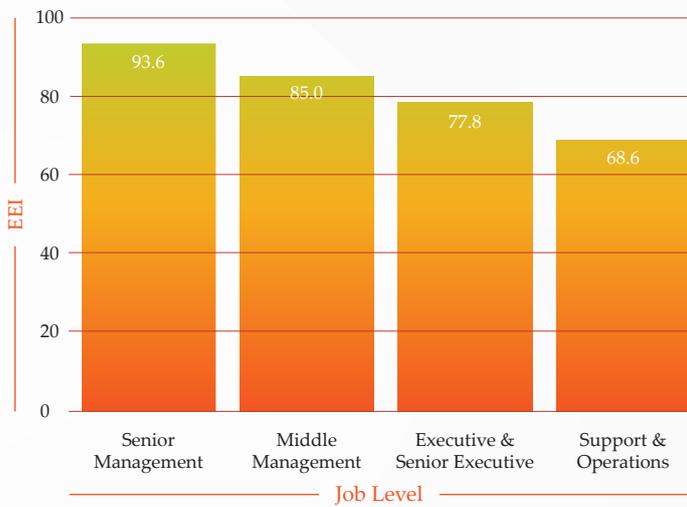
Do engagement levels vary across job levels?

Taking a closer look at the results by job level, we found that employees in senior and middle management job roles are consistently more engaged than executive/senior executive and support/operational job roles. This observation is consistent with the results of previous years. A negative eNPS® score means that there are more Detractors than Promoters, hence a score of -50.9 indicates that there are 50.9% more Detractors than Promoters at the Support and Operations level.

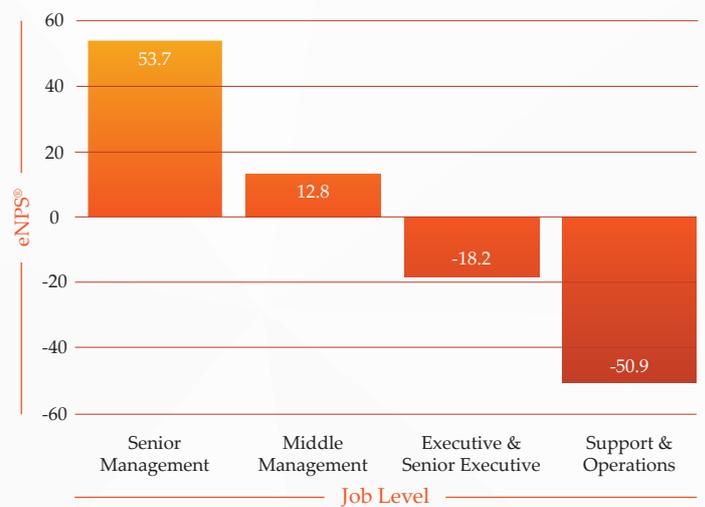
These results are also not surprising as we generally observe more efforts to communicate and engage management level staff and less to ground operations staff. Through our consulting work, it is also common to find that the needs of employees differ. For example, employees in Support and Operations job roles appreciate health-related staff benefits as compared to flexible work timings. This may be because addressing safety or physiological well-being needs are more important to them. Hence, engagement strategies which are not differentiated for the various staff levels may not be experienced by staff.

This suggests that more organisational effort is still required to ensure that HR policies and engagement activities continue to cater to employees across all job levels.

EEI by Job Level



eNPS® by Job Level

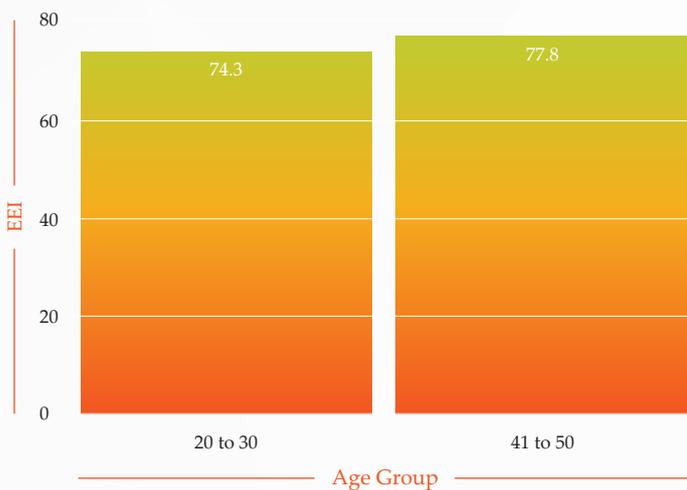


Do engagement levels vary across age groups?

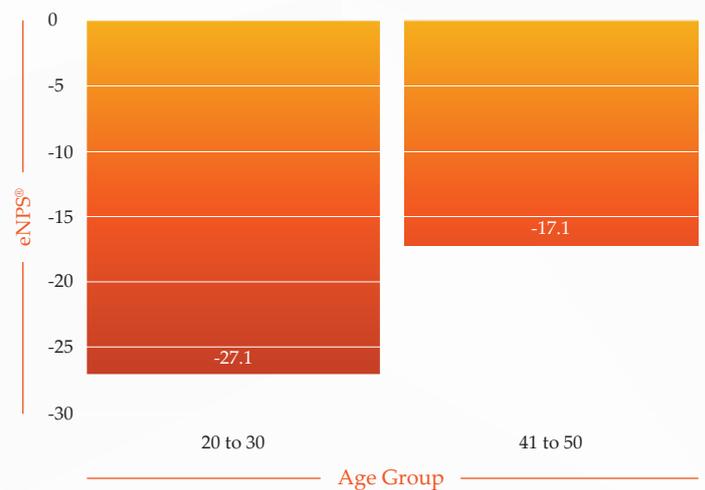
Employee engagement levels vary across age groups, where employees aged 20 to 30 years old are generally less engaged compared to employees aged 41 to 50 years old.

With that, we looked into the drivers of employee engagement to identify the similarities and differences across age groups. Organisations may then customise their strategies and approaches in engaging staff of different age groups.

EEI by Age Group



eNPS® by Age Group



How do Employees Perceive Digitalisation?

In the age of digitalisation, where organisations, jobs and tasks are constantly evolving, employees should be mindful to take ownership of their career and continue upskilling and reskilling to stay relevant. Organisations can play their part to invest and develop in employees for the organisation's future needs. Our study has revealed that 15% of employees did not feel that their organisation helped them to adapt to change and acquire new skills, as part of automation and digitisation. Nonetheless, it is heartening to note that 85% of employees agree that their organisation is helping them to adapt and acquire new skills.

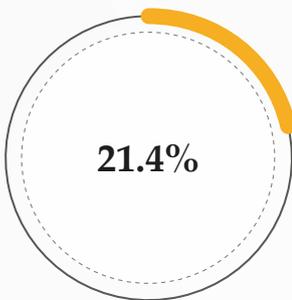
Over 20% of employees indicated that they do not take the initiative to develop their skill sets for their career development as their companies move towards digitalisation. One possible reason could be that they perceive their current skills and jobs will continue to be relevant in the future. Our study revealed that 91% of employees feel that their skills will remain relevant and 90% of employees feel that their job will remain relevant to meet the future needs of their organisation.

As Singapore moves towards being a SMART nation, digital transformation will be increasingly important to support the SMART nation objectives. To transform, organisations will need to define the new competencies and skills to transform their business. In addition, employees need to take charge of their careers, learn new knowledge and skills to continue to be relevant and adapt to new roles.

Acquiring New Skills

(By the Individual)

As companies move towards digitalising their businesses, I take the initiative to develop my skill sets for my career development.



Rating of slightly disagree, disagree or strongly disagree.

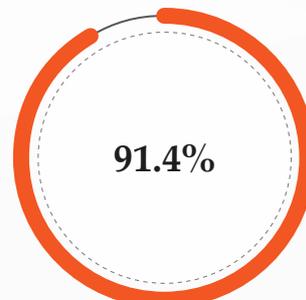
(By the Company)

My organisation helps staff adapt to changes and acquire new skills, as part of automation and digitisation, to increase productivity.



Relevancy of Skills & Job

I feel that my skills will still be relevant to meet the future needs of the company.



Rating of slightly agree, agree or strongly agree.

I feel that my job will still be relevant to meet the future needs of the company.



Strategies to Engage the Organisation

In summary, we have observed that the Singapore Workforce recorded the lowest level of employee engagement in 2019. In this section, we answer the key question: What are the priority areas for action? What can organisations do better to engage their employees?

In addition to having an overall employee engagement strategy for the organisation, it is important to design and implement differentiated engagement strategies for different demographic groups to meet their different needs (e.g. age group and job level).

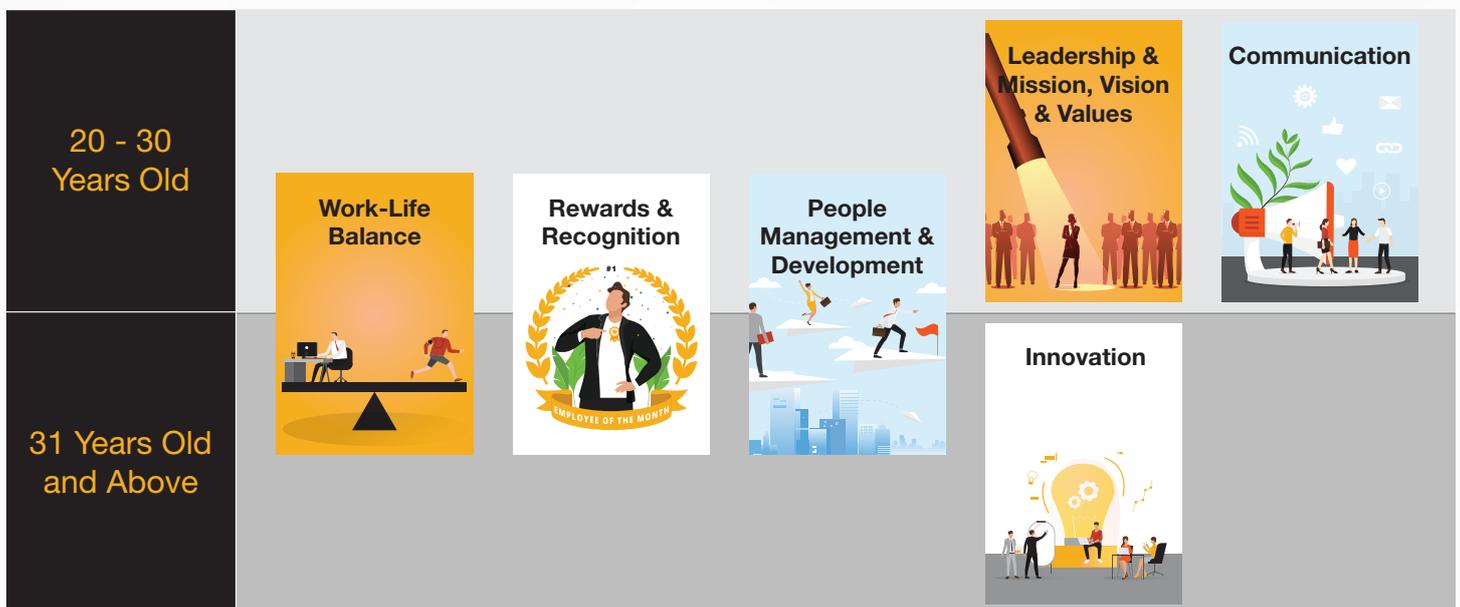
It was established earlier that employees of lower job levels (executive/senior executive and support or operational job roles) are less engaged. In addition, employees aged 20 to 30 years old are less engaged compared to employees aged 41 to 50 years old.

Key Drivers of Employee Engagement

The drivers of employee engagement are generally similar across employees aged 20 years and above. These include work-life balance, rewards and recognition, and people management and development.

Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that employees aged 20 to 30 years old, who comprises of mainly millennials, have different engagement drivers as compared to employees aged 31 years and above.

In addition to the key drivers above, millennials also desire inspirational leadership, a clear strategic organisational direction and open communication across the organisation. On the other hand, employees aged 31 and above desire an organisational culture of innovation.



The key strategies employers can consider focussing on are:

- Promoting Work-Life
- Encouraging Employee Innovation
- Rewarding and Recognising Employees
- Investing in Employees



■ Promoting Work-Life Harmony

As Singapore progresses to become an ageing population, employees will face increased family responsibilities while balancing work. Furthermore, with millennials forming an increased proportion of the workforce and them bringing their values on work-life to the organisation, it might be time for organisations to rethink 'work-life harmony'.

Helping employees achieve work-life harmony is important. Not only does this lead to more engaged employees, organisations will be better able to attract and retain talent and register lower employee absenteeism or sick leave. Employees who experience greater work-life harmony are also more productive.

However, 2 in 5 employees indicated that they do not experience work-life harmony in their organisation. Given the benefits of helping employees achieve work-life harmony, let us delve into the various ways to successfully promote work-life harmony in the organisation.

Communicate Clear Expectations and Policies

More organisations are offering formal and ad-hoc Flexible Work Life arrangements (FWAs) based on a MOM report². Implementing FWAs within the organisation does not however necessarily translate to employees experiencing greater work-life harmony from it.

Implementing effective FWAs sustainably requires a combination of factors. One of which is to set clear FWA standards. Once established, FWA policies should be clearly communicated to employees. This aligns expectations on FWA utilisation across all job levels within the organisation, including leaders, managers and staff. These communications may come in various forms, from drafting policies and guidelines to training programmes that equip managers with skills to enable FWA.

Use of Digital Technologies

One of the key obstacles to successful FWA implementation is that employees often do not have the right tools and resources required to perform their job or to communicate effectively with their colleagues. Organisations should explore and identify relevant digital technologies such as digital devices with secure remote access to company data and online communication platforms to enable employees to work effectively out of the office. These technologies should be identified as part of the implementation process of FWA.

Create an Environment of Trust

With employees no longer seeing each other face-to-face as often, it is important to build an environment of trust amongst employees. Establishing an environment of openness and trust often provides employees with empowerment and autonomy which leads to increased productivity.

This culture of trust begins with leaders trusting their employees to be accountable for their work and to use their flexibility wisely, supported by robust Human Capital practices which is also vigilant to potential abuses in FWA utilisation.

Additionally, managers need to move from an activity-based to outcome-based mindset by placing emphasis on the productivity and results, instead of monitoring employees' working hours closely.



■ Encouraging Employee Innovation

Encouraging staff to come up with new and better ways to do things lead to more engaged employees. An organisation can encourage innovation by promoting an agile culture.

“Agility is the ability of an organisation to renew itself, adapt, change quickly, and succeed in a rapidly changing, ambiguous, turbulent environment.” – Aaron De Smet, Leader of Organisation Design at McKinsey³

An agile culture involves providing teams with the autonomy to manage itself and implementing a process of review and experimentation. Employees are also required to collaboratively brainstorm to improve cycles of innovation. With an agile mindset, employees experience benefits of increased innovativeness and increased commitment to outcomes while leaders benefit by being able to allocate more time for other activities.

While most organisations recognise the necessity of innovation to stay ahead of the curve in the age of digitalisation and disruption, few are able to cultivate an innovative culture to successfully execute ideas and translate it to sustainable change.

Promote an Agile Culture by Encourage Sharing of Lessons from Failure and Cultivating a Growth Mindset

To facilitate innovation and continuous improvement, organisations need to foster a safe environment and platform for employees to share their lessons learnt from failure. When lessons are not shared, not only do other employees not benefit from the opportunity to learn and grow, but also increases the chances of other employees making the same mistakes. This could translate to cost to the organisation.

In addition, organisations should cultivate a growth mindset to encourage risk-taking. As organisations today are facing with digital disruptions, being able to adapt to new processes and technologies is required. A growth mindset requires leaders and employees to step out of their comfort zones and be open to new ideas and learning.

Invest in Building Innovation Capabilities

Besides cultivating an innovative culture, organisations need to ensure that their employees are equipped with the relevant capabilities and competencies to drive innovation. This includes equipping them with competencies such as adaptability and business acumen. Organisations should provide employees with funding, tools and knowledge such as design thinking methodology.

Lastly, organisations need to review and realign their rewards and recognition to encourage employees to go from innovation to implementation. In the next section, we will be discussing more on rewards and recognition.



■ Rewarding and Recognising Employees

Rewards and recognition have been a repeated key driver of employee engagement for the past years. Employees value internal and external equity. Nonetheless, employee recognition and appreciation has been a growing area of importance in driving employee engagement. Besides that, having a clear and transparent performance management system helps in motivating employees.

Building a Culture of Recognition and Appreciation

Organisations should build a culture of recognition and appreciation and building this culture start from leaders. Employee recognition could be incorporated as one of the desired organisational leadership behaviours within organisation's performance management framework. Leaders would then be appraised based on this set of leadership capabilities.

Review Employee Recognition Schemes

To motivate employees, organisations may review their current employee recognition schemes to ensure that it is clear and transparent to all employees. Dissatisfaction in employee recognition schemes or performance management system is often caused by employees' perception that reward and recognition system is unfair and hence might not be experienced by employees.

Furthermore, employee recognition schemes should reward employees based on outcome instead of output (e.g. the number of hours committed, the volume of work completed). In other words, these schemes should reward for performance in order to reinforce positive behaviours which are aligned with accomplishing strategic goals.



■ Investing in Employees

As organisations struggle to survive in these disruptive times, it may be natural for organisations to consider reducing their learning and development budget. Organisations should, however, continue to invest in employees' learning and development to build new skills for future needs.

Define Functional Competencies and Determine Career Pathways Across Functional Areas

Organisations could define functional competencies and career pathways across functional areas to include future skillsets and careers based on the organisation's future direction.

Continue to Invest in Learning and Development to Focus on Just-In-Time Learning

Furthermore, investing in employees do not necessarily equate to sending employees to training or courses. Employers need to ensure that competencies are made relevant through on-the-job learning, mentoring, coaching and providing employees with timely feedback. Additionally, organisations can tap on various technology enablers such as learning management platforms to create their own content with their in-house subject-matter experts. These just-in-time learning management platforms allow for virtual training on demand, at the employee's convenience.

Empower Individuals to Take Charge of their Career Development

Employees too, have an important role to play in their learning pathways and career development. To facilitate employees owning their careers, organisations can empower employees to take charge of their learning pathways by providing tools and resources for employees to self-learn and have access to knowledge resources.

Redesign Jobs to Support Business and Digital Transformation

Lastly, amidst the age of disruption, organisations may redesign relevant jobs to support business and digital transformation. New capabilities and development plans to support jobs that have been redesigned must be considered.

Strategies to Engage Millennials

In the previous section, we covered the implications for the organisation. Are these implications the same for different age groups?

We have previously covered that the key employee engagement drivers for employees aged 20-30 are different from the organisation. Employees aged 20-30 years (mostly comprising of the millennials) also desire **inspirational leadership**, a **clear strategic organisational direction** and **open communication across the organisation**.

As millennials continue to form a growing proportion of the workforce, additional strategies would include the following:

Communicate
Organisation's Purpose
and Direction

Communicate Effectively
across all Levels in the
Organisation

Communicate Organisation's Purpose and Direction

Organisations should communicate both the purpose of the organisation and how it impacts various job roles to their employees. Employees, especially millennials, desire to understand the direction of the organisation to find meaning in work. As such, leaders play an important role in creating clarity of the organisation's direction and effectively communicating it down the organisation. They also act as role models in driving the organisation culture.

Communicate Effectively across all Levels in the Organisation

As communication across all levels in the organisation may be challenging, organisations should strive to improve the process of communication to ensure its effectiveness. This includes establishing and reviewing communication channels or platforms, and evaluating its effectiveness to promote openness and transparency. In this digital age, organisations can tap on a range of technologies and collaboration tools to distribute knowledge content to respective target audience. Organisations need to evaluate the effectiveness of communication and engagement to improve communication efforts.

What's Next?

Our paper delved into the current employee engagement climate and what organisations can do to improve employee engagement.

Uncertain times are often accompanied with windows of opportunities which organisations can benefit from tapping on. Nonetheless, it is not sufficient for organisations to react to change and identify opportunities after being 'forced' to adapt. Organisations should be forward-looking and remain innovative. Embracing change will be part of the new normal and organisational culture has a large role to play in this.

aAdvantage partners with Barrett Values Centre (BVC) in our organisational culture work. In BVC's recent Global COVID-19 Culture assessment, it was found that employees are calling for a greater focus towards these values in the present climate as compared to pre-COVID period : 'adaptability', 'agility', 'cross-group collaboration' and 'innovation'. Assessing your organisation's current culture, establishing and shaping the desired future culture is one of the ways which organisations can navigate themselves from crisis to opportunities and beyond.

Notes and References

¹ Tan, S. (2020). Staff engagement in S'pore below global average: Report. Retrieved from The Straits Times: <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/manpower/staff-engagement-in-spore-below-global-average-report>

² Ong, S., & Ng, L. (2019). Conditions of Employment 2018. Retrieved from MOM: <https://stats.mom.gov.sg/Pages/Conditions-Of-Employment-2018.aspx>

³ Aghina, W., Smet, A., Murarka, M., & Collins, L. (2015). The keys to organization agility. Retrieved from McKinsey: <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/the-keys-to-organizational-agility>

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How can aAdvantage Partner You in Your Journey?

Besides interventions in organisational culture, aAdvantage also offers other business solutions and interventions.

To find out more how aAdvantage can partner you in your organisational journey to success, please contact us at enquiries@advantage-consulting.com.

If you are looking for a knowledge sharing platform to facilitate virtual learning in your organisation, you may wish to consider Enabley.

Short Bite-Size Consulting Solutions

1 Leaders	Fuelling the Leadership Team's Desire to Navigate the Unknown	
2 Staff	Engaging and Motivating Staff to Navigate the Unknown	
3 Customers	Pulse-checking and Leading on Customer Experience	
4 Strategy	Repositioning Your Business to Thrive Tomorrow - Rapid Strategy Re-Alignment	
5 Process	Aligning and Creating Buy-in on Process Review and Documentation	
6 Work-Life	Aligning Work Expectations, Staying Connected, Staying Productive	

Other Research and Insights Studies by aAdvantage Consulting

aAdvantage Consulting conducts several benchmarking studies across various areas, including desired workplace culture and employee engagement.



Since 2011, aAdvantage has conducted its **annual workforce engagement survey**. Each year, more than 1,500 employees across industries are interviewed to understand their level of engagement. The study also analyses the key drivers of employee engagement and the importance of work life in the workplace.



Every 3 years since 2012, aAdvantage conduct a **National Values Assessment**. Our findings were compared to similar global studies. The study also explored the type of workplace culture desired by employees. Results for 2012, 2015 and 2018 are available for download at the link below.



In 2014, aAdvantage partnered with the Institute of Singapore Chartered Accountants (ISCA) to conduct an **industry level employee engagement study**. The study aimed to identify the key drivers of employee engagement so as to address talent retention issues in the accounting sector, particularly in small and medium sized practices.



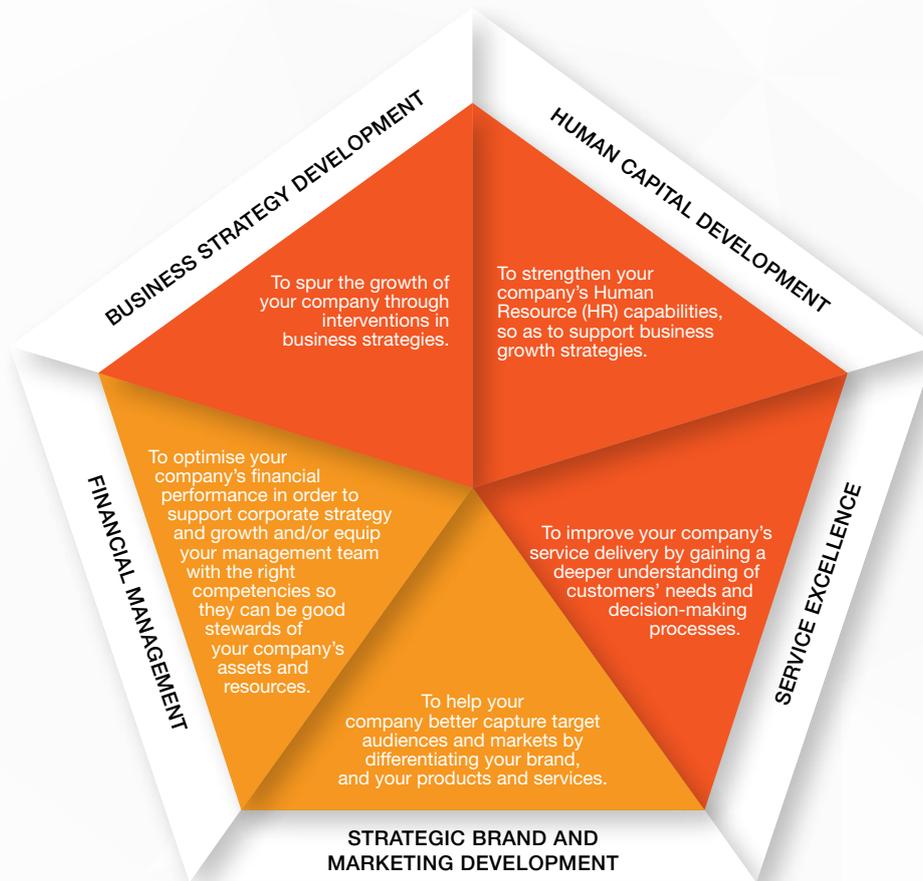
Periodically, aAdvantage conducts its Net Promoter Score® (NPS®) benchmarking study on selected industries. In 2018, we published our NPS® study on selected public sector agencies.

Resources from these studies are available for download at:
<https://www.aadvantage-consulting.sg/publications>

Leveraging the Enterprise Development Grant (EDG)

The Enterprise Development Grant (EDG) helps Singapore companies grow and transform. This grant supports projects that help you upgrade your business, innovate or venture overseas, under three pillars - 1. Core Capabilities, 2. Innovation and Productivity, 3. Market Access.

aAdvantage can assist in building its core capabilities. Projects under Core Capabilities help businesses prepare for growth and transformation by strengthening their business foundations. These should go beyond basic functions such as sales and accounting. Areas include:



aAdvantage Consulting has experience in working with organisations in these areas:

BUSINESS STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT

Project may address any of these areas:

- **Business Excellence ***
- Corporate growth strategy
- Free Trade Agreement (FTA)
- Intellectual Property (IP) strategy

* aAdvantage Consulting is able to assist in this area.

SERVICE EXCELLENCE

Project may address any of these areas:

- Diagnosis and gap analysis of customer needs to improve service levels and drive customer-centric behaviour
- Service innovation, adoption of advanced customer research, analytics and service process redesign to enhance customer experience

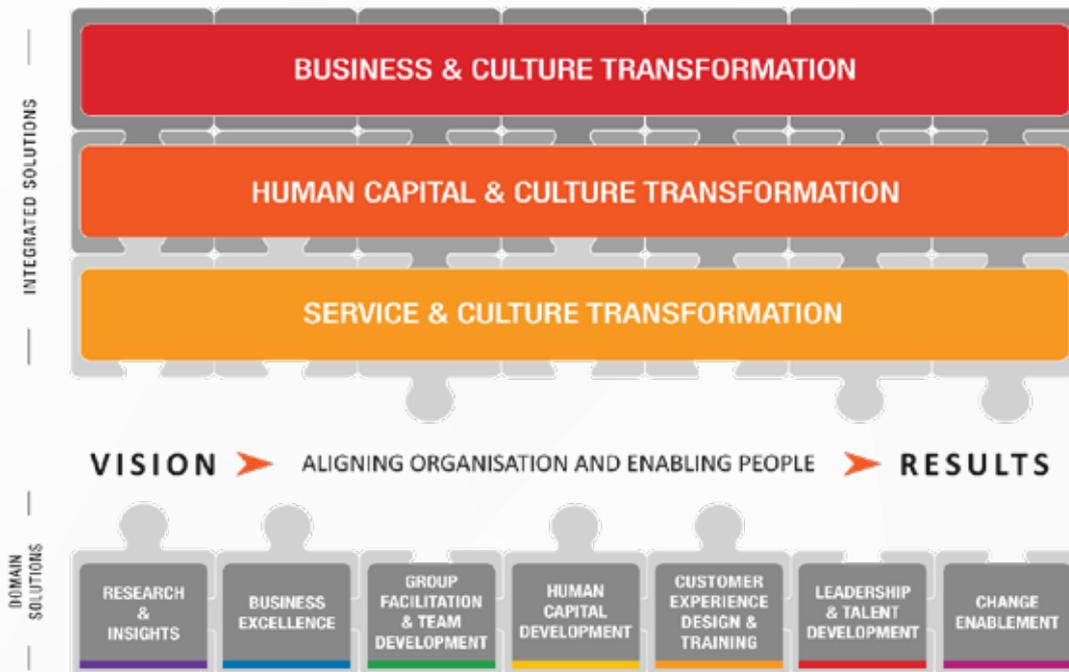
HUMAN CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT

Project may address any of these areas:

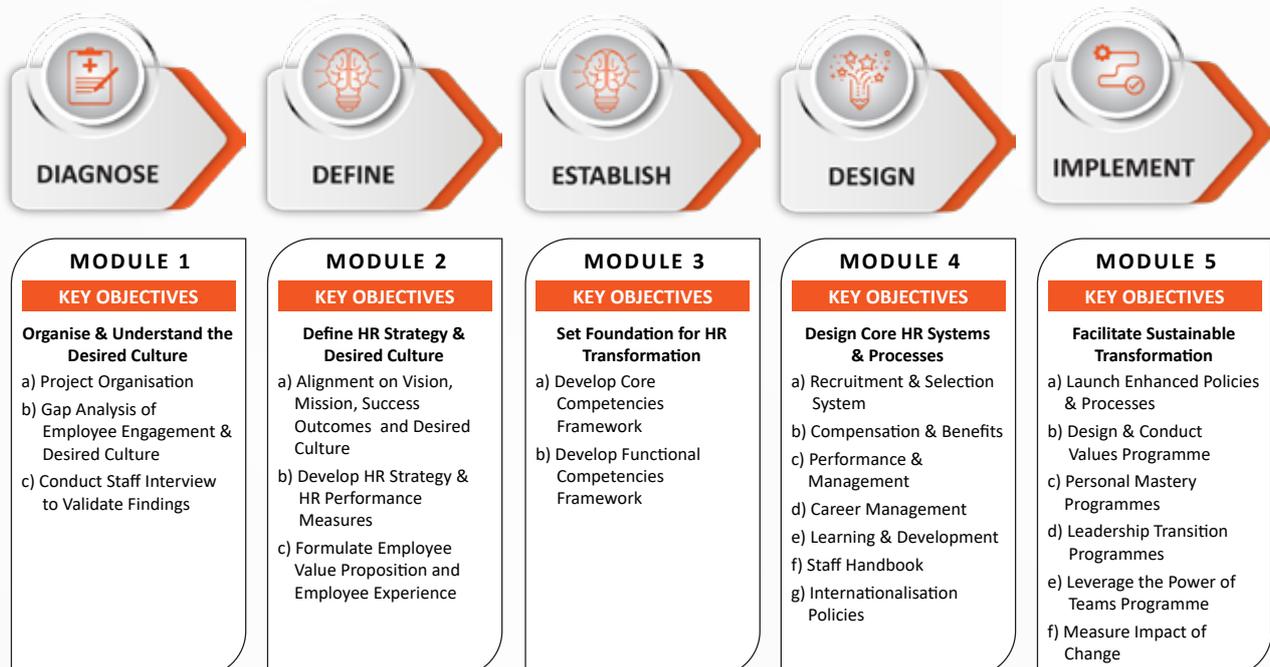
- Compensation & Benefits
- Employee Engagement & Communication
- Employee Value Proposition
- HR Management
- International Mobility
- Job Redesign
- Learning & Development
- Manpower Planning
- Organisation Culture
- Performance Management
- Recruitment & Selection
- Talent Management & Succession Planning

aAdvantage's Human Resource Transformation Solutions

aAdvantage's mission is to partner our clients to achieve impactful implementation & seamless transformation for sustainable growth. To achieve the desired transformation regardless of the context (i.e. business, human capital or service), we believe that attention to culture is critical to deliver sustainable change and transformation across all staff levels. Our consultants possess domain expertise to execute the desired vision to achieve the results.



Over the years, we are increasingly working with Leaders of local enterprises who recognise the importance the human capital and consciously building a culture to execute strategy. We believe that an organisation's Human Capital Strategy must support the Business Strategy. Our overall end-to-end approach to Human Capital Transformation begins with the end in mind to develop structured systems to attract, develop and retain the right talent for the organisation.



About aAdvantage Consulting

aAdvantage Consulting is a business consultancy firm that partners organisations in leading their business and organisational transformation from “Vision to Results”. Established in 2002, we are now in our 18th year of operations.

We help our clients turn strategies into business results through our People, Process and Performance solutions. As part of our organisation development and business transformation consulting services, we provide holistic and customised solutions to assist clients achieve lasting change.

We believe that a shared leadership, vision, clear standards, processes and roles, performance management and people development all come together to ensure sustainable change in organisations.

If you would like to discuss these findings, or would like to embark on similar studies for your organisation or industry, please contact:

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