

# Saddle Club eases the way for older staff

Its commitment to cater to older workers and rehire those past retirement age is lauded at tripartite dialogue

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CLEARING horse dung and urine was a small part of Mr Mohd Sharif Mansor's job in grooming horses at the Bukit Timah Saddle Club.

But it took a heavy toll on his health.

He suffered severe pain in his hands, shoulders and back, from the daily chore of bagging up to 400kg of horse waste and dumping them into a 2m-high container.

But since the club took to heart the national call to re-employ workers after the retirement age of 62, the work life of 69-year-old Mohd Sharif has been relatively pain-free.

The reason is the mechanisation of the waste-removal process since January last year, a move taken by the club to create a more work-friendly environment for its ageing team of grooms. Most of the 21 grooms are older than 40.

The Saddle Club's efforts were highlighted yesterday at a tripartite dialogue among employers, government officials and union leaders of the Singapore Manual and Mercantile Workers' Union (SMMWU), which has 240 branch unions with 82,000 members.

The club is among 60 branch unions that are set to agree to a new clause on re-employment when they renew their collective agreements (CAs) next year.

Already, 30 of its branch unions have worked in the clause in their CAs this year, said Mr Joseph Chua, SMMWU's assistant secretary-general.

Another 10 are set to follow later this year, he added.

Mr Chua is confident that the CAs of all the 240 branch unions would have the re-employment clause by the time it becomes law.

Re-employment has been a buzzword since 2006, as Singapore's ageing population and the need for workers to build up a nest egg propelled the Government to urge companies to rehire workers beyond the retirement age of 62.

There are plans to introduce a re-employment law by January 2012.

In the meantime, the Government is helping companies redesign the work and workplace for these workers through the Advantage scheme run by the Workforce Development Agency (WDA).



EASY DOES IT: Mr Rafiai Baksin (left), 57 and Mr Mohd Sharif Mansor, 69, using the Saddle Club's new machinery which has made dung disposal a breeze.

ST PHOTO: JOYCE FANG

With the Saddle Club, the WDA gave a grant of more than \$10,000 to fund the purchase of the \$50,000 waste-disposal machinery, said the club's chairman Roderic Tan.

Last month, the National Trades Union Congress said more than 540 unionised companies, out of the 1,000 under its charge, have started to rehire older workers.

Yesterday, Acting Manpower Minister Gan Kim Yong praised unions for encouraging re-employment practices when he gave the opening address at the dialogue.

He then gave them yet another role: ensure their members continually improve their skills to stay employable.

During the dialogue, some companies

expressed worry that re-employing older workers might jack up their medical costs. They also asked for advice on the extent of pay cuts for such workers.

In response, Mr Ong Yen Her, the Manpower Ministry's director of labour relations, said more can be done to encourage workers to accept co-payment of health-care costs.

Ms Law Swee Hong, SMMWU's deputy secretary-general, asked if a study could be done to find out the salary range of workers aged 62. Mr Ong said his ministry is open to her suggestion.

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## Re-employment: Top two concerns

### » Medical costs

Hiring older workers could lead to higher medical bills.

Who will foot the bill and how can it be done, employers have asked worriedly.

The answer lies in encouraging workers to share in the payment, said a Manpower Ministry official.

Also, let the scheme be portable, said unionists.

### » Wages for re-employed workers

What is the extent of the pay cut for re-employed workers? Employers worry that they may be embroiled in a dispute with employees over the amount.

Guidelines are in place to guide employers and workers in their negotiations, said government officials and union leaders.

A strong and transparent appraisal system will also help address issues of fairness, added government officials.