

Seniors agree with MM on staying active

But some say work is not the only way to do so, and it can be hard to find jobs

BY CLARISSA OON & KEITH LIN

MANY seniors agree with Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew's recent comments about the importance of remaining active and not retiring.

Staying engaged with society is important, these older Singaporeans said. But some questioned if work is the only way to keep active, as Mr Lee suggested at a dialogue last Friday.

Others argued that govern-

ment agencies and employers could make it easier for elderly Singaporeans to find consultancy or part-time jobs so they can continue working into their twilight years.

Speaking at a conference on the burgeoning silver industry here, Mr Lee shared how being a globally engaged statesman had given him the necessary mental stimuli to take him into his 85th year.

His comment that able-bodied seniors should continue working as "retirement means death" sparked impassioned debate online over its feasibility for the average Singaporean.

Most of the eight seniors interviewed by The Straits Times said they hope to carry on with a job they enjoy in their old age.

"Some people may think work-

ing beyond retirement age is very stressful, but there are many different forms of work out there," said Mr Cheok Chin Yam, 49, who runs his own marine equipment company.

"I don't think I will continue to work at my current pace when I'm in my 60s. The most important thing is to keep myself mentally challenged."

Like MM Lee, Mrs Karen Chee, 46, believes only work can challenge and fulfil her in her golden years. A former assistant director at a medical institute, she is now studying for her masters in business administration.

"Some people can retire and still be very active in a different way, such as by taking up hobbies or doing community work. But personally, only work can give me that kind of motivation," she said.

But retired school principal Edward Tan, 62, disagreed that work is king.

"Obviously MM enjoys his work, so what he says is true for him, but not necessarily true for everyone else," said Mr Tan, who has done community work and travelled since he retired in 2001.

"I learnt it's important not to be too attached to things like your job and the influence you once held, and to accept that each passing phase of my life is a new chapter."

One netizen suggested working after retirement "is not a matter of choice" but of whether "there's anyone out there willing to even hire a mature worker".

Another thought MM Lee's remarks will encourage children of the elderly not to give them financial support on the grounds that they are able to continue working.

But in general, active-ageing advocates and community workers contacted are pleased with MM Lee's strong message in favour of living purposefully into one's old age.

"There are many examples of retirees who have not planned their retirement. They sleep late into the morning and then begin not to groom themselves, eventually losing interest in what is happening outside, followed by dementia," said Mr Gerard Ee, chairman of the Council for Third Age, which champions active ageing.

Do not let work completely overshadow your life, advised Dr Kanwaljit Soin, who runs a non-profit organisation for older women to age successfully.

"The thing to do is have a second string to the bow. One must always make provisions so, if for

some reason you cannot work, you find other things to occupy yourself," she said.

To allow more seniors to continue in the workforce, employers should base their hiring not on age but on "robust factors such as skills, productivity and performance", said Mr Gan Kim Yong, Minister of State for Education & Manpower and chairman of the committee drawing up guidelines on the re-employment law.

He also encouraged employers to discuss with their older employees what jobs are suitable and available for them, as well as adopt flexible work arrangements for this group.

clare@sph.com.sg

klin@sph.com.sg

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Retirement is not in his repertoire

ASSOCIATE Professor Ho Hwee Long was supposed to have retired seven years ago, but the 67-year-old is still going strong at the National Institute of Education (NIE).

Whereas most university lecturers choose to retire at 60, he said he jumped at the opportunity when the NIE offered to extend his contract: once when he was 60 and again when he was 65.

"I was delighted to accept the offer," said Prof Ho, who trains band conductors and teaches music education. He plays six musical instruments, including the French horn and the clarinet.

He agreed fully with Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew's views on retirement and said proudly: "I do not just agree with him, I am doing it, I am still working."

As an adjunct professor, his workload is only a quarter of what it used to be.

Besides classes at the NIE three times a week, he also coaches the National Junior College symphonic band and is a consultant to the Singapore Youth Festival.

Outside of school, he helps bring music to the heartland with his work as a member of the North West Community Development Council.

As packed as his days appear to be, the father of three daughters has no intention of slowing down:

"If you've been busy your whole life and you suddenly stop, it's not beneficial for your physical and mental health.

"Some older people feel that they are inferior and think they are useless. But if you have a good attitude, you will realise you can still contribute."

YEO GHIM LAY



ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN

ENCORE: Prof Ho, 67, has not changed his tune even after passing the usual retirement age for most university lecturers. He still teaches at the NIE, trains the National Junior College symphonic band and works with the North West CDC.

INFERIORITY IS A STATE OF MIND

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ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR HO HWEE LONG

Go on working? Choice not his to make

IF MR Bryan Lincoln, 66, had his way, he would not have retired as a bank executive in 2003.

The recession that year – precipitated by the double whammy of the Sars outbreak and the Iraq war – saw many companies trim their staff count to cut their losses.

Mr Lincoln, who hit the retirement age of 62 then, knew he would be given the golden handshake. "I know it is good to be working for as long as one possibly can." But, as he said with a sigh, "a lot of things are not done by choice".

After retiring, he continued with grassroots work – which he had been doing for the past 28 years – as chairman of the Serangoon Gardens Citizens Consultative Committee and its community centre's management committee.

But he stepped down from his posts

last year so that younger leaders could assume the mantle. Again, the decision was not his to make. "I would have continued, but I suppose this is part of an island-wide effort to groom new blood for the grassroots," he said.

So while he agrees with Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew that one ought to work through one's golden years, "in reality, we live in a totally different world".

Mr Lincoln has retired from community work and focuses on nurturing his five-year-old grandson and three-year-old granddaughter. He keeps up with the world by reading widely and tuning in to the news.

"I may have totally retired, but I've not gone to sleep," he said. "I'm still constantly renewing my knowledge of the world."

KEITH LIN