

Learn from the Best Local Employers in Singapore - Construction Firms

The vast majority of firms at the top of Singapore's Best Employers 2021 list in April, as compiled by The Straits Times, were foreign. The surprise standout locally was the construction industry. Perhaps it's time for the vaunted service sector and other industries to learn from oft-neglected construction companies.

The Best Employers

To identify the best employers here, the Straits Times received input from more than 9,000 people working at more than 1,700 employers in 26 industries. Google topped the list, followed by Adidas. While 3rd-ranked Singapore American School is technically local, its origins are American.

The top purely local company, at number 10, was Sunray Woodcraft Construction. Jumbo Group came in at 19 and Teambuild Construction at number 23. Woh Hup construction was among the top 50.

While a financial services company did make the top 10, with Barclays Bank at number 6, the top local firm in the sector was DBS Bank at 58.

Despite their high ranking, construction are not popular among local graduates and may be ignored by other sectors. GradSingapore's list of the 100 most desired graduate employers in Singapore for 2021, for instance, saw technology, financial services, government and consulting top the list. The closest to construction is a property company, Far East, at 97.

While some might blame graduates' preferences on salary, the data shows otherwise. The building and construction sector has the 5th highest salaries, according to JobStreet, behind technology and healthcare yet ahead of engineering and marketing.

Companies Should Learn from the Construction Sector

That construction is not popular is hardly surprising. "Construction has long been seen as a sector that is labour-intensive, demands long hours and pays poorly," employers told Today newspaper. And despite its technological advancement and a focus on sustainability in recent years, as well as the delight staff have in seeing drawings come to life, few look at it as a leading light for employer insights.

Given the lack of employee satisfaction at many firms in Singapore, though, it may be time to look again. Indeed, only 11 percent of Singaporean employees felt "fully engaged" at work, according to a recent study by payroll company ADP. And the Qualtrics 2020 Employee Experience Trends study that 38 percent of staff plan to leave their employer within two years.

When we think of the best employers, we may think of large global firms that offer baristas serving coffee, free lunches, stock options, employee education, massage rooms, nap pods or laundry services. Realistically, though, few companies offer these amenities. What virtually all top companies do deliver, though, are the culture and support that employees value. And construction firms are among the leaders.

That leadership dates back more than a decade. In 2008, for example, NUS professor Low Sui Pheng and University of Hong Kong lecturer Koh Tas Yong found in their research that a number of construction firms here have a strong comprehensive culture and have implemented the Total Quality Management elements of top management leadership, people, process, customer and supplier management.

And when the Ministry of Manpower looked a decade ago at firms with the best Work-Life strategies, it cited two construction firms. It said Straits Construction believes that a Work-Life strategy can align corporate and individual goals to attain a win-win scenario for all and that flexible work arrangements ensure that employees who are parents can spend quality time with their families. Lucky Joint Construction believes that "a happy employee is a productive employee" and ensures that employees have ample time to spend with their families.

Today, leading local construction firms in the Straits Times survey show similar traits. Sunray, a family-run company, says it provides a thriving environment with scope for open discussions, care and inclusivity that has contributed to the conception of creditable relations between employees and employers. Teambuild says it drives the potential of the team through initiatives such as overseas training trips, a career mentorship programme for engineers, and an education fund that enables employees to develop their skills and knowledge. Woh Hup, Singapore's largest privately owned construction and civil engineering specialist, says integrity and enterprise, creating lasting value for our clients, improving quality and safety standards on every project, and maximising opportunities for our employees to achieve their career potential are at the heart of the family-run business.

These traits are in line with what employer review firm Glassdoorsays says are the four traits the best places to work have in common. Top firms establish a motivating mission, have a strong culture that fosters community, are people-focused and use open communications to ensure transparency.

That's not to say that the top companies in the Straits Times list do not use similar practices. At consumer goods company Reckitt, for instance, regional human resources director Surya Rai says the firm focuses on addressing employees' needs for a sense of belonging to the company and emotional well-being. And Motorola Solutions human resources director Charlene Tan said employees use online learning platforms to access leadership development, technical and soft skills programmes.

Surprising as it may be to some people, though, construction firms are leaders locally. Individuals looking for a great place to work as well as employers looking at how to engage their staff better would be well advised to look closely at this oft-maligned sector.