



## Singapore: a civil service built on performance and quality

In the fifty years since it gained independence in 1965, Singapore has by far recorded one of the most impressive economic performances of modern times. With the third highest GDP per capita in the world, Singapore has focused its efforts on education, combating pollution and personal safety, while its civil service model has gained an international reputation.

The motto of the Singapore civil service is "Integrity, Service, Excellence"<sup>1</sup>, and the government focuses on promoting the responsiveness and flexibility of its public sector. Using a model that combines aspects of a career civil service and a mission-based one, civil staff are steeped in a culture of professional mobility and cross-departmental versatility. Bonuses are partly linked to the country's economic performance<sup>2</sup>, but a large portion of it is based on individual and collective performance.

In a speech to Parliament on 22 January 2016<sup>3</sup>, Teo Chee Hean, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister-In-Charge of the Civil Service, reminded the government's commitment to "maintaining a high quality Public Service". The government is seeking to improve coordination across ministries, integrate front-line operations across agencies where possible and encourage officers to seek certification and accreditation. In return, the government is committed to adapting its development programmes and plans to continue paying market competitive salaries to recruit and retain public officers of good quality.

### Integrity at every level

According to Transparency International's 2015 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), Singapore was the eighth least-corrupt country worldwide, and the least corrupt in Asia (after sharing the top spot with Denmark and New Zealand in 2010). The country is making every effort to keep its excellent score. Speaking at a meeting organised in April 2015<sup>4</sup> with public service leaders, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong remarked that public service leaders may deal with difficult problems and meet high public expectations, but they are "keenly aware" that the ethos of the public service must be upheld. "They know that their fundamental duty is to serve the nation and improve people's lives." Earlier in the year, addressing Singapore's fall in the CPI rankings, the Prime Minister announced a 20% increase in staff at the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (which employs 120 people), and the creation of a one-stop Corruption Reporting Centre where members of the public can report cases of corruption<sup>5</sup>.

As part of this, every civil servant is given training in how to combat fraud. Ser Hui Chia, director of the Ministry of Finance's Performance and Resource Management Directorate, speaking on this topic at the Civil Service College, explained this approach by noting that zero tolerance for corruption is critical for maintaining investors' confidence, but also that of its citizens, so that Singapore can uphold its reputation as a safe and stable environment<sup>6</sup>.

### Serving the State and understanding its citizens

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.psd.gov.sg/singapore-public-service/mission-vision-and-core-values>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-11-27/singapore-civil-servants-win-or-lose-bonuses-on-state-of-economy>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/values-honesty-conviction/2447702.html>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/public-service-leaders/1790098.html>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.theonlinecitizen.com/2015/01/boosting-cpi-manpower-reporting-centre-to-tackle-corruption-pm-lee/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.edb.gov.sg/content/edb/en/why-singapore/about-singapore/facts-and-rankings/rankings.html>

Of the 145,000 people employed by the Singapore Public Service, 82,000 are civil servants on either fixed-term or permanent contracts. They perform their duties in sixteen government ministries and ten organs of state. Civil servants are managed by the Public Service Division<sup>7</sup>, which reports to the Prime Minister. The remaining staff are employed in one of the country's 66 government agencies, known as statutory boards<sup>8</sup>, which have management and recruitment autonomy.

As the country's largest employer, and with a ratio of two government employees per 100 inhabitants (four times fewer than in France), the government has an innovative human resources policy that focuses on efficiency. Civil servants are reminded that they serve the nation, and every year, they recite the Public Service Pledge<sup>9</sup> during Public Service Week, an event that has been held each year in May since 2008<sup>10</sup>.

Building on its successful economic growth, Singapore is looking to the future. The Public Service is committed to driving modernisation efforts that, in its view, should be in the service of the country's citizens. Dr Christopher Edward Koh Kok Hwee, who trains future senior executives at the Civil Service College, believes that "the public sector is more strategic than the private sector because it thinks about the long term." For him, looking ahead is critical. In his classes, he always asks his students to imagine what the country might look like in 20, 30 or 40 years, with an eye to thinking about what public services Singaporeans will expect<sup>11</sup>.

## Performance-based compensation

All available positions are posted on the government website Careers@Gov<sup>12</sup>, and are also published in the press. The key selection criteria is how well the applicant's skills fit with the position. Kwek Mean Luck, director of the Civil Service College, noted that, "no position is protected or untouchable. For each position, we may recruit internally, from other government departments or from the private sector."

Base pay is calculated based on an employee's profile (professional experience and qualifications) and on the position he or she occupies. Market salaries are also taken into consideration. For the government, this approach allows it to motivate applicants and also to curb corruption since there is no pay gap between the public and private sectors.

Beginning in 2000, the Merit Increment system began to gradually replace seniority in determining pay raises. Salaries also have a variable component, which consists of a monthly Performance Bonus and an annual bonus that is pegged to the country's economic growth and that is not used when calculating pensions. Depending on the level of responsibility, the variable component can represent between two and eleven months and a half of salary. In June 2015, when Singapore marked its Jubilee year, every civil servant was given a one-off bonus of S\$500 (about €309)<sup>13</sup>.

Performance is assessed annually<sup>14</sup>, based on whether an employee has met objectives in line with his or her skills. Kwek Mean Luck nevertheless pointed out that, "in order to conduct a completely fair performance assessment, superiors have no information about an employee's level of education, hiring or promotions." The assessment must also include a look ahead at the employee's possible career path. This approach<sup>15</sup> helps to identify training choices and transfer opportunities that are useful in terms of forward planning.

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7 <http://www.psd.gov.sg/>  
8 <http://app.sgdi.gov.sg/index.asp?cat=2>  
9 <http://www.careers.gov.sg/the-singapore-public-service/public-service-pledge>  
10 [http://www.challenge.gov.sg/archives/2008\\_03/public\\_service.html](http://www.challenge.gov.sg/archives/2008_03/public_service.html)  
11 <http://news.asiaone.com/news/singapore/singapore-starts-new-public-engagement-initiative-looking-sg100>  
12 <http://www.careers.gov.sg/>  
13 <http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/manpower/civil-servants-to-get-500-in-special-sg50-payment>  
14 <https://www.accenture.com/us-en/success-singapore-public-service-division-appraisal-system-summary.aspx>  
15 <http://www.psd.gov.sg/singapore-public-service/careers>