

SBF SME COMMITTEE

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BUDGET 2019

Singapore Business Federation
December 2018

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FOREWORD

The SBF SME Committee (SMEC) has submitted recommendations annually for Budgets 2012 to 2018, addressing issues and challenges faced by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The SMEC is encouraged by the attention given by the Government to these issues, and the adoption of several of these recommendations.

For Budget 2019, the SMEC organised 2 roundtable dialogues with partner Trade Associations and Chambers (TACs) to gather their inputs on issues faced by their members and what they would like to be addressed in the upcoming Budget. 14 TACs participated in these dialogues.

1	Association of Small and Medium Enterprises
2	Association of Process Industry
3	Business Leaders Alumni Club
4	Franchising and Licensing Association
5	Federation of Merchants' Associations
6	Restaurant Association of Singapore
7	Singapore Contractors Association Limited
8	Singapore Food Manufacturers' Association
9	Singapore Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry
10	Singapore Logistics Association
11	Singapore Malay Chamber of Commerce and Industry
12	Singapore Nightlife Business Association
13	Singapore Precision Engineering and Technology Association
14	Singapore Retailers Association

Table 1.0: Participating TACs

The SBF SMEC studied the feedback received and identified seven areas where SMEs would appreciate further support and assistance from the government.

I. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BUDGET 2019

1. Increasing SMEs' Competitiveness for Projects

Participating in government procurement can help SMEs to build capability, gain track record for business growth and enhance their competitiveness. The general feedback from the various TACs was that their members faced difficulty in securing or getting shortlisted to participate in projects, both in government procurement and for overseas assignments. Major factors cited included a lack of track record in similar projects by SMEs, limited scale and resources to win tenders alone and strong competition from government-linked companies.

The issue on power imbalance in contracts involving SMEs was also raised. SMEs were often subject to unfair contract practices, with terms dictated by the larger companies that are seen as unfair and onerous for SMEs to meet. While it had been suggested in Parliament that legislation be enacted to protect SMEs from unfair contract practices, the adopted view was that the government, in applying free market principles, should intervene only where necessary. This is carried out so that businesses can respond quickly to market signals and adjust their business strategies accordingly¹.

Statistics from the Ministry of Finance shared during Budget 2017 showed that over 80 per cent of government contracts, comprising about half of total government contract value, were awarded to SMEs. 40 per cent of these contracts were won by SMEs with

¹ <https://www.mlaw.gov.sg/content/minlaw/en/news/parliamentary-speeches-and-responses/response-by-senior-minister-of-state-for-law--ms-indranee-rajah-.html>

revenues below S\$10 million². However, a joint study by the Singapore Business Federation (SBF) and National University of Singapore (NUS) in 2017 revealed that awareness and participation rate of government procurement among SMEs remained low.

Rules related to government procurement³⁴ were eased in August 2018. In September 2018, the government announced that the price-quality method will be the main option used for evaluating tenders, allowing businesses to compete on quality, instead of on pricing alone⁵.

Recommendation

1. Raise awareness – The Government and its agencies can work with TACs to raise awareness of the measures that the government has taken to increase government procurement opportunities for SMEs, and the actual opportunities available, especially for projects where innovation solutions are required.

2. Access to government projects – It will be beneficial for the Government and its agencies to begin implementing the new rules on government procurement to allow more SMEs to qualify for public projects. Projects should also be divided into more bite-sized components to enable more SMEs to participate in

2 <https://www.businesstimes.com.sg/government-economy/singapore-budget-2017/over-80-of-govt-contracts-go-to-smes-more-help-on-the-way>

3 <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/rules-eased-for-smes-bidding-for-public-projects>

4 Changes include removal of the requirement to affix company stamps on government forms by October 2018 and companies with yearly revenues below S\$5 million no longer have to produce audited financial statements to take part in government tenders effective from June 2018

5 <https://www.straitstimes.com/business/price-quality-method-to-be-used-to-evaluate-tenders-for-government-contracts-chee-hong-tat>

these projects and build track record/precedents for future projects.

3. Procurement platform for Government-linked Companies (GLCs) – A procurement platform for GLCs could be set up to enhance information efficiency of procurement opportunities to SMEs. GLCs could also create problem-statement platforms, similar to the Open Innovation Platform by the Info-comm Media Development Authority (IMDA), that connect problem owners and problem solvers, to provide opportunities for SMEs to showcase their solutions for assessment.

4. Industry collaboration – Raise awareness and encourage MNCs and GLCs to participate in the Partnership for Capability Transformation (PACT) and Collaborative Industry Projects (CIP) schemes that allow SMEs to collaborate and band resources as means to build their capabilities and competitiveness.

5. Fair contract practices – The Pro-enterprise Panel (PEP) to look into cases where anti-competitive and unfair contract practices are surfaced by SMEs. GLCs to take the lead in practicing fair contract agreements.

2. Short Supply of Skilled Manpower, Insufficient Young Talent and Access to Foreign Manpower

Difficulty in skilled manpower recruitment and sustained effects of controlled quotas of foreign manpower continue to be business challenges for SMEs. Across many sectors, it was observed that the decreasing supply of skilled manpower impacted the development of younger workers as they often perform a mentoring role at the

production floor. SBF’s National Business Survey (NBS) 2018/2019 found that hiring people with the right skills/attitude was the top most challenge faced by SMEs. 36 per cent of respondents to the NBS also provided feedback that it would be beneficial for the Industry Transformation Maps (ITMs) to have solutions that help enterprises improve manpower needs and talent pipeline.

Top Five Challenges Faced by SMEs	
1. Hiring people with the right skills/attitude	60%
2. Compliance costs	50%
3. Wage and salary expectations	50%
4. Business Competition	49%
5. Finding new/better ways to grow revenue	49%

Source: SBF NBS 2018/2019⁶

Another significant feedback relates to the outflow of talent when students graduate from their courses; the Singapore Precision Engineering and Technology Association (SPETA) representatives observed that this was evident in the precision engineering sector, leading to a short supply of young talents in the industry.

In the manufacturing sector, it was noted that the foreign workforce size had been declining. Based on the Ministry of Manpower (MOM)’s statistics on annual employment change by industry and residential status for 2017, the distribution of foreign workforce

⁶ National Business Survey 2018/2019, Singapore Business Federation, December 2018

in this sector had been decreasing since 2014 and registered a 10% year-on-year contraction in 2017⁷.

In terms of talent pipelines for SMEs in technical fields, while the various Institutes of Technical Education (ITEs) have an existing Traineeship scheme to develop workforce-ready graduates, the table below shows the number of secondary school graduates who completed full-time and traineeship engineering programmes from 2012 to 2017, with the National ITE Certificate (Nitec) and technical engineer diploma courses showing a declining trend in graduate numbers.

H.8 SECONDARY SCHOOL GRADUATES WHO COMPLETED FULL-TIME AND TRAINEESHIP PROGRAMMES AT INSTITUTE OF TECHNICAL EDUCATION, 2012 – 2017

Type of Training	Number					
	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Engineering						
Technical Engineer Diploma	40	75	46	52	48	58
Higher National ITE Certificate (<i>Higher Nitec</i>)	1,792	1,765	1,820	2,196	2,265	2,489
National ITE Certificate (<i>Nitec</i>)	4,063	3,967	4,019	4,344	3,605	3,555

Source: Ministry of Manpower website⁹

7 <http://stats.mom.gov.sg/Pages/Employment-Summary-Table.aspx>

8 <https://www.mom.gov.sg/documents-and-publications/foreign-workforce-numbers>

9 <http://stats.mom.gov.sg/Pages/Training-and-Higher-Education-Tables2017.aspx>

Recommendations

- 1. No further tightening of foreign manpower quotas and changes to the foreign worker levies in the sectors such as precision engineering to avail sufficient time for SMEs to transform.**
- 2. Design grants and tax incentives to complement existing programs to encourage more SMEs to have internship programmes that enable them to develop a pipeline of talent for future manpower needs and integrate students into jobs after graduation.**
- 3. Further review and enhance existing ITE's Traineeship Scheme ¹⁰ in consultation with businesses and TACs to promote take-up of the scheme by employers and students. Some areas where the Traineeship Scheme can be further enhanced include its course contents, to increase its relevance to industry, and greater emphasis on how the lessons learnt in the training labs/workshops can be applied to companies' actual business operations**
- 4. Enhance the Market Readiness Assistance (MRA) grant to include supporting SMEs in their establishment of overseas nodes. Specifically, the grant should be enhanced to include helping SMEs tap on the wider and lower costs of readily available talents in selected regional markets, with these workers based outside Singapore but supporting locally-based businesses remotely. Special considerations could also be accorded to service companies to help them build**

¹⁰ ITE's traineeship scheme is a formal training arrangement comprising of on-the-job and off-the-job training for trainees. On completion, trainees receive the same National Certificate as full-time ITE graduates. There are currently 30 courses on offer - <https://www.ite.edu.sg/wps/portal/fts.admission.tsp>

operational capabilities in regional countries.

3. Helping SMEs with Enterprise and Technology Road-Mapping

SBF' NBS 2018/2019 shows that SMEs' top priorities in the next 12 months are growing revenue and maintaining market share. The various Trade Associations and Chambers (TACs) found a general difficulty amongst SMEs in developing and implementing a leapfrog growth strategy due to SMEs having insufficiently long-term/longitudinal perspectives on their development trajectory and company valuation. This is often due to the lack of knowledge or resources to undertake road-mapping in areas such as business strategy, digital adoption and internationalisation to help them grow through effective strategies aligned with their business goals.

Top Five Priorities For SMEs	
1. Growing revenue	62%
2. Maintaining market share	41%
3. Expanding to overseas markets	34%
4. Developing digital business capabilities	33%
5. Growing market share	30%

Source: NBS 2018/2019

About one in two enterprises surveyed by the NBS felt that government support for R&D, innovation and their adoption would make a big difference to their business¹¹. In this area, the TACs noted that there are existing government assistance programmes to

¹¹ National Business Survey 2018/2019, Singapore Business Federation, December 2018

support SMEs with enterprise and technology road-mapping. ESG's Enterprise Development Grant¹² provides SMEs with support for road-mapping in the areas of business excellence, business model transformation and branding and marketing. At the same time, the Agency for Science, Technology and Research's (A*STAR's) Operation and Technology Roadmapping¹³ (OTR) assists companies in the development of a technology roadmap using mapping methodology adapted from Cambridge University. The initiatives and outcomes of the various ITMs are also useful references and help.

Recommendations

1. Government agencies, such as ESG and A*STAR, with ready support for SMEs in enterprise and technology road-mapping can work closely with TACs to support SMEs in these areas. The focus should be on driving more effective outreach programs for awareness, and promote greater adoption through lowering costs.

1a. On driving more effective outreach programs, the government should explore the possibility of providing specialized ITM-related advisory to SMEs through the respective ITM lead agencies and TACs to avail direct, relevant assistance to SMEs who require them. This may involve morphing/modifying the current SME centres that tend to provide generic advice to specialized ITM centres to provide deeper assistance to help workers and companies in each

12 <https://spring.enterprisesg.gov.sg/Growing-Business/Grant/Pages/capability-development-grant.aspx>

13 <https://www.a-star.edu.sg/Collaborate/Programmes-for-SMEs/Operation-Technology-Roadmap>

ITM industry to transform. These centres should also help direct SMEs to road-mapping tools and resources.

1b. On driving adoption, the government should simplify the process/procedures of grant applications and funding disbursement to SMEs to reduce the administrative efforts required when seeking government funding for these services and programmes.

4. Creation of an SME Week to Consolidate Resources and Facilitate Learning

It was generally observed by respondents that there are many activities organised across government agencies and TACs to promote learning and capability upscaling for SMEs. The content of these activities range from half day workshops/info-sessions to full day seminars to week-long conferences. Some of these activities include ESG / A*STAR's SME Day, Singapore Malay Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SMCCI) Convention 2018 and SME Centre Conference Day (all held in May), Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry's (SCCCI) annual conference and the Intellectual Property Office of Singapore's (IPOS) IP Week (both in August), and National Research Foundation's (NRF) Singapore Week of Innovation and Technology (SWITCH) in September.

The proliferation of these multiple activities can be confusing for SMEs to decide which activity to attend and which activities they will benefit the most out of. This point becomes especially pertinent when SMEs tend to be very time-strapped. The messages

from these activities are not necessarily coherent. There are overlaps in scope. These activities often compete for the same time and resources for the planning agencies / TACs and SME attendees.

Recommendation

Appoint a lead government agency and/or TAC to organise a “SME Week” that will facilitate focused in-depth learning, showcase of solutions for enterprise adoption, and networking opportunities with both local and overseas businesses.

5. Formation of Overseas Nodes to Help Local SMEs Internationalise

With growing urgency for SMEs to regionalize and internationalise, there is a need for Singapore businesses who are already established in selected key markets to be better organised. This will connect such businesses with new-to-market SMEs, find opportunities to collaborate and compete more effectively.

The SCCC had successfully launched its China node supported by the then International Enterprise (IE) Singapore. The ESG-SCCC Singapore Enterprise Centre (previously known as IE-SCCC Singapore Enterprise Centre¹⁴) established in 2013¹⁵ had helped to facilitate business and economic exchanges between its members and

¹⁴ <https://www.sccc.org.sg/en/file/ie-sccc-singapore-enterprise-center>

¹⁵ <https://www.straitstimes.com/business/one-stop-centre-set-up-for-singapore-firms-in-shanghai>

the relevant Chinese authorities, enterprises and institutions, and amongst Singapore firms with business interests in China.

From the findings of the NBS 2018/2019, more than half of the respondents are keen to expand into an ASEAN country in the near future. However, there are many obstacles, with insufficient market knowledge and information as well as the lack of understanding of the complex in-country compliance issues as the top challenges cited. Other critical barriers include unclear/non-transparent rules and regulations, financing the overseas expansion, customs-related issues, import restrictions, corruption and challenges in making business contacts.

Top Five Issues Faced by SMEs in Overseas Expansion	
1. Market knowledge and information	42%
2. Compliance issues (e.g. meeting local regulatory requirements)	36%
3. Unclear/ Non-transparent rules & regulations	30%
4. Bureaucracy	27%
5. Custom-related issues (e.g. tedious/ unclear import procedures & document requirements)	25%

Source: NBS 2018/2019

The NBS further found that more than half of businesses surveyed felt that the understanding of compliance, regulations and standards would be very helpful in their expansion to overseas markets. Having relevant contacts in the target overseas

market(s) and more information on market needs and customer requirements are also beneficial.

Top Five Helpful Support for Overseas Expansion	
1. Relevant contacts in the target overseas market(s)	52%
2. Understanding of compliance, regulations & standards	51%
3. More information on market needs & customer requirements	45%
4. More information on taxation rules	45%
5. Understanding of business & social norms	38%

Source: NBS 2018/2019

Recommendation

Provide TACs with resources to organise the overseas Singapore business communities and relevant business groups as overseas node points that our SMEs can leverage on to facilitate easier market entry. This could involve working through appointed lead TACs to serve as the go-to party for selected focused markets.

6. Refining Government SME Grant Processing Criteria and Application Process

The TACs noted that the Government has been making improvements to various touchpoints such as www.smeportal.sg and www.businessgrants.gov.sg on matters relating to available support schemes. The types of support available have also been re-designed to cover a wide spectrum of business needs.

However, navigating the websites to find information and the suitable support scheme is still a daunting task for many SMEs. Feedback from the business community also highlighted that although application processes are more streamlined, the documentation for application and audit remains cumbersome. Based on the findings of the SBF NBS 2018/2019, help with complex schemes and grants for business transformation was the second ranked area that businesses hope ITMs could help to address (31 per cent). The top ranked area was ways to improve manpower needs and talent pipeline (36 percent)¹⁶.

SMEs with good ideas and innovative solutions that require support, may be deterred by the application process and paperwork required. It was noted that some segments of businesses, especially the smaller SMEs, may not be able to articulate the merits of their projects to the required degree of detail and specifications of the current documentation. This prevents SMEs from tapping on these schemes that would otherwise allow the SMEs to tap on opportunities or improvements identified.

Recommendations

1. Create sub-segments within the current definition of SMEs so that more differentiated and targeted help can be provided to the micro-segments for greater effectiveness in assistance provision especially in view of the limited resources of this category of companies. This could be in the form of easier

¹⁶ National Business Survey 2018/2019, Singapore Business Federation, December 2018

grant applications and government procurement requirements for the smaller SMEs.

2. The government can develop info-maps of government support schemes and grants to better help SMEs in understanding and leveraging on government assistance to transform and grow. These simplified maps or illustrations will also allow the TACs to more effectively cascade the information to their members, and help overcome business perception that it is difficult to navigate and access the various grants, schemes and programmes available.

7. Rising Business Cost

The TACs provided feedback that business cost is rising due to increasing wages as well as water and electricity prices, and in the near future, goods and services (GST) hikes. There is also a consensus that company growth is lagging behind wage growth, leading to decreasing profit margins. Data from the Ministry of Trade and Industry's (MTI's) Economic Survey 2Q18 however showed that the unit labor (ULC) cost for the manufacturing sector declined by 7.4% year on year on the back of strong productivity gains while the ULC for the services sector rose 1.9%¹⁷. TACs at the dialogues acknowledged that, although the economic indicators appeared to be healthy, the positive effects may not have trickled down to SMEs. There were also concerns that business cost, in particular rental, might rise when the economy does well.

¹⁷ Economic Survey of Singapore (2Q18), Ministry of Trade and Industry (Singapore), August 2018

There were also concerns on the cost of retaining and training matured workers in light of the ageing workforce¹⁸. A 2017 Marsh & McLENNAN report on Singapore's aging workforce found that employees aged over 50 years old are the fastest growing demographic. By 2030 there will be a 55% increase in this group of employees, which will double the cost of medical benefits per employee from \$946 to \$1,973 per employee. This is estimated to account for 40% of the workforce and productivity loss due to sickness absenteeism at \$3.3billion in 2030.

Recommendations

- 1. The government to collaborate with TACs to explore the concept and proliferation of performance wage design for SMEs to close the gap between wage growth and company growth, and also to promote sustainable, profitable growth.**
- 2. Following the good example set by JTC Corporation, it is recommended that the other government agencies that are landlords also recognise the principles detailed in the SBF's Fair Tenancy Framework¹⁹. This will signify the government's strong support for fair tenancy practices, and also encourage/place pressure on the private sector landlords to adopt such practices.**

18 <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/spore-ageing-at-faster-pace-than-a-decade-ago>

19 <http://www.sbf.org.sg/business-advocacy/fair-tenancy-framework>

3. Introduce support measures to help SMEs mitigate the cost of retaining and training mature workers, for example, subsidizing or finding ways to lower the medical insurance costs of matured workers²⁰.

4. Introduction of a part-time/freelance framework for mature workers.

5. Conduct a study on the medical needs and insurance cost for aging workforce.

6. Introduce more job re-design schemes for mature workforce.

²⁰ A Marsh & McLennan report, Aging Workforce, Cost and Productivity Challenges of Ill Health in Singapore (2017) found that rising direct medical costs and loss of productivity due to sickness and absenteeism have a negative cost impact on companies

ANNEX

SBF SME Committee

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Abbreviations

A*STAR	Agency for Science, Technology and Research
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASME	Association of Small and Medium Enterprises
CIP	Collaborative Industry Projects
ESG	Enterprise Singapore
FLA	Franchising and Licensing Association (Singapore)
GLCs	Government Linked Companies
GST	Goods and Services Tax
IMDA	Info-communications Media Development Authority of Singapore
IPOS	Intellectual Property Office of Singapore
ITE	Institute of Technical Education
ITM	Industry Transformation Map
JTC	Jurong Town Corporation
MRA	Market Readiness Assistance
NBS	National Business Survey
NITEC	National ITE Certificate
NRF	National Research Foundation
NTU	Nanyang Technological University
NTUC	National Trades Union Congress
NUS	National University of Singapore
OTR	Operation and Technology Roadmapping
PACT	Partnerships for Capability Transformation
PEP	Pro-enterprise Panel
SBF	Singapore Business Federation
SASS	Singapore Association of Ship Suppliers and Services
SCAL	Singapore Contractors Association Limited
SCCCI	Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry
SFIC	Singapore Furniture Industries Council
SHRI	Singapore Human Resources Institute
SICCI	Singapore Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry
Simtech	Singapore Institute of Manufacturing Technology
SIT	Singapore Institute of Technology
SLA	Singapore Logistics Association
SMCCI	Singapore Malay Chamber of Commerce and Industry
SMEs	Small and Medium Sized Enterprises
SNBA	Singapore Nightlife Business Association
SPETA	Singapore Precision Engineering and Technology Association
SRA	Singapore Retailers Association
SUSS	Singapore University of Social Sciences

Abbreviations

SWITCH	Singapore Week of Innovation and Technology
TACs	Trade Association and Chambers
TAFF	Textile and Fashion Federation Singapore
ULC	Unit Labour Cost

References

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