

**SPEECH BY MR ONG YE KUNG, CHIEF EXECUTIVE  
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LAUNCH OF THE CERTIFIED SERVICE PROFESSIONAL  
PROGRAMME  
22 MAY 2008, 10.30AM AT THE SINGAPORE FLYER**

Industry partners, colleagues, friends, ladies and gentlemen

**Introduction**

1 I am happy to be here today to officially launch the Certified Service Professional (CSP) programme. This is part of the Tourism TALent, or TOTAL Plan, which was launched a few months ago.

2 There is a growing need for more manpower in the tourism industry. This is driven by tourists arriving in Singapore in record numbers, and new tourism investments, such as the Singapore Flyer and the Integrated Resorts. The sector is expected to need another 60,000 workers in the next two to three years.

3 Many concerned people have put forward their views on how to solve the tourism manpower crunch. One view that is often heard is to let in more foreign workers, because this is a matter of 'making sure there is enough warm bodies' to do the work. But this alone does not work, because it takes more than a warm body to do a service job. A service worker needs to be friendly, know their products, able to converse and attend to customers, understand their needs, build relationships, and coach fellow employees. The work demands are high, and if we treat this as a mere headcount problem we will fail to deliver our Uniquely Singapore brand promise, our customers will stop coming back, and we will hurt our service competitiveness in the long term.

4 Another common view is to mobilize our unemployed and economically inactive Singaporeans to fill up the vacancies. WDA, NTUC and the Community Development Councils, will try our best to help these segments of workers find jobs in the tourism sectors. But we know that we are almost at full employment, the labour market is very tight, and looking for suitable workers has not been easy. So it will be quite unrealistic to expect that the new big developments will be staffed entirely or mostly by the unemployed and economically inactive.

5 Yet another solution is to educate and train our students to prepare them for these new jobs. Our education institutions are doing this rigorously, but the supply is insufficient. Every year, there are around 40,000 babies born in Singapore and moving up our education ladder over time. Each cohort of students stepping into the workforce is needed by every sector of our economy. Even if the tourism industry can secure a good proportion of new entrants into the industry, relying on the flow of new entrants cannot meet the surge in tourism manpower demand in the near term.

### **A Multi-Pronged Approach**

6 We need to address the need for tourism manpower, in a similar way as we address our country's need for water. Both are scarce resources. In the case of water, we rely on multiple taps – our own reservoirs, importing from overseas, recycling waste water to produce NeWater, and desalinating sea water. For manpower, we too need to recognize there is no single solution. We need to be creative and resourceful too, relying on multiple sources – students coming into the workforce, the unemployed and economically inactive workers that can be retrained back into the workforce, bringing in more foreign workers with the right skills and attributes. At the same time, we need to work harder in redesigning job,

streamline processes, leverage on technology and machinery to raise productivity and ameliorate the manpower crunch.

7 At the same time we have to allow the labour market to function efficiently, so that there is competition for scarce resources, market signals are transparent, and workers are mobile and able to move towards industries that offer brighter prospects and more attractive careers. The more readily workers can do that, the more we can adapt to the changing needs of the economy, and solve manpower shortages in high growth industries. This does not just apply to the tourism-related industry, but also finance, healthcare, aerospace, pharmaceuticals, chemicals, media and communications, and so on.

8 There are many factors that can contribute to an efficient labour market and a agile and flexible workforce. WDA and our partners can contribute to two important factors. First, a common skills certification system. If the requirements of the industry are codified into a skills certificate, which are awarded to workers who are assessed to possess these skills, it becomes a lot easier for workers and companies to find each other. Because we would have establish a common currency in the labour market. The second pre-requisite is that there must be training programmes that are accessible to all adult workers, so that it is possible for them to learn the skills and attain the industry-recognised certification.

### **Certified Service Professionals**

9 This is what WDA has been trying to build with our partners for the tourism industry. We developed the Workforce Skills Qualifications (WSQ) system for the tourism sector with inputs from the industry. We established Continuing Education and Training (CET) Centres, running programmes that are subsidized, and which workers can enroll into.

10 Moving forward, CSP will be a major programme that will be offered publicly to workers by various CET Centres. Like all WSQ programmes, CSP originated from industry inputs. The dominant feedback from service companies is that they can train service workers in specific skills, whether it is for retail assistants, hotel receptionists or croupiers. What companies need Government's help on is equip workers with the right service mindset, and passion for the job. To be in the service sector one must love serving people, derive immense satisfaction by making customers happy, and possess resilience such that if you meet an unreasonable or even abusive customer you can laugh it off and serve the next appreciative one. With those attributes, they are ready for almost any service jobs. When I relate this feedback to a doctor some time ago, the idea immediately clicked and he said it made sense to train 'stem cell' service workers – with the basic foundation skills in place, ready to take on more complex competencies on the job.

11 From this feedback, we developed the CSP, as a five-day intensive training programme, focusing on transforming mindsets and igniting passion for service. The trainees must feel that they are professionals in the field, and proud of what they do. The training approach is experiential, almost boot-camp like. In the five days, they live and breathe good service, and what service professionals have to do in real life. For example, every morning, trainees will be expected to attend a roll call; they must turn up in proper attire; they address each other and their instructors with proper salutations; and during tea breaks they take turns to be 'banquet hosts', to serve the rest and make sure everyone is happy with their curry puffs.

12 40 workers took part in the first two pilot runs. Many companies were invited to sit in and observe the training. They gave good feedback that enables

us to further improve the programme. But most encouraging of all is that they felt that the programme is relevant, address an important need of the industry, and a few have even asked us if they could put their existing workers through the training.

13 The CDCs referred about 30 jobseekers to the pilot runs. Around one third were offered jobs after their training, and another one third is currently undergoing interviews, which is not bad for a start. But for the jobseekers, going through training, and acquiring the right skills is just the start. The real hard work starts from the first day you report to work. Switching into a new line is never easy. Workers will need to persevere, learn the ropes, make friends and get used to the new working environment, apply what they learned and be a professional, and not throw in the towel after a few days. Employers, on the other hand, will need to take steps to make the working environment welcoming to new comers, especially mid career entrants, and take a developmental and nurturing approach.

## **Conclusion**

14 In the next 3 years, we aim to train over 30,000 workers through the CSP. We hope that in the process, we will contribute to one of the major manpower taps for the tourism industry. We also hope to make a difference to the Singapore service culture, and the service competitiveness of our workforce.

15 Today's launch is the culmination of many months of hard work by WDA staff and many of our partners. I want to thank our industry partners for giving valuable inputs on the courseware, SQ Centre for developing the curriculum, and NTUC and the Community Development Councils for supporting the first two pilot batches of trainees, and Singapore Flyer for letting us host the event here. I also

want to thank the trainees, who were opened and eager to advance your skills for better career and a better life. I look forward to our continued partnership. Thank you.