



MINISTRY OF
MANPOWER

co lab

A minimalist line drawing of a room corner. A lamp hangs from the ceiling, casting a light on the wall. The drawing is composed of simple black lines on a yellow background.

RECOGNISING OUR LOWER-WAGE WORKERS, CARING FOR THEIR REST NEEDS

Human-centred design research project led by Co-Lab in the Ministry of Manpower

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SENIOR MINISTER OF STATE**

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FOREWORD



ZAQY MOHAMAD

Senior Minister of State (Manpower)

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, while many of us had the option of working from home due to the nature of our jobs, many of our lower-wage workers, such as cleaners and security officers, had to continue with their jobs at their workplaces. Their work has been instrumental in ensuring key essential services in the country continue to function smoothly for our people, so that we can go about our everyday lives.

The pandemic has highlighted the importance of the work of our lower-wage workers. Many Singaporeans have acknowledged and expressed appreciation for them. Nevertheless, applauding their work is only the first step. What we must do is work towards taking concrete steps that will uplift the lives of our lower-wage workers.

My team at the Ministry of Manpower has been looking into how we might better improve the well-being of lower-wage workers well before the pandemic hit. Their research, detailed in these pages, began in 2019 as part of the Workcare initiative that I had launched, to improve the work environments of lower-wage workers and strengthen public appreciation for their work. Subsequently in October 2020, the Tripartite Workgroup for Lower-Wage Workers which I chair was set up to explore measures to further uplift their wages and well-being. All these efforts will require

sustained support not only from the Government, but also from employers, unions, service buyers, and every Singaporean.

This report contains findings and recommendations from a pilot study on improving the work environments for our lower-wage workers with a focus on outsourced cleaners – where they work and where they rest. All of us can play to improve the well-being of lower-wage workers at work. I invite you to join us in this endeavour!

ABOUT CO- LAB

Co-Lab was set up in 2017 within MOM's Corporate Planning and Management Department to drive the transformation of MOM's business outcomes in a human-centred, data-driven way:

> SERVICE DELIVERY

Review customer strategies and process to improve customer experience and operational efficiency.

> COMPLIANCE WITH RULE AND REGULATIONS

Review strategies and processes to ensure a fair business environment employers and workplace for employees.

> POLICY CRAFTING

Designing policies and programmes based on users' needs and behaviour to improve impact.

Co-Lab developed the “Understand-Design-Test” (UDT) framework as a problem-solving approach for MOM that combines design thinking, behavioural insights and data analytics tools.

It entails deepening our understanding of the problems through user interviews, customer journey mapping and data exploration, designing possible solutions based on insights from the research (e.g. prototypes, predictive models, behavioural interventions), and testing solutions through a variety of approaches from low scale user testing to randomised controlled trials.

Using the UDT framework, Co-Lab partnered stakeholders and worked on a wide range of projects, including re-designing our enforcement approach to encourage construction companies to take greater ownership of workplace safety and health, encouraging employers of migrant domestic workers to pay levies promptly, increasing employers' awareness and usage of the Employment Agency directory and enabling employers to build workplace resilience against terrorism with SGSecure. More recently, Co-Lab re-designed our employment dispute management services offered under The Tripartite Alliance of Dispute Management (TADM) as well as programme delivery to help retrenched workers bounce back from their employment setback.

THE WORKCARE PILOT RESEARCH TEAM

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PROJECT BACKGROUND

The Workcare initiative was introduced by the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) in 2019 to improve the work environments of our lower-wage workers and strengthen public appreciation for the work that they do. It forms part of a broader, multi-pronged effort to uplift lower-wage workers, which includes: **Progressive Wages**, which seek to empower our lower-wage workers with higher wages and better skills, **Workfare**, which provides broad-base income supplement and training support, and **Workright**, which safeguards the employment rights of our lower-wage workers.

One of Workcare's focus areas is to improve access to proper rest areas for outsourced workers, many of whom are lower-wage workers engaged in physically demanding work. As many outsourced workers are deployed to external sites, designated rest areas with necessary amenities are not always provided for at their workplaces. In light of this, MOM, the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC), and the Singapore National Employers Federation (SNEF) jointly issued a Tripartite Advisory on Provision of Rest Areas for Outsourced Workers in December 2019 to guide service buyers and providers in providing proper rest areas for outsourced workers.

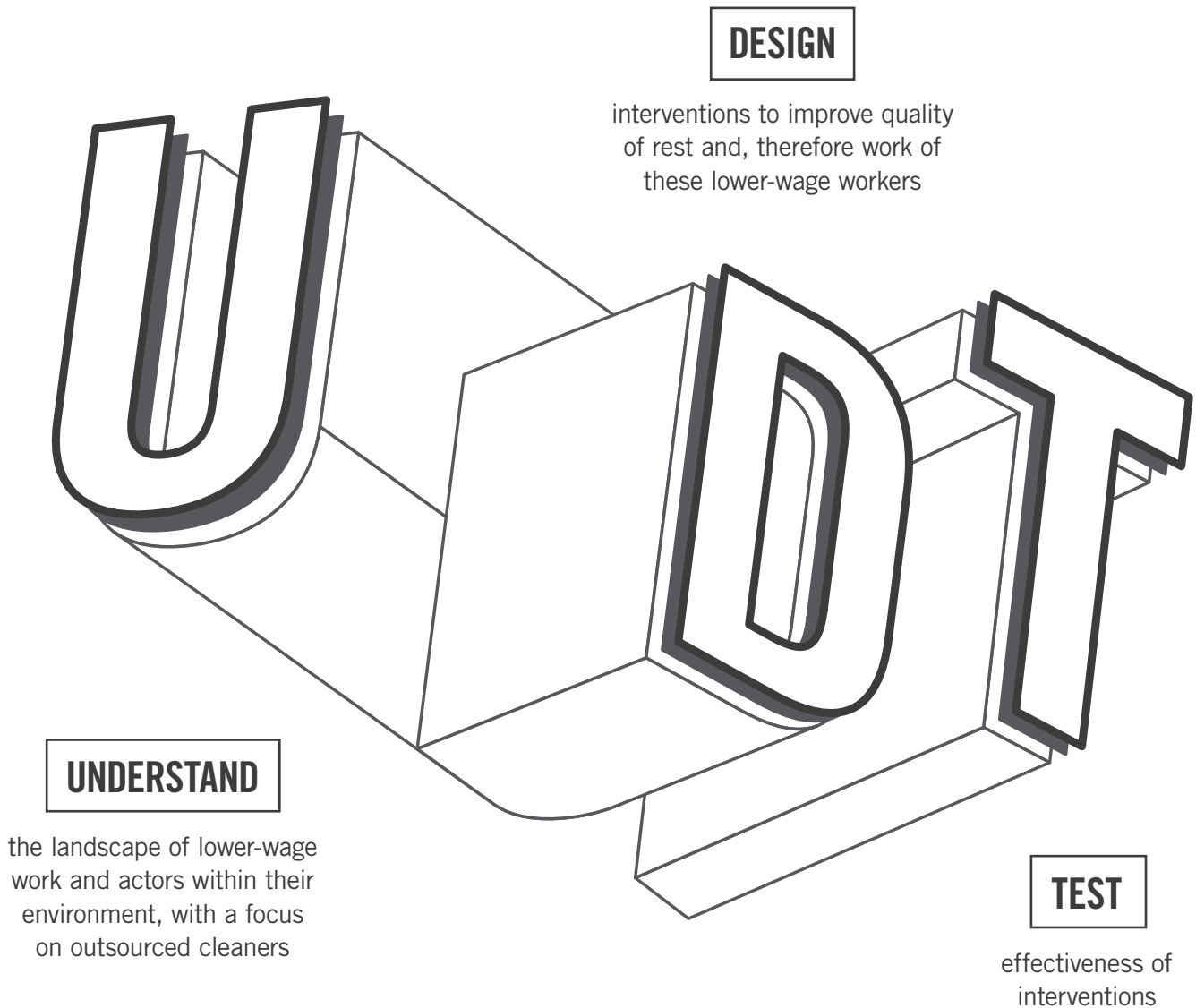
Alongside the release of the Tripartite Advisory, MOM began a pilot project in November 2019 with two Town Councils to improve the rest areas of outsourced cleaners within their constituencies. This project sought to better understand the perspectives of service buyers, workers and other stakeholders, as well as to design and test impactful interventions to improve the quality of workers' rest and work. 20 rest areas for outsourced cleaners, mostly in utility centres in HDB blocks, were upgraded as part of the pilot. We then conducted further qualitative research with service buyers and service providers in other sectors (retail, commercial, hawker centres) to further enrich our understanding. This report summarises our findings. It outlines the factors that affect workers' rest, and enlists service buyers, service providers, and the wider public in helping us change the way society views workers, and the way workers view themselves and their work.

We hope you will join us in this journey to ensure that we, as a society, will not only applaud our lower-wage workers' contributions – but also create a conducive work environment that supports them in doing their best work.

RESEARCH METHODS

Co-Lab, an in-house innovation team in MOM, led a multi-disciplinary team of officers that carried out the project using MOM's Understand-Design-Test (UDT) methodology.

Based on design thinking principles, the UDT methodology was used to:



A total of 16 outsourced cleaners and representatives from town councils and cleaning companies were shadowed and interviewed respectively. The shadowing sessions were timed to start and end at the same time as the workers' shifts, so that we could experience the working hours and break times for ourselves. Of the 20 rest areas that were upgraded as part of the pilot, one rest area was set aside to test specific interventions over a period of 8 weeks.

The team also interviewed 4 pairs of service buyers and service providers with progressive rest areas for employees, to learn best practices and understand more about how they provided these rest areas.



Disclaimer: We were mindful to acknowledge that our dual roles as not only researchers but also MOM officers, as well as the language barriers between ourselves and the participants, may have influenced participants' responses. In view of these challenges, participants were assured that their responses would be kept confidential. When presenting our results, we also acknowledged the possible effects on our research of this power imbalance. As far as possible, we tried to avoid causing disruption to workers' routines by observing from a distance, and only interviewing workers and staff during breaks.

CONTEXTUALISING OUTSOURCED LOWER-WAGE WORK

In the outsourcing model, a company that needs a service will not hire workers directly for the job, but instead buys services from another company that will supply workers to perform that service. Services that are usually outsourced include cleaning, security, and landscaping, which account for a significant proportion of lower-wage workers in Singapore. Since these workers work offsite at various locations, other actors in this ecosystem (e.g. service buyers and end-users) play an important role in determining the working conditions for these workers, including where they take their breaks.

OUTSOURCED LOWER-WAGE WORKERS

Outsourced Lower-Wage Workers have varying workload and manual labour across industries, some of which are further impacted by demand and supply of local and foreign labour as roles involving more manual labour are usually done by migrant workers. Their workload can also vary across work environments. They would be anyone from your conservancy cleaner to your landscaper.

SERVICE PROVIDERS

Service Providers are companies that hire, train and manage these workers so as to provide services at our residential estates, workplaces, malls and parks.

SERVICE BUYERS

Service Buyers buy services from these companies to run their operations. Examples would be town councils, office buildings, schools and malls.

USERS

Users are anybody who relies on services of outsourced lower-wage workers to work, play or reside in these spaces.



FACTORS AFFECTING WORKERS' REST



IN REST AREAS



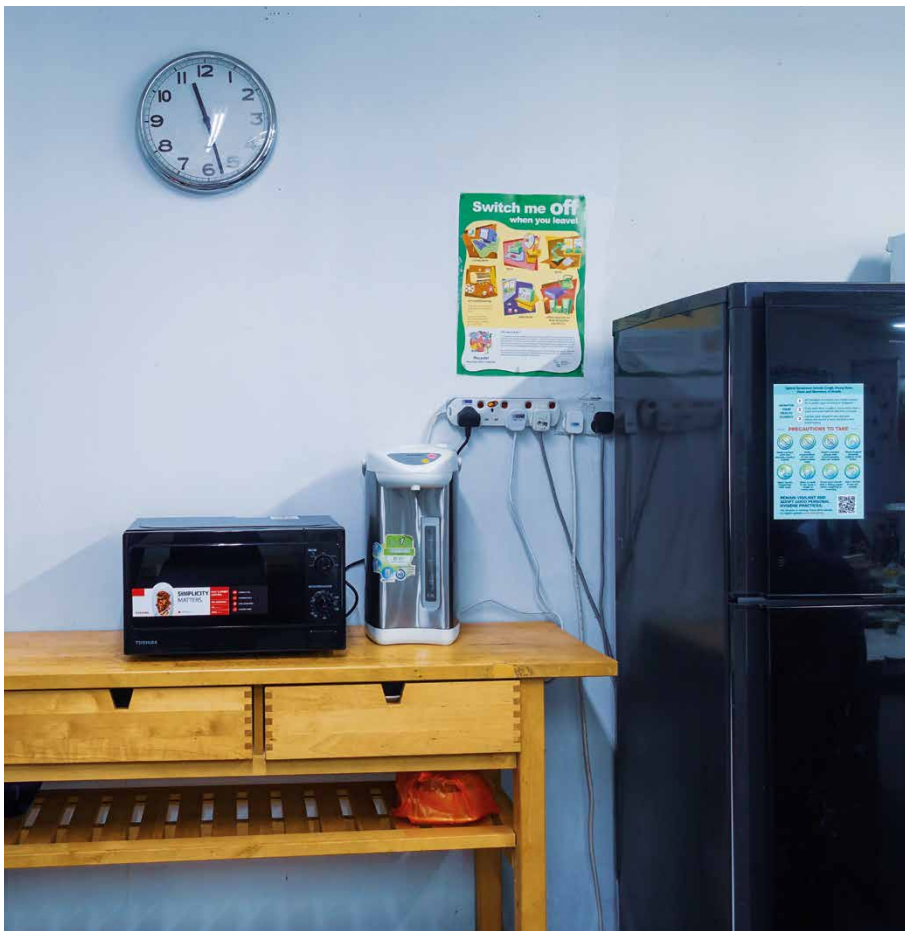
Workers' rest should not be an afterthought – in order to ensure workers are able to perform their duties well, they also need to be able to rest well in between their duty hours. To facilitate this, their rest areas need to be prioritised and planned for, ideally at the outset when the entire space is being set up. They should be given a safe, proper space to rest – preferably one that is accessible, gives them enough privacy to rest at ease, and socialise with their colleagues.

Workers rest better in private. They are wary of negative perceptions of their work attitudes when seen resting or socialising with their colleagues in public spaces.

When given a choice between a private rest area and resting in a public space (e.g. public benches in residential estates, employee cafeterias in commercial buildings), an overwhelming majority of workers preferred to take their breaks in private. The reasons given were both external (fear of being perceived to be skiving during work) and internal (opportunity to catch up with colleagues in private).

// Case study 1

IKEA Alexandra's "makan rooms" are open to all co-workers in IKEA – whether they're IKEA's co-workers, or staff employed by their third-party service providers. In addition, IKEA provides separate rest areas for their cleaning and security service providers, where the furnishings are provided by the partners (i.e. service providers) for their own staff. Although they are free to use the "makan rooms", many cleaning and security staff in IKEA still prefer to rest in their own space as it affords them privacy and a chance to catch up with their colleagues.



// Case study 2

At Yishun Park Hawker Centre, the appointed cleaning service provider Cleanmark's sales and operations manager, Spencer, customised the cleaners' rest area to suit his staff's preferences. Aware that many of the elderly cleaners enjoyed cold soft drinks, he installed a fridge and stocked it with soft drinks. As the elderly may also lose track of which locker they put their belongings in, he procured lockers with clear glass panels so that the cleaners would be able to recognise their belongings.



Workers' needs for rest are simple but diverse. Service buyers and service providers should customise the rest areas according to their workers' specific needs.



Workers' needs can differ based on job scope (e.g. conservancy cleaners may need a hose to wash their feet after shifts), or other factors such as age or personality. For instance, some workers enjoy social interactions with their colleagues in the rest area, while others may prefer a quieter break.

For larger premises, workers can be given some flexibility to rest near their workstation, with access to water and lockers to store their belongings if practicable.

“ Some of the workers who are too old, I let them rest at their key point. Every level will have one key point. There won't be anything much there, but there will be a chair, a basin with tap, basket all that. So if they are too old, I won't ask them to come all the way down. They can make their drink at that level and rest there.”
– Cleaning Supervisor (service provider)

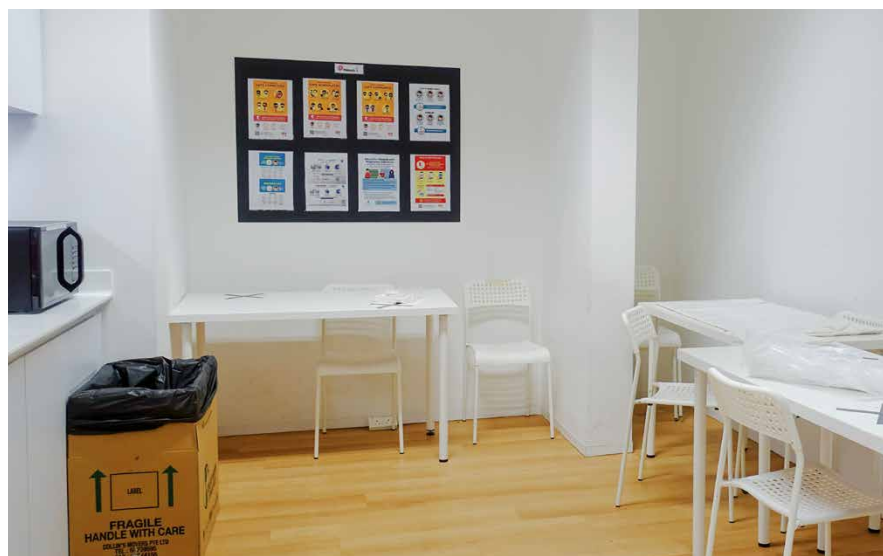
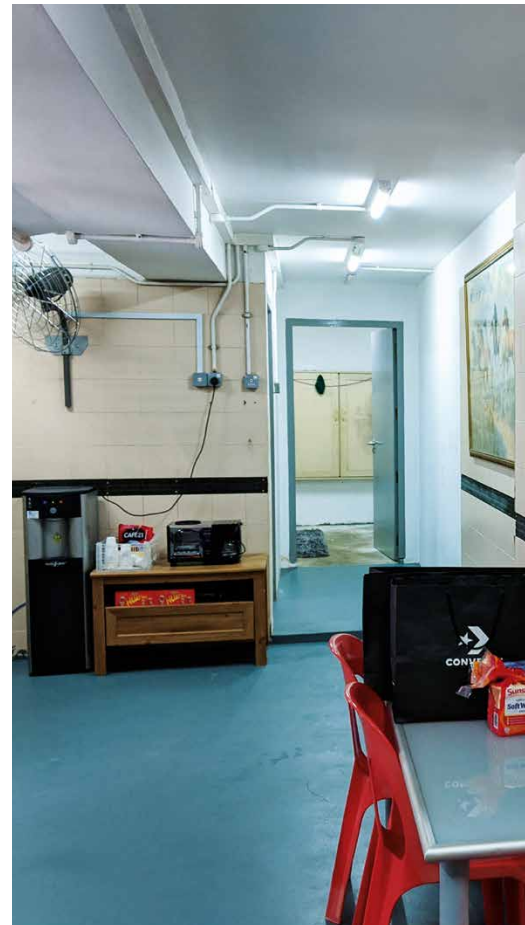
Clearly designated rest areas should be provided for workers' use. If the space is used for other purposes (e.g. storage), the area for rest should be clearly demarcated.

During our research, we often saw workers resting next to stored work equipment, or in the bin areas of residential estates or malls. This is commonly seen among makeshift rest areas and/or when workers carve out their own rest spaces within storage rooms, and may pose a health and safety hazard for them. If spaces used for rest areas are also used for storage, the area designated for rest should be clearly marked out within these spaces for the workers' safety.

We observed that the best rest areas were usually found in places where service buyers prioritised workers' rest. They set up dedicated rest areas within buildings or partitioned an existing storage area to ensure hygiene and safety of the demarcated rest area, and encouraged workers to use these rest areas.

For instance, Ang Mo Kio Town Council did a review of its existing storage spaces as part of the pilot project and found that it was possible to partition or convert some storage areas into safe, conducive rest areas with some simple renovation work and furnishings. Areas designated for rest had features such as anti-slip flooring added for safety, and items such as unused furniture and salvaged bicycles that were previously stored in the space were removed.

A good time to set up a dedicated rest area can be when planning a move to a new office – we observed that service buyers with progressive rest areas had often achieved this by setting aside space for them in their floor plans when they moved to new premises.



// Case study 3

When Shopee moved to its new premises in 2019, their People Team was tasked to plan the use of the space. After workstations and facilities were accounted for, they found themselves left with a number of tiny rooms that could not be converted to any other use. Recalling that the cleaners had to share the employees' cafeteria at their old building, they decided to convert some of the leftover spaces to rest areas. These rest areas double up as water points for cleaners, and are situated at every level of the building.

IN THE LARGER CLEANING ECOSYSTEM

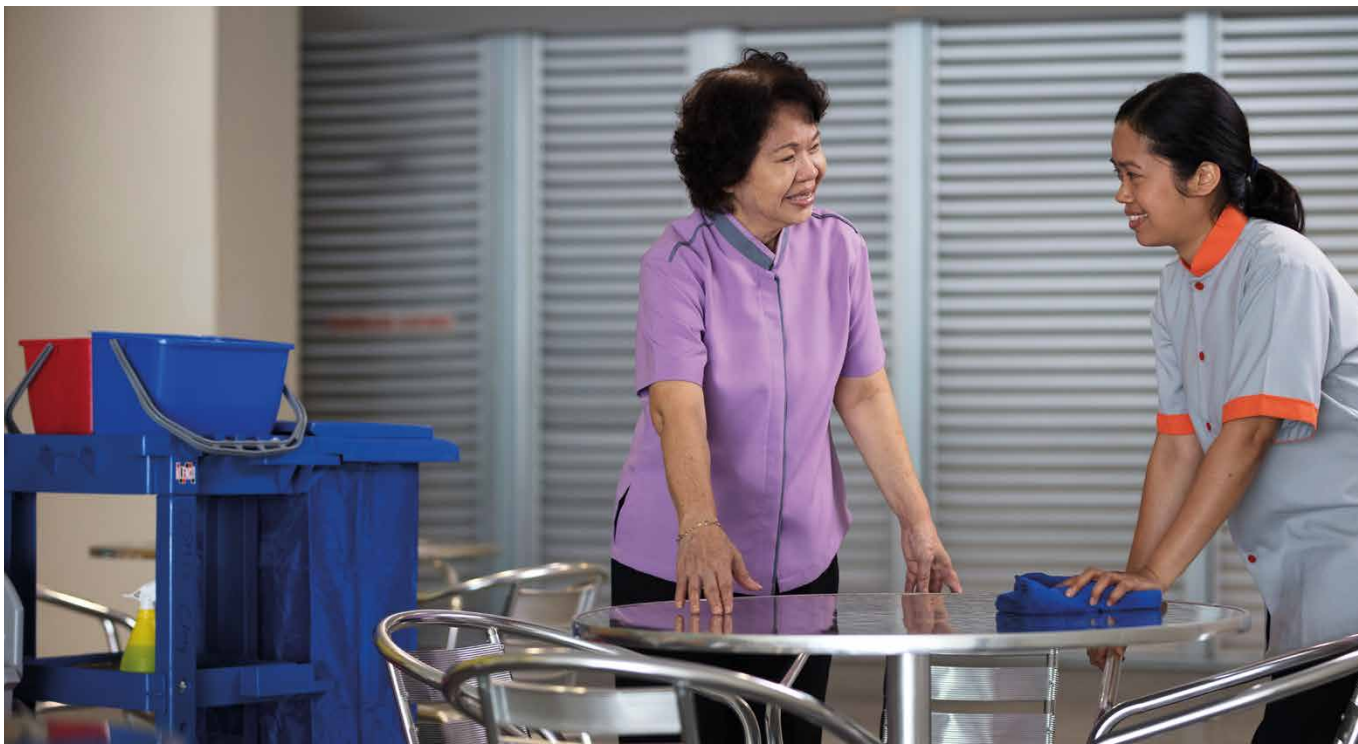
Quality rest comes not just from having a safe and hygienic rest area, but also having the opportunity and time to do so. To ensure outsourced lower-wage workers have a manageable workload, service buyers, service providers, and premise users will need to work together as they each have a role to play.

End users' complaints have a disproportionate effect on workers' workload.

When users complain about a service, service buyers and providers will task the workers to rectify the problem. They will need to do additional work to monitor the situation, close the feedback loop with the users and display efforts at having improved their services. Cleaners for instance may need to keep submitting WhatsApp images of their cleaned areas.

This may add undue stress to workers when users' feedback does not feel justified – for instance, if the root cause was not the quality of the worker's work but patterns in users' behaviour when using the space. For example, toilets in hawker centres, malls and other retail spaces tend to have more complaints about cleanliness, not because they are poorly maintained by cleaners, but because members of public use them more frequently and do not help keep them clean after use.





Workers perform better and have more opportunities to rest when they are given autonomy and flexibility, and when encouraged to work as a team.

They find work more satisfying when they are allowed to plan their own tasks to achieve the desired outcomes. For example, Mr Raj* a foreman at West Coast Town Council is asked to keep a particular area clean as opposed to more measurable duties like wiping an area 3 times a day. This gives him ownership over his work – he then goes above and beyond to clear litter, check if amenities are in good working condition, and so on. It also allows for time to rest as he is now given the flexibility to do what is needed to keep the area clean, instead of doing unnecessary mandated work.

“ I have a cleaner who finishes his sweeping at 11am. So 11 to 12 lunchtime, got 1 hour. So I told him the whole zone, you’ll be in charge. For this 1 hour, you go around and do what needs to be done. I don’t want to guide you, come here eh you do this do that. Unless there is an urgent case. And he did. Every day he take photo. You give them the trust, they give you the trust.” – Cleaning Supervisor (service provider)

// Case study 1

This principle can apply to service contracting as well. At NEA’s hawker centres, their respective managing agents use an outcome-based contracting framework to procure outsourced services. This allows for the managing agents to have oversight of the quality of services provided, but gives their service providers the flexibility to hire and deploy their cleaners as needed to get the job done. Cleaners also do not have to be on their feet all the time as long as their work is done to standard.

*Name has been changed to maintain confidentiality of research.

// Case study 2

At UE BizHub Central, basic refreshments are provided and placed at the outsourced workers' rest area: 3-in-1 coffee, Milo, tea and crackers. Outsourced workers can also take their drinks from the coffee dispensers provided by the outsourced company.

Treating workers with respect and appreciation reinforces their dignity and motivates them to go the extra mile.

Although much of the work that workers do is regarded as essential work, they are often labelled as unskilled and may not be held in high regard. When service buyers treat outsourced workers the same way they treat their own staff and accord them with equal respect, workers are more motivated to go above and beyond in their roles. Even small acts of appreciation from service buyers and users of the space can suffice to lift their spirits and make their time at work more enjoyable.



Many service buyers view themselves as accountable to users (residents, shoppers – beneficiaries of the service), and may not feel responsible for outsourced workers' welfare as they see themselves only as purchasers of a service.

Many service buyers view upholding customer service standards as their main responsibility, rather than worker welfare. They see service providers as the only ones responsible for workers' welfare, as they are the employers of these workers. As they are overwhelmed by the need to keep up with their users' demands, they may not see their own role in providing a conducive environment for outsourced workers to work and rest.

“ Ok, under the contract, the main purpose of this contract is to provide these (services). If you talk about welfare of these workers, it should come from the employer themselves.”
– Service buyer

INTERVENTIONS TO IMPROVE WORKERS' WELL-BEING



As part of the study, we set aside one of the 20 upgraded rest areas to test specific interventions to improve workers' well-being. These interventions addressed two key areas in the findings: (i) involving workers in making decisions; and (ii) making their work relatable to users.

As these interventions were designed to be low-cost and easy to implement, service buyers and service providers can consider implementing similar interventions for their own workers, based on their workers' needs.



Provide secure and personal lockers for them to store their belongings safely

As rest areas are shared spaces that can be accessed by many, providing cleaners with storage spaces was not enough. They had been carrying around their valuables, even while doing heavy manual tasks, until they were given secure lockers. This assurance allowed them to leave their wallets or personal belongings behind and carry out their tasks nimbly.

Allow workers to customise and personalise their rest areas

Involving cleaners in the redesign of their rest areas gave them a sense of belonging and ownership of their space. They picked orange for their walls and requested for a prayer mat. These collaborative gestures gave cleaners permission to rest, as it showed them that the management was taking their welfare seriously and giving them the autonomy to decide what to do with their breaks.



Showcase the types of work that lower-wage workers do for users of the space

Many residents are often unaware of the amount of work that goes into maintaining their estates and addressing their complaints. The idea of redesigning cleaner notices was meant to connect residents to conservancy cleaners as humans behind work done and not just as unknown service providers.

Findings showed that residents who already know their cleaners also tend to be the ones aware of work that they do and vice versa – residents who had no idea who their cleaners were, were just as unaware of the work they did.

Question:

Do you know what they (cleaners) do every day? Where they rest?

Surveyed across 20 residents at Jurong West St 64 over 2 afternoons



Recognised their cleaners

“Very early start job around 6. Maybe not stay here. Cleaning Rubbish.”

“Clean the staircase? Do they rest near the rubbish chute?”

“Cleaning lifts, common areas. Do they rest in the carpark?”

“Yes. Cleaning the floor, lift, mopping every floor. Not sure, they have dorms?”



Did not recognised their cleaners

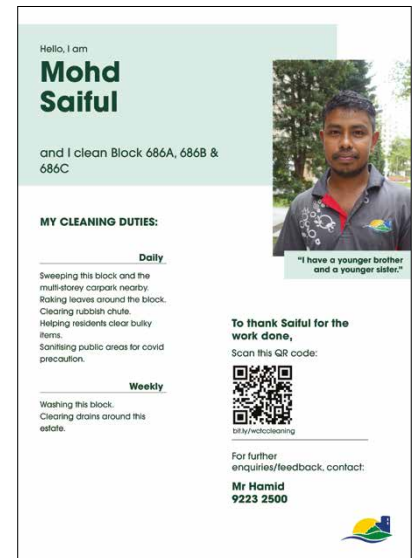
“Cleaning, sweeping, mopping. No idea where they rest.”

“Sweep floor, pick up litter, wash floor. Don’t know where they rest.”

“Block washing, sweep floors and drains.”

“No, not really. Just cleaning?”

Similar ideas have also been effectively implemented in several town councils. Where these notices are placed also play a part in how effective they are in helping residents recognise their cleaners.



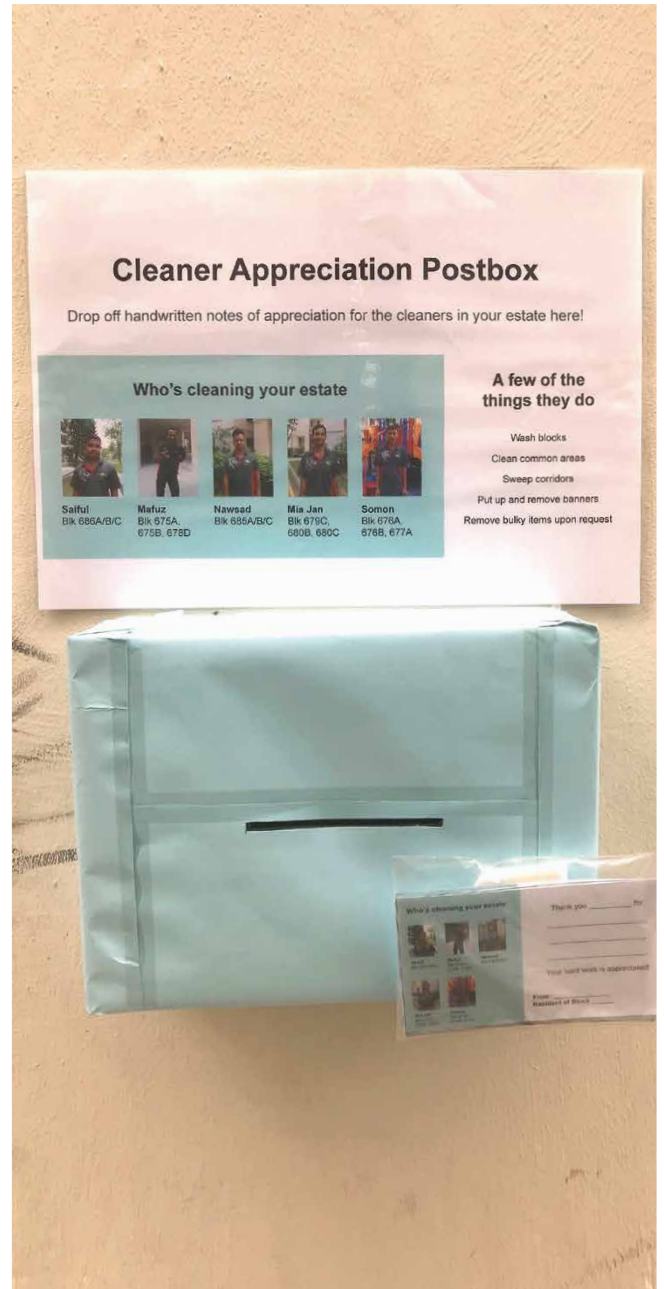
Prototypes of notices used during testing

Create opportunities for users to appreciate the workers' contributions

Inspired by some residents who would leave cleaners food at their rest area, a postbox was set up outside the rest area to encourage residents to send cleaners notes of appreciation.

The response was positive – all the notepaper was used up, and it was clear that residents paid attention to the cleaners' work scope as they thanked the specific cleaners in charge of their own blocks. Personalised notes and words of appreciation to cleaners indicated that residents valued the welfare of their cleaners.

When users (e.g. residents) value workers' welfare, this will in turn affect how service buyers and service providers treat their workers as their KPIs are ultimately geared towards their users' demands.



CONCLUSIONS

Rest areas are only as effective as the systems around them. How their work is measured and valued is key to ensuring that workers are well-rested, and therefore productive, at work. Many of these lower-wage workers work for companies that provide services to office buildings, malls, and condominiums – and the managers of these spaces are in turn accountable to those who use them: people like you and me.

As users of services that lower-wage workers provide, we can play a more active role in demanding better work environments for these workers. While physical improvements to work environments (i.e. rest areas) are important, they will not guarantee more rest for workers, unless they are given permission to rest. Service buyers and providers can indicate that their welfare is important to them, as seen in examples where better rested workers are more productive and can establish long-term relationships with those they work with.

As users of these services, maintaining our common spaces will significantly ease the load of the work that many lower-wage workers do. Being mindful of our space and practising empathy for these service providers do relieve the workload of lower-wage workers.

The team expresses our appreciation to the individuals and organisations involved in the pilot and our research – town councils and industry partners who have been featured in this report, and all who have offered their support in one way or another.

