New work pass for foreigners can also help Singapore retain local talent: Experts

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SINGAPORE - The slew of changes to Singapore's work pass framework for foreign professionals announced on Monday (Aug 29) is expected to position the Republic as a prime destination for top talent.

A new five-year work pass for these high-fliers, which headlined the changes unveiled by Minister for Manpower Tan See Leng, could also help retain top home-grown talent by assuring them that they have peers from overseas they can stand toe to toe with, labour experts told The Straits Times.

The Overseas Networks and Expertise Pass targets top talent in all sectors earning a fixed monthly salary of at least $30,000, or have a track record of outstanding achievements in various fields such as academia or the arts.

"(Such a pass) builds a community of top talent so (home-grown talent) don't have to go overseas to find peers to learn from and exchange their knowledge with," said Dr Faizal Yahya from the Institute of Policy Studies.

Such talent are likely extremely seasoned experts who do not wish to be tied to a single organisation but who can pass on valuable knowledge to local talent, said Dr David Leong, managing director of human resource advisory firm PeopleWorldwide Consulting.

He added that robotics, artificial intelligence, cyber security, biotechnology and finance are the sectors likely to attract talent under the new pass.

Ms Evelyn Chow, managing director of strategic human resources consultancy DecodeHR, said Singapore's top talent likely have overseas networks from their studies or work.

These networks could also include talent who qualify for the new pass. Singaporeans could spread word of the pass or even invite them over for collaboration, Ms Chow said.

The new pass was unveiled at a time when schemes to attract and retain top foreign talent are being introduced elsewhere, such as in Germany and the United Kingdom.

But Ms Chow noted that different countries target different segments of talent based on their needs.

"The UK is focusing on recent graduates, perhaps because it is not retaining the same rate of foreign graduates that it used to," she said, comparing Singapore's new pass with the UK's High Potential Individual visa scheme introduced in May.

"Asia is already extremely attractive for young graduates... (so) Singapore does not need a similar scheme for high potential young foreign talent," said Ms Chow.

In Singapore, "the Government is really pushing for... the kind of established top talent to meet the needs of the organisations they are trying to attract to establish their headquarters here", she added.

Although a potential draw for talent, the new pass also poses challenges for employers.

Ms Low Peck Kem, Singapore Human Resources Institute president, said: "With higher perceived stability of a five-year term instead of two years, pass holders would also be more committed to relocate their dependants.

"With such big moves, it is also less flexible for companies to change the employment contract," she said.

She added: "With easier recruitment of foreign talent, local talent may perceive it as less opportunity for them for the top jobs."

Other changes announced on Monday include a shorter Employment Pass (EP) processing time, with a response promised within 10 business days, a shortening of the Fair Consideration Framework job advertising requirement to 14 days from 28 days, and a longer five-year EP for occupations in areas where there is a shortage of skills, compared with two to three years before.

Also announced was a unified salary benchmark pegged to the top 10 per cent of EP holders - now set at $22,500 a month - for exemption from the Fair Consideration Framework job advertising requirement and points-based Complementarity Assessment Framework. The new benchmark will also apply to those applying for a personalised EP.

The Singapore National Employers Federation said on Monday that the shortened advertising requirement would help employers supplement their Singaporean workforce with foreigners in a timely manner so that business sustainability and growth are not affected.