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Self-led learning, job-matching: There's no secret to how this highly classified defence firm keeps talents engaged

DSO National Laboratories recognises its scientists and engineers need space to stay curious, push their limits and rediscover what drives them

Ms Sharon Tan, a programme director at DSO National Laboratories, trains with the dragon boat team, one of the organisation's many common interest groups that help staff connect and recharge. PHOTO: DSO NATIONAL LABORATORIES

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Brilliant minds from diverse backgrounds work together to build mission-critical technologies – the kind they cannot talk about but are vital to Singapore's security.

One of them is Ms Sharon Tan, programme director at DSO National Laboratories' Multimission Aerial Robotics department under the Robotics Division, who is engineering classified unmanned aerial systems.

By day, her work is steeped in secrecy and national importance – but beyond the classified corridors, her bosses recognise that even the sharpest minds need space to recharge, explore and grow.

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So, for half a day each month, Ms Tan, 39, spends work hours indulging her curiosity on various topics, which sometimes means reading Adam Grant's books on organisational psychology. This is all thanks to the company's Learning Day initiative.

On these designated days, which fall on the last Fridays of every month, managers are not allowed to schedule meetings or assign tasks. Instead, employees are given free rein to take classes, research, or work on anything, from learning a language to spending time on a hobby – whatever fuels their personal growth.

These moments of self-directed growth help engineers and researchers return to their core work more energised, curious and, most importantly, open to new ideas.

As a manager herself, Ms Tan thinks it is a progressive and bold move by the senior leadership.

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"Learning Day has taken meeting time away from us," she admits. "But if you think about it in the grand scheme of things, half a day each month is a small investment to motivate staff to keep learning."

Ms Tan (first row, second from left) and her colleagues rarely miss a paddle session at the Kallang River each week. PHOTO: DSO NATIONAL LABORATORIES

Other initiatives, such as Sports Hour, encourage team bonding and send a powerful signal: that employees are valued not just as workers, but as whole people whose mental well-being is a priority for the organisation.

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Says DSO's chief executive officer Cheong Chee Hoo: "Being a good employer means building more than careers – it means creating a community where people feel supported, challenged and inspired to grow."

These efforts reflect a culture that values individuals who are resilient, self-motivated and eager to keep learning, making DSO one of Singapore's best employers, as ranked by The Straits Times and global research firm Statista.

Ms Tan says: "The pace of technology is so fast – if people aren't adaptable and driven, it's not sustainable for the company. That's why it's so important for us to invest in people, to get them to grow."

That mindset shows up in how some of her colleagues choose to use their Learning Days. Senior engineer Darren Lai, a self-professed automotive fanatic, originally planned to spend his Learning Days diving into electric vehicle technology.

But these days, the 32-year-old is deep in the world of lossless data compression, a method that reduces file size without losing any data. It is a field more aligned with his current work and one he has grown deeply invested in.

"We're all just so passionate about what we do that we just naturally gravitate towards new things related to our job," Mr Lai says with a laugh.

With room to explore emerging skills, senior engineer Darren Lai finds new ways to develop in his field. PHOTO: DSO NATIONAL LABORATORIES

This singular dedication makes for a very unique environment at DSO that should not be taken for granted, he continues.

For example, Mr Lai's teammates in the Sensors Division come from diverse backgrounds – electrical engineers like himself, as well as mechanical and thermal engineers – each bringing a unique perspective to every project.

"Whenever you suggest something at a meeting, you don't hope for people to just agree with you," Mr Lai says. "In fact, everybody always hopes that somebody will see a problem, point it out, and everyone will put their brains together to try to solve it."

"At the end of the day, we are all trying to make the final product better," says Mr Lai. "That's the whole point of being an engineer – to solve problems."

Tailored paths for every talent

While Learning Days offer space for self-directed growth, DSO also offers structured pathways for employees to deepen their expertise – from fully funded part-time or full-time academic programmes at local institutions, to hands-on secondment opportunities within DSO or with external organisations.

These organisations include Temasek Laboratories at local universities like the National University of Singapore and Nanyang Technological University, or ST Engineering.

Ms Tan opted for a three-year secondment to the Ministry of Defence's Future Systems and Technology Directorate. There, she gained valuable insights into how DSO's emerging technologies would fit into the larger ecosystem of Singapore's defence capabilities.

Stepping into a new environment, she says, is sometimes necessary – not just to gain fresh perspective, but also to break out of the daily routine and spark new ideas.

"Because good employees thrive when sufficiently challenged," she says. "But to manage the right amount of challenge, we need to check in with them regularly."

Those regular check-ins also help managers spot early signs of disengagement and take timely action to support the employee. This can mean easing the workload or switching up the job to reignite interest.

More often than not, it is the latter – because highly motivated individuals tend to disengage when they are faced with tasks that no longer stretch their capabilities.

Surrounded by colleagues from varied disciplines, Mr Lai (first from left) finds fresh perspectives that fuel his curiosity and growth. PHOTO COURTESY OF MR DARREN LAI

Ms Tan says: "Sometimes in the interview room, a job might seem really interesting to an engineer, but after turning some bolts and nuts for a while, he or she might realise that it's not the best fit for them, and their intrinsic motivation starts to fade."

When that happens, her approach is to work collaboratively with the employee to reshape their role in a way that rekindles their interest and drive.

"We'll ask if they'd like to do more design work, focus more on analysis, or even spend less time in the lab," she says.

"Everyone's sweet spot is different – and also changes over time – so we have to put in the work to find it," adds Ms Tan.

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