

Happy to stick to their job for decades

Long-serving housekeepers are uncommon in the cleaning industry, where turnover is high

Theresa Tan

Madam Wong Kim Fong, 73, is marking her 55th year as a housekeeper at Mount Alvernia Hospital – her first and only job, and it is likely to be her last.

The senior housekeeper, who has spent more than half a century cleaning the private hospital in Thomson Road, is its longest-serving staff member. Her late father was a cook at the hospital, which was set up in 1961, and he recommended his then 19-year-old daughter as a housekeeper in 1962.

Madam Wong, who has primary school education, said: “I never thought of looking for another job as the staff here are good. And I’m so used to working here.”

She and three other housekeepers – who have each worked at the hospital for 45 years – are a rarity in today’s job market, where change is relentless and disruption the new reality. This is especially so for the cleaning industry, in which a cleaner who stays with the same firm for 10 years is deemed extraordinary, said Mr Milton Ng, president of the Environmental Management Association of Singapore.

ISS Facility Services managing director Woon Chiap Chan said about a third of its new cleaners do not stay for more than a year. ISS Facility Services, which is one of Singapore’s biggest cleaning firms, employs some 6,000 cleaners.

One reason for the turnover is that many cleaners want to work in the same office but their employer may not win the tender when the cleaning contract is up, so they move to the cleaning firm that wins the tender.

Older Singaporeans new to the cleaning sector may also quit when they find themselves unable to cope with its demands.

Given the low base pay for clean-



Cleaner Wong Kim Fong (centre) started work at Mount Alvernia Hospital 55 years ago, while her colleagues Lim Ah Bee (left) and Tan Kim Yeok have both worked at the hospital for 45 years. They say they are loath to leave their workplace.

ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE

ers, people will move quickly once there is an increment offered elsewhere. Mr Ng said: “People, especially the younger staff, jump ship for \$50 more a month.”

Most cleaners here are hired by cleaning firms, Mr Woon pointed out – unlike Madam Wong and her colleagues, who are employed directly by Mount Alvernia.

Two other housekeepers who have worked at the hospital for 45 years said the generous benefits and good working relations are key to their job longevity. Madam Lim Ah Bee, 67, said of her colleagues: “We have known each other for so long, we are like family. This is like my second home.”

For Madam Tan Kim Yeok, 65, the staff benefits are a big pull. For example, staff can claim up to \$1,000 a year for their medical bills. And owing to her long service, she gets 21 days of annual leave.

Madam Wong started work with

JUMPING SHIP

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MR MILTON NG, president of the Environmental Management Association of Singapore, on cleaners switching jobs.

a monthly salary of \$90 in 1962 but now takes home \$1,888 a month after Central Provident Fund deductions. Both Madam Tan and Madam Lim earn \$1,500 a month.

These salaries and benefits are generous by industry standards.

The median basic wage of Singapore’s full-time cleaners was \$1,100 in 2015. Mr Woon said cleaning firms usually give cleaners between seven and 14 days of leave a

year. He added that after working for 30 to 40 years, cleaners still earn less than \$2,000 a month.

Their low wages are the reason the labour movement’s Tripartite Cluster for Cleaners has pushed for higher pay. From July this year, the basic pay of cleaners hired by cleaning firms will rise by \$200 over three years. After that, it will rise yearly by 3 per cent for three years.

The Mount Alvernia housekeepers plan to work for as long as they can. They work six days a week, for eight hours a shift. Madam Wong’s husband, retired technician Loy Jit Tuen, 73, said: “I have told her to retire but she wants to work. We don’t need the money. We have savings.”

The couple have two daughters and four grandchildren. Their elder daughter, 44, works in a university, while their younger daughter, 40, is a nurse.

In the past 50 years, Madam Wong has hardly taken medical

leave. All the “exercise” involved in cleaning keeps her fit, she said.

Mr Zukifli Abdul Rashid Durai, assistant manager of housekeeping, said: “If she has a cold or is sick, she would still come to work. We have to force her to go home to rest. She’s very responsible and hardworking.”

The housekeepers said cleaning methods and materials have changed over the decades. For example, in the 1960s and 1970s, they had to go on their knees to scrub the floor. Now, they handle a machine that does the scrubbing, which is less tiring for them.

Back then, they used soap and water to scrub the floor. Now there are chemicals to make the job easier.

Mr Zukifli said of the veteran housekeepers: “They are a dying breed in terms of loyalty. You don’t see people working with the same company for 50 years any more.”

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