THE VALUE OF “BEING” AN OLDER PROFESSIONAL

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Introduction
The United Nations has declared 1999 as the International Year of Older Persons (IYOP). This declaration is timely since there will be an increase in the global proportion of the elderly over the next few decades. In Singapore, the Senior Citizens Week held in November 1998 marked the launch of IYOP. The Minister for Community Development, Mr. Abdullah Tarmugi, gave a speech at the launch of IYOP at which he reported that over the next 30 years, Singapore’s population aged 65 years and above will triple from 230,000 to more than 800,000 which is 18 percent of the population. In his message, Mr. Tarmugi stressed that "we must see growing old as offering opportunities for continued development and contribution to society. This will help us to prepare ourselves better for the future" (Tarmugi, 1998).

- Indeed, the very real issues of ageing and its impact on global and national policies and activities require at least an awareness of changing demographics and a change of mindset about older persons in society. To see growing old as offering opportunities for continued development and contribution to society, it is important to significantly reframe perspectives about the characteristics and capacities of older people. Professor Tommy Koh stated that negative expressions such as "old and useless", "old and stupid", "old and senile" and "old and grumpy" should be counteracted with positive expressions such as "old and wise", "old and mature", "old and experienced", and "old and happy" (The Straits Times, 15 November 1998). When older people are seen in a more positive light, not only can their contributions be recognised, but also their capacities be continually developed. In this article, we would like to highlight how perspectives about older professionals within organisations can be reframed so that organisations can honour and develop the capacities and contributions of these individuals who, in turn, can help organisations better prepare themselves for the future.

Life-Long Learning and Older Professionals
Life-long learning is core to professional development. This desire for learning and growth is definitely not off-limits to older professionals. Take the example of Mrs. Chan, an older senior teacher, who received an award for her zestful service to a new centre for the professional development of teachers (The Straits Times, 14 November 1998). Her service to others reflected her ability to continue to contribute to society. Mrs. Chan’s accomplishment is a testament that older professionals can engage in life-long learning and contribute to their professions.

To begin reframing perspectives of older professionals’ position and worth in their organisations, we can start by examining the larger context of contemporary society. We presently live in a post-industrial, information technology age where knowing how to use rather than the acquisition of knowledge, is critical. The immense information and knowledge base available and the rate at which new information replaces the old require a certain level of maturity in handling knowledge for constructive purposes. Amidst such rapid change is the recognition that values form the foundation upon which new information and knowledge are negotiated upon, and that people matured in values need to play a significant role to guide the process of value formation. Such maturity can be found mainly in the experience and insight of those who have lived longer and see the importance of linking the past with the future through learning about and negotiating with the present.

We also live in an interdependent and diverse world where the future rests increasingly on the
cooperation and collaboration of individuals, societies, and nations to work proactively together to build and create a world that represents a willed future (Ozbekhan, 1969) because any worthwhile future depends on people interacting to make it happen (Trist, 1980). As a result, education that seeks to transform thinking and learning about diversity, change and new possibilities has an enormous role in shaping the future. Older professionals in any organisation can play an invaluable part in this type of education to shape the future of their younger members, organisations and society itself. Consider the metaphorical image of the relay runner who has served his or her team in running a race and is ready to pass the baton to the eager, upcoming runner. There is much the experienced runner has learnt from running on the track and as he or she approaches the upcoming runner, the chief concern is that the baton is passed on safely to the fresh runner. For the fresh runner to receive the baton successfully, he or she needs to look back and be poised for the exchange. The performance of the relay team depends ultimately on how each team member puts in effort and training in bestowing the other team members an edge. The baton passing represents the continuance of each person's legacy for the next person.

The Capacities of Older Professionals
Hence, provided that younger professionals are willing to listen to and consider their input, older professionals can play a vital part in and leave a powerful legacy to their organisations by virtue of their experience, maturity and insights. Besides their ability to learn and apply new skills, older professionals can contribute to their organisations in ways that no other age group of professionals can. The specific ways older professionals can contribute lie in their capacity for wisdom, their sense of "being", and being a mentor to others.

The Role of Wisdom
- Scheffler (1985) defined wisdom in terms of its major constituents - foresight, vision and value - which are arrived at through living longer and experiencing more of life. Foresight can only be granted through the amount of hindsight that one has. Older professionals have the natural advantage of greater hindsight simply because they have more experiences to reflect upon. Having seen more of life, their vision can be more solidly grounded in realism simply because their values have had the chance to be clarified and firmly espoused. Having live longer, older professionals have the capacity to be more attuned to the patterns of change that affect organisations. Their wisdom in sensing what changes may mean rests not on codifiable knowledge which refers basically to content knowledge such as facts and rules that inform upon knowing and doing. Instead, older professionals, in their wisdom, can represent the path towards embodied knowledge which can simply be described as the unity between knowledge and experience personified in an individual. The focus on embodied knowledge is not so much on knowing or doing but rather on "being".

The Sense of "Being"
In a climate of constant change, Vaill (1996) argues that professionals need to see learning as a "way of being" and to integrate their learning into their very being. The rationale for this argument is that professionals, in encountering rapid and unpredictable change, often find themselves in novel situations that they have never experienced before. Their approach, in these situations, ultimately rests on how they relate to learning. For example, are they self-directed or willing to take risks or believe they are capable in addressing a new problem? These internal beliefs and ideas about self in relation to learning are part of one's being, and calls for intra-personal awareness or knowledge of self in terms of values and beliefs. The stance of learning as a way of being calls for "intra-personal stocktaking" whereby professionals learn to appraise and reference themselves in relation to interpersonal and external organisational concerns. In so doing, professionals can consciously capitalise on personal capacities and even turn personal limitations into something positive for the
organisation. By having a clear idea of themselves, professionals can more effectively align their visions and strategies to people within and outside their organisations (Labovitz & Rosansky, 1997). We would like to argue that older professionals have more personal and professional experiences and time-tested values, and hence a deeper sense of being, from which to appraise and reference themselves in relation to organisational concerns. Older professionals have more embodied knowledge that they can access and reflect upon to mediate the praxis between knowledge and action. Having lived longer and experienced more in life, their sense of being is rooted in a clearer sense of self-identity and personal values.

The Mentor Relationship
If professional development is a shared journey in an organisation, then older professionals can, through their hindsight, foresight and experience, be “embodied reference points” along that journey. With their reference points which unify knowledge and experience, they can well serve as mentors. As mentors, they bring with them the experience of having “run the race well” and seen the “obstacles along the way”. In this way, they can better guide and support younger members within the organisation. With their greater capacity for wisdom and their stronger sense of being, older professionals can be reference points in a mentor relationship to younger professionals in addressing organisational concerns.

Conclusion
Older professionals can definitely play an important role in their organisations in ways that are respectful of their capacities. Indeed, their unique capacities have much value at a time of rapid change. Older professionals can be anchors at a time when the fluctuating and capricious effects of globalisation are felt in organisations worldwide. They serve to remind us to that “being” is ultimately more important than knowing and doing, and prepare all of us for the journey ahead.

References
—, Retired? Then it’s time to start anew. The Straits Times, 15 November, 1998