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Eyed by firms, PAP MPs draw a strict line

Many tapped for directorships as they are seen as adding credibility; all keep public and private sector roles separate

By [M. Nirmala](#)

A PAP MP is such a prize catch for companies that a handful of the more seasoned MPs have between six and 11 directorships under their belts.

A Straits Times poll of 25 MPs, from a list of 45 MPs who are not office holders or labour MPs and can sit on boards, found that almost all had been approached by companies or are already directors.

Four said they had turned down the offers, which can bring in director fees of between \$10,000 and \$70,000 a year.

The MPs and corporate watchers interviewed say that PAP MPs have become much sought after because they are seen by the private sector as people who add credibility to their organisations.

The MPs stressed that they are clear about drawing a strict line between their public and private sector roles.

But some conceded that there is a perception among companies that a PAP MP can open doors.

Said Dr Tan Cheng Bock (MP for Ayer Rajah), who has been Chuan Hup Holdings' non-executive chairman since 1991: 'There are companies that want to make use of us and MPs have to get away from being caught in this situation.

'We must ensure the integrity of the system because we were brought up in this system and we must never let it go down.'

Back in 1991, Dr Tan sought approval from Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong to accept the Chuan Hup Holdings offer.

Mr Goh agreed and advised him to keep his private and public positions separate and not lobby any public officer in the course of business.

Dr Tan said that after that offer, 'two very big companies and plenty of smaller companies' approached him. He turned them down because he was happy helping just one local company turn professional and expand overseas.

Businessman and former Nominated MP Zulkifli Baharudin holds up Dr Tan as an example of a PAP MP who can balance his work as a doctor, an MP and in the corporate world, without compromising his integrity.

Said Mr Zulkifli: 'There is nothing wrong in MPs wanting to go into business, but if the public does not see them showing competence in managing their public life and business interests, the image of the party is going to be affected.'

PM Goh, noting that PAP MPs are increasingly serving as directors of companies, updated earlier guidelines on MPs getting involved in business and a copy was made public yesterday.

One reason for the rising demand for these MPs has been a bumper crop of companies going for public listing.

Last year's initial public share offerings put a squeeze on the supply of independent directors. Companies began training their sights on not just lawyers and accountants, who are traditional popular choices, but also PAP MPs, given their party's high premium on competence and integrity.

Names that have popped up in more than one of last year's new listings as independent directors include former MP Chng Hee Kok and accountant Sitoh Yih Pin, adviser to Potong Pasir's grassroots groups who was the PAP's candidate there in the last general election.

Another reason for PAP MPs' popularity is the growing phenomenon of companies taking their operations regional. The MPs are seen as capable of leading the charge overseas because of their familiarity with regional issues.

Among the PAP MPs, Bukit Timah MP, Dr Wang Kai Yuen, figures among Singapore's busiest independent directors as he has a board seat on 11 publicly-listed firms.

The companies range from small ones like printing firm Xpress Holdings to public transport giant ComfortDelgro Corporation.

The MP, who holds down a full-time job as managing director of Xerox Software, said he would have ended up with more directorships if he had not rejected other requests.

Like him, Mr Ong Kian Min, an MP for Tampines GRC and a lawyer in private practice, is also an independent director in 11 publicly-listed firms, including Osim and BreadTalk.

Even first-term MPs, such as Dr Amy Khor (Hong Kah GRC), Miss Penny Low (Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC), Madam Cynthia Phua (Aljunied GRC) and Mr Ahmad Khalis Abdul Ghani (Hong Kah GRC), were approached by companies but they turned them down.

Said Dr Khor: 'I have my job and I have to look after my constituents and three kids.' -- Additional reporting by Azrin Asmani and Wee Li-En