Most firms unaware of role of social enterprises: survey

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By: Benjamin Aw

RAISING the profile of social enterprises is key to improving the sector, a survey of 155 companies here has found.

Social enterprises - businesses fundamentally driven by a social mission - can boost their visibility through roadshows, corporate link-ups, industry accreditation and social media, recommended the team of students from the National University of Singapore (NUS) Business School who were behind the survey.

The survey, which was commissioned by the Social Enterprise Association (SE Association) and conducted on senior executives and executives influencing corporate social responsibility (CSR) operations, found that 86 per cent of respondents were unable to name a single social enterprise correctly, and that 75 per cent of respondents incorrectly believed that encouraging staff to do community work was an objective common to social enterprises.

"Today, there is still an unclear understanding of what social enterprises and their roles are," said Melvin Teng, one of the students involved in the survey.

The survey also found that 49 per cent of respondents belonged to companies that were willing to provide in-kind and monetary support to social enterprises, through ways such as purchasing their goods and services and providing funding and donation.

Going one step further in supporting social enterprises is law firm Olswang Asia, which has over the past four months partnered agriculture social enterprise Edible Gardens in providing legal, accounting, and manpower support.
Said Elle Tood, partner of Olswang Asia, of the collaboration: "I wanted something where we could have a more involved relationship, something different that other corporations weren't doing."

The two companies were brought together by SE Association's Social Enterprise Partner Programme.

Accepting the recommendations of the team, Gillian Koh, board member of SE Association, noted that a lack of understanding of what a social enterprise is may have led to a lack of support from corporations.

"I think there are a lot of things we can work on," said Dr Koh. "Any help is very valuable, as long as it helps to build that ecosystem that we are striving towards."

Said Marcus Lim, co-founder of water sanitation social enterprise Ecosoftt: "I hope to see us moving to the stage where there is a symbiotic relationship between social enterprises and corporations."