

Addressing the Needs of the Furniture Industry – The Furniture Learning Institute

SINGAPORE, 29 January 2004 - In February 2003, the Singapore Furniture Industries Council (SFIC) launched its strategic blueprint for its industry's future growth as a result of the Furniture Industry Capability Upgrading Programme (ICAP). The Furniture ICAP recommended six major strategic thrusts for the Singapore furniture industry and one clear direction was to introduce a Furniture Learning Institute (FLI) to address the industry's needs in areas of professional and skills development; and in the long term, develop a knowledge-driven furniture industry for Singapore.

The need for such an institute is apparent as the furniture industry today is confronted with many challenges. The greatest challenge come from more discerning and sophisticated customers demanding and expecting more in terms of higher sophistication, better quality, lower prices, and impeccable customer service. Therefore, the furniture industry must train its workforce to meet the customers' expectations.

Another challenge is the ever-present, intense competition from the global marketplace. European and American competitors are developing more sophisticated, higher quality products with the latest designs. Asian competitors from emerging countries are manufacturing at lower cost than Singapore, and threatening to capture greater market shares through low-pricing strategies. The industry's workforce must become more versatile, knowledgeable, and productive in order to create higher value-added contribution to the industry, so that the industry remains competitive.

Moreover, there is unbridled potential in several high value niche market sectors, such as eco-furniture, ergonomic furniture, contract manufacturing, interior design, and high-end lifestyle furniture products. The range of furniture products manufactured by local companies in these markets is extensive and many companies are well suited to supply these high value niche export markets. These manufacturers require short production runs and quick turn around times. They require a knowledgeable workforce that has strong design capabilities, ingenuity, adaptability and responsiveness to the changes and demands in the economy.

The SFIC believes that the launch of the FLI will enable the development of a workforce that can contribute and help the industry meet the challenges and tap the opportunities ahead. The FLI has the leadership role in leading the industry to higher levels of academic and skills achievement and therefore adding to the economic capability and sustainability of the Singapore furniture industry.

Consistent improvements therefore have to be made to nurture the furniture market in Singapore. Tomorrow's competition can only be overcome if the Singapore furniture industry demonstrates visionary strength and takes progressive-and-measurable steps to shape the future. Visionary foresight is imperative if we want to survive and thrive in the global market. The FLI will ensure that the industry in Singapore remains ahead of the others by creating the conditions for a profitable, increasingly internationalised and competitive furniture industry through training.

'In light of the keen competition which all furniture industry players face, I am confident that this institute will be of great value to the furniture sector as the courses and programmes will be tailored to the furniture industry's specific requirements,' says Mr. James Koh, President of the SFIC.

Supported by SPRING Singapore and the Singapore Workforce Development Agency, the institute's mission is to increase participation in structured training within the industry and to develop and maintain an internationally competitive, highly skilled workforce to power the Singapore furniture industry to global standards.

The objectives of the institute are:

- To develop new training structures and systems for the industry to meet its present and future needs;
- To promote human resource investment among industry players with a focus on training and development; to represent the interests of the industry at a national level on training issues;

- To administer structured training courses on the industry's behalf and to provide support services to the industry on training issues and,
- To train 30% of the industry workforce or 3,300 rank-and-file staff (GCE 'A' level and below) within 3 years.

The institute will focus on a few key areas.

- Firstly, it will display excellence in providing the industry with a framework and the necessary support systems which will make available opportunities for young industry players to come into the industry and perform with high skill standards.
- Secondly, the FLI will also assist the industry to develop a competitive strategy involving upskilling, supervisory and management capabilities. Key focus will include:-
- Design capability development to create leading edge products. This strategy will be embraced by the FLI to improve export potential and competitiveness.
- Professional development to strengthen supervisors and management within the industry with the necessary knowledge-tools and soft-skills for sound management and leadership. This will propel our companies forward to achieve their medium-to-long term goals.
- Technical development to upskill our production workforce so that effectiveness and efficiency on the production line is achieved. This will ensure that we not only produce faster, but better. It will further allow our workers to continue to be employable in this technological surging era.

At commencement, customized certifiable programmes that will be offered include: effective communication, warehouse management and operations, delivery skills, visual merchandising, furniture product knowledge and many others. "The main focus of these courses is to ensure that in-service workers keep current and thus would not be made redundant. Appropriate and timely training must therefore be provided to equip in-service workers with new knowledge and skills to meet changing job requirements," said Mr Neo Sia Meng, Chairman of the Furniture Learning Institute.

With the aim of helping members to train and re-skill its furniture workforce, a sum of \$300,000 has been allocated under the SFIC 2nd Member Assistance Scheme to the 'Employee Training Relief Fund'. This fund from the SFIC will serve to help members relief temporary replacement costs when staff are being sent to the FLI for training. With this relief fund, more employers will embrace training and regard it as fundamental in order to achieve a significant increase in productivity and efficiency within the workforce.

The FLI's mid term goal within the next 3 to 6 years will focus on more specialised, certifiable, knowledge-based courses for the furniture industry. The SFIC is currently looking into extending services to the region and collaborating with overseas institutions on training, research and development. These plans, which are currently in the pipeline, will be announced at a later date.

About SFIC

Singapore Furniture Industries Council (SFIC) was established in 1981 as the official representative body of Singapore's furniture industry. It currently represents 95% of furniture manufacturers in Singapore, 65% of whom have subsidiary manufacturing plants in the region; including Malaysia, Indonesia, China, Vietnam, and Myanmar. Its primary roles include promoting the interests of its members and the Singapore furniture industry, facilitating members' exposure to the world market, creating more entrepreneurs through human resource development, developing local talents, creating more leading-edge and award-winning designs by organising events such as the annual FDA (Furniture Design Award), forging strategic partnerships with government and trade-related agencies, harnessing technology and knowledge for growth through the use of information technology.

About Furniture ICAP

After one year of exhaustive research, surveys, and planning, in February 2003, the Singapore Furniture Industries Council (SFIC) launched its strategic blueprint for its industry's future growth as a result of the Furniture Industry Capability Upgrading Programme (ICAP).

The spirit of ICAP encourages Singapore furniture companies, through the SFIC, to forge a common vision and identify the long-term business model for the industry. ICAP will result in the development of appropriate strategies and action plans to address the capability and skill gaps to ensure the industry's future growth.

Furniture ICAP has the following six major strategic thrusts:

1. Grow and expand business globally
2. Raise design standards
3. Establish a Furniture Learning Institute
4. Establish an International Furniture Trade Centre
5. Immediate Measures to assist industry players
6. Develop and maintain industry growth profile

The SFIC has several on-going programmes and activities under these six major strategic thrusts, including the 2nd Member Assistance Scheme, the Furniture Design Awards, the Furniture Design Forum, the Singapore Furniture Industry Awards, participation at major overseas trade exhibitions, overseas trade missions, and the International Furniture Fair Singapore / ASEAN Furniture Show. The SFIC will be launching several more programmes and activities under these six major strategic thrusts within the next eighteen months.