Safety nets touted as infra job-creation engine stalls

By Chloe Mari A. Hufana
Reporter

THE government should address the negative trend in employment by expanding social safety nets and redeploying workers to "green" jobs, labor advocates said.

They said the job creation being counted on from infrastructure could be stalling with the Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH) paralyzed by internal investigations and staff upheaval in the wake of the flood-control corruption scandal.

Benjamin B. Velasco, an assistant professor with the University of the Philippines School of Labor and Industrial Relations, said the flood-control investigations will result in job losses for construction workers.

"On the other hand, tolerating massive graft also has negative labor market impacts," he said via Facebook Messenger.

The Philippine Statistics Authority reported on Wednesday that the jobless rate hit a three-year high in July at 5.3%, with agriculture jobs taking the biggest hit in the wake of the heavy July rains. Flooded fields led farmers to switch to construction jobs to make ends meet, though that industry could soon be facing its own slowdown due to the corruption probes.

"Ghost projects mean no actual work is done and no jobs are created," Mr. Velasco added.

President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr., during an inspection of flood control projects worth billions of pesos in August, discovered that many of the promised structures were either defective or nonexistent.

Mr. Velasco urged the government to cushion displaced workers through social protection measures, including unemployment insurance via the Social Security System, while accelerating a shift toward sustainable employment.

"(The government should) ensure a just transition and alternative jobs in building public transport facilities and leading the shift to renewable energy through solarization and windmills," he said.

The 5.3% jobless rate in July was equivalent to 2.59 million jobless workers, up from 2.38 million a year earlier and 1.95 million in June.

The July reading matched the jobless rate from August 2022. In June 2022, unemployment hit 6%.

FULL STORY
Read the full story by scanning the QR code with your smartphone or by typing the link <tinyurl.com/24f6rx4v>

OPINION

On free meals at work

Some companies offer workers free breakfast and even buffet lunches. I don't understand this practice. Why can't they simply raise salaries? Could you help me make sense of this policy? — Black Lotus.

IN THE WORKPLACE
REY ELBO

The idea of providing free meals is a recruitment and retention strategy adopted by Silicon Valley. Such strategies have also been justified as a motivational tool, ensuring loyalty and productivity.

Free food may look like corporate generosity, but it's not. Rather, it's a practice that can't be easily copied by competitors. Google, for one, offers almost everything, including vegan dishes and energy-boosting smoothies.

By keeping their employees onsite, Google minimizes lunch-hour escapes that eat into working hours. A study by ezCater's Food for Work Report 2024 found that employees receiving free meals at work can save more than 30 minutes per working day. Multiply that across thousands of workers, and you'll understand the value of hot meals as a smart investment.

In the Philippines, such trends have trickled down to certain BPOs in Metro Manila and other industries. Companies like Transcom offer free meals to employees with perfect attendance through its "Rewards Card" system. This improves retention in an industry notorious for attrition rates as high as 40%.

Outside of the BPO industry, EEI Corp., a major construction firm, spends P580 million annually on free meals for workers.

Japanese companies based in the Philippines also offer free meals, but take a different approach. One electronics manufacturer gives the equivalent of P2,000 as a monthly meal allowance per worker, which is administratively easy to do.

One electronic components factory with more than 3,000 workers spends about P30 per meal for lunch, in addition to free coffee during breaks. A Japanese mobility company used to give free unlimited rice to more than 2,000 regular workers until the practice was discontinued due to waste.

They replaced it with a meal allowance of P175 per person for every eight hours of work. That means P3,500 allowance for a minimum of 20 working days per month.

In all these, the underlying message is simple. Well-fed workers make fewer mistakes. In industries where precision matters, a good meal is cheaper than rework or accidents.

POWER PRINCIPLES

The offerings of these Philippine-based companies may not be as glamorous as Silicon Valley sushi, but the power principle is the same — to keep their workers healthy, energized, and physically present all the time. For many people, free meals or cash allowance represent a meaningful financial cushion.

A free or subsidized lunch is money saved, which adds up over time. That's a form of financial wellness. So, why would companies spend millions feeding their people instead of simply raising salaries? The answer lies in the following:

One, improved labor productivity. Employees who don't waste time commuting or even walking some distance for food are more focused. In situations where every second counts, like customer service or assembly lines — time saved is money earned.

Two, cultural engagement. Meals create communal spaces. In the Philippines, where *"salo-salo"* (food sharing) is cultural, communal eating builds a family-like atmosphere, akin to the traditional practice of laying out a single, bountiful spread of food and eating on banana leaves.

Three, talent magnet. Free meals make a difference for job applicants. It's an attractive perk for both fresh graduates and seasoned professionals. For millennials and Gen Z workers, who prefer enriching work experiences over cash, enjoying free meals signals the employer's dynamism.

Four, health is wealth. Companies that control the menu can influence healthier choices, reducing sick days. A balanced diet beats unhealthy instant noodles and dried fish. And while offering free unlimited rice is attractive, a healthier option might be one free cup and a subsidized second cup.

Five, cost-effective loyalty. Free meals may actually cost less than frequent salary hikes. For example, providing lunch for P100 daily adds up to P2,200 monthly per employee. Compare that with across-the-board salary increases, which become part of fixed payroll obligations, like bonuses.

RISKS AND REALITIES

But not all is gravy. There's a fine line between providing free meals as a genuine benefit and using it as a solution for deeper issues. Employees may appreciate the perk, but if workloads are unbearable, managers are toxic, or salaries become stagnant, no amount of free *adobo* and *kare-kare* will solve morale problems.

What matters is the intent — showing employees they are valued beyond spreadsheets.

Free meals keep people healthier, happier, and loyal. They reduce downtime, encourage collaboration, and help companies stand out in the talent market. Because sometimes, the best way to feed a company's bottom line is to first feed its workers.

Join our Oct. 17, 2025 public workshop on "How to Detect and Investigate Employee Fraud." For details, e-mail **operations@reyelbo.consulting** or register via ***https://reyelbo.com/contact-us***

ACEN honored with two prestigious HR Asia Awards, strengthening its position as an employer of choice

ACEN's Chief Human Resources Officer JP Orbeta (left) and Group General Counsel Dodjie Lagazo (center) accepted the recognition during the awarding ceremony at the Marriott Grand Ballroom.

ACEN, the listed renewable energy company of the Ayala group, has been recognized with two distinguished accolades at the HR Asia Best Companies to Work for in Asia Awards 2025, held at the Marriott Grand Ballroom in Manila.

For the second consecutive year, ACEN has received the HR Asia Best Companies to Work for in Asia Award, a recognition program that honors organizations across Asia for outstanding HR practices, high employee engagement and excellent workplace cultures. The award is based on employee feedback and independent assessments, underscoring ACEN's continued commitment to being an employer of choice.

Adding to this milestone, ACEN was also awarded the HR Asia Sustainable Workplace Award, a special category given only to 10 to 15 organizations each year. This distinction highlights ACEN's unwavering commitment to environmental responsibility and sustainable business practices, as well as its leadership in fostering a culture of sustainability and eco-innovation that creates a positive impact on both the environment and society.

This year, ACEN proudly shares the honor with 48 other distinguished corporations across industries, among them are fellow Ayala companies Globe Telecom, GCash, and Ayala Property Management Corporation (APMC).

The awards are determined through the Total Engagement Assessment Model (TEAM) survey, which included participation from ACEN employees across the head office and operating units. This was complemented by an audit presentation that highlighted the company's breakthroughs in its HR Centers of Excellence (COE), HR business partner practice, and HR Shared Services — particularly in technological empowerment initiatives such as the implementation of a new HR Information System (myHR) last year.

A testament to ACEN's culture

JP Orbeta, ACEN's Chief Human Resources Officer, expressed pride in the company's achievement: "These awards are a powerful affirmation of our belief that together, we unlock more — for ourselves, our communities, and our planet. To be recognized as one of Asia's best workplaces for the second consecutive year, and now as a sustainable workplace, tells us that our people feel valued, empowered, and inspired to drive meaningful change. We will continue to create an environment where our people can thrive, innovate, and lead the energy transition with purpose."

These recognitions affirm ACEN's strong workplace culture and dedication to sustainability, while further energizing the company to build a more inclusive, purpose-driven, and future-ready workplace where more is always possible.