

BY XINSHU DONG

INNOVATION IN THE LION CITY

Emerging technologies are shaping the future of entrepreneurship in Singapore

DESPITE being a relatively young nation with a population of just 5.6 million people, Singapore has evolved to become a vibrant startup hub in the region as much as on the global stage, with its prime geographical location a gateway to high-growth markets such as China and India.

On average, over 50,000 new businesses are formed in the city-state each year. According to the Singapore Department of Statistics, the number of tech startups in the country has been rising, from 2,800 in 2003 to 4,300 in 2016.

In addition, a Bain & Company study in 2017 found that the number of recorded venture capital deals in Singapore rose to 524, quadrupling the number recorded in 2012. This is undoubtedly a contributor to the exponential growth in Singapore's tech ecosystem, giving investors more reason to expand into emerging technologies such as blockchain.

With well-established global connections, advanced information technology (IT) infrastructure, abundant investment opportunities and a robust regulatory regime, Singapore is without a doubt an ideal place for businesses and startups to flourish.

Coupled with the Singapore government's enterprise-friendly approach, supported by many benefits such as tax incentives for local startups and entrepreneurs and heavy capital investments in the technology sector, the nation's

forward-looking position towards innovation continues to attract startups and emerging technology to its shores.

FROM GRANTS TO GROWTH

In order to develop a dynamic and favourable startup ecosystem, sufficient government and institutional support is essential to cultivating aspiring entrepreneurs and helping their ventures succeed. Presently, Singapore already offers a wide variety of grants, subsidies and incubator programmes to support entrepreneurs, startups and budding businesses.

For example, Startup SG is an umbrella initiative that brings together an array of schemes aimed at enabling startups and new businesses to grow. These include the Startup SG Founder programme, which supports entrepreneurs through mentorship and grants; Startup SG Tech for more tech-specific businesses to expedite the development of their proprietary solutions; and Startup SG Talent which promotes talent attraction and development.

The government has also been developing and introducing additional initiatives to support the startup community and guide their direction of growth. The recent Budget 2019 announced the launch of new initiatives offered to startups in Singapore, ranging from opportunities for mentorship, foreign alliances, financing schemes, and skills training programmes for the existing workforce.

Government agency Enterprise SG is championing enterprise development through various grant

programmes, loans, tax incentives, and investments as well as non-financial support such as business tool kits and skills development initiatives.

With its progressive approach to emerging economic and technological trends, Singapore has steadily become a haven for blockchain development. The Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS) has proven itself to be accepting and willing to engage with emerging technologies, adopting an open legal framework for blockchain and cryptocurrency.

Last year, the MAS and the Singapore Exchange (SGX) announced a collaboration with Anquan Capital, Deloitte and Nasdaq to explore safe and efficient trading across different blockchain platforms. The Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA) also launched a Blockchain Challenge to provide seed funding to budding projects and promote the development of blockchain solutions beyond fintech.

While grants may provide financial support, incubators offer professional mentoring and business resources that are conducive to a startup's growth. Tribe Accelerator, the nation's first government-backed blockchain accelerator by locally-based venture capital firm Trive Ventures, recently added 10 startups to its pilot programme, half of which were founded in Singapore. By helping these blockchain projects fast-track their product development and encouraging the adoption of blockchain solutions in the wider market, such accelerator programmes can promote greater awareness

of the everyday uses of blockchain, propelling the industry forward in the long run.

Furthermore, as a way to advance the industry from within, Singapore-based projects are also engaging with the blockchain ecosystem by offering support and funding to budding projects and developers. For example, Zilliqa's Ecosystem Grant Programme was launched to encourage the development and adoption of applications that are built on our platform.

NURTURING TOMORROW'S INNOVATORS

On top of proactive government and institutional support, Singapore's progressive academic environment has likewise been embracing the nascent technology by offering more courses and workshops in blockchain, giving the nation an edge against competing markets.

Furthermore, universities in Singapore have also been exploring the inclusion of blockchain into their curricula. For example, the National University of Singapore's Cryptocurrency, Strategy, Techniques and Algorithms Centre (CRYSTAL Centre) supports the development of projects and protocols from the theoretical aspect, having actively partnered and worked with some of the leading projects in Singapore's burgeoning blockchain scene.

By cultivating a skilled talent pool, Singapore-based businesses will have the opportunity to position themselves at the forefront of technological innovation and expertise. However, aside from imparting skills and knowledge, I believe that it is also important for academic institutions to cultivate an entrepreneurial mindset in their students – people who can innovate, think outside of the box, and be willing to take risks and try new things.

By developing education initiatives that teach entrepreneurship as a subject at local universities, students will have access to the necessary resources and tools to explore their own entrepreneurial ventures. For instance, Singapore Management University (SMU) offers a range of programmes for those who want to explore starting their own businesses, from an academic major in entrepreneurship to business incubation programmes for students.

Going beyond degree-level education, I think that the key to giving our future generations an enterprising edge is starting young; and in this, SMU has launched the Youth Innovation Challenge. This entrepreneurship challenge is targeted at fostering innovation from a younger age and is open to students from secondary schools, polytechnics, junior colleges and the Institute of Technical Education.

While great education provides us with a solid foundation, theoretical knowledge alone is not enough for a person to succeed in the real world. Students need adequate mentorship, opportunities to showcase their entrepreneurship, and room to explore hands-on applications of their skills.

This is especially so for blockchain, as the ecosystem thrives on bold risk-takers and innovators – creative thinkers who are willing to try different things and think of new ways to apply their knowledge in a very nascent space.

BRIDGING THE GAP

With its location at the crossroads of Asia's biggest markets, it is no wonder that more and more businesses are choosing to set up their regional headquarters in Singapore. According to data from Singapore's Economic Development Board,

59 per cent of technology multinational corporations have regional headquarters based in Singapore.

Singapore recently revised the guidelines for its Entrepreneur Pass, making it even easier for foreign entrepreneurs to expand to the region and further adding variety to the country's startup community. As a whole, both diversity and global connectivity is especially important for Singapore, due to the size of its domestic market.

To strengthen Singapore's connections to major innovation hubs around the world, the Global Innovation Alliance (GIA) was launched in 2017 in a bid to create more opportunities for students, entrepreneurs and businesses to gain overseas experience, connect and collaborate with their overseas counterparts.

Singapore has also signed 24 free trade agreements with several nations including the US, EU, Asean and China, making trade across borders simple and hassle-free. The presence of global companies and educational institutions also enables Singapore to leverage these relationships to promote cross-border entrepreneurial efforts.

Startups are an integral part of Singapore's digital economy that will continue to keep us vibrant and competitive. As a small island nation, it is imperative for us to embrace innovation to stay relevant internationally – particularly in emerging industries such as blockchain. As long as we continue to stay up-to-date and open to new business opportunities, and pursue new breakthroughs in technology to support the growing industry, Singapore will be able to remain appealing and maintain its edge as both a regional and global hub. ■

The writer is the co-founder of Zilliqa

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SmartSIP 10

\$188 /month
10 Channels + 10 DDIs

FREE

- + Unlimited Incoming Calls
- + 1000 Mins Outgoing Local Calls
- + Caller Number Display
- + SmartUC Mobile (Over 2 DDIs)

Waiver of One-Time Charge (worth \$995.10)

- + Setup Charge
- + Number Port-In
- + DDI Number Activation
- + Caller Number Display Activation



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