

Sowing the Seeds of Startup Growth

Almost a decade into nurturing startups in Singapore, the Action Community for Entrepreneurship (ACE) is charting a new direction that will give aspiring entrepreneurs improved access to the resources and networks needed to build successful and sustainable businesses.

Thinking about starting a business? According to the World Bank's latest Ease of Doing Business Index, Singapore is one of the best places in the world to do so. Not only does Singapore rank first overall for ease of doing business, it also comes in fourth globally for ease of starting a business. While this may sound like startup heaven, ACE still believes that more can be done to support entrepreneurs and grow successful new businesses here.

Laying the foundation

Since its formation in 2003, ACE has had a significant impact on the entrepreneurial landscape in Singapore. Key areas of focus have included improving the financing options available to startups and SMEs and working with the Pro-Enterprise Panel to review and simplify close to 1,000 rules and regulations. Furthermore, ACE initiatives such as the First Mover Framework have sought to provide innovative business ideas with an advantage in order to maximise the use of public assets. These efforts have resulted in positive changes for startups – a recent study by the US-based Milken Institute ranked Singapore fourth out of 122 countries and second in Asia for providing capital access to entrepreneurs.

ACE's outreach efforts, through its entrepreneurs and volunteers, have also spread the "startup spirit" to more than 60,000 students through talks and workshops to date. This has resulted in a noticeable change in the way that Singaporean students view entrepreneurship. A recent Global University Entrepreneurial Spirit Students' survey revealed that almost 80% of local students indicated that they intend to start their own businesses.

A new direction

Yet ACE has made it clear that it will not rest on its laurels. As Minister of State for Trade and Industry and ACE Chairman,



ACE's outreach efforts have spread the "startup spirit" to more than 60,000 students through talks and workshops. Almost 80% of local students indicated that they intend to start their own businesses.

Mr Teo Ser Luck (above), explains, there is a need to refocus ACE's efforts to reflect the changes and achievements of the past nine years.

"When ACE was formed almost a decade ago, the focus was on areas like financing, rules and regulations, internationalisation and fostering a culture of entrepreneurship. This has over the years helped to create a pro-enterprise environment, and a culture that is more receptive towards entrepreneurship. Going forward, we will focus more on helping individual aspiring entrepreneurs to start their companies and guide them to become sustainable businesses."

This new direction will focus ACE's efforts on supporting startups from conception to beyond the startup phase. "While we will be providing seed funding, our main focus is to link entrepreneurs to critical resources beyond funding, such as mentorship and networks," says Mr Teo. "These will make a difference to whether they succeed and create better jobs for Singaporeans." And with SMEs employing seven out of 10 workers in Singapore, it is indeed critical that new companies develop in such a way that they can offer not just jobs, but ones that are sought after and of good quality.

Five ways forward

To better serve the needs of entrepreneurs and startups, ACE has identified five areas of focus, each with its own dedicated

Sub-Committee to drive its efforts. To help startups find their feet and develop into sustainable businesses, the Mentoring Sub-Committee aims to provide entrepreneurs with access to valuable advice and knowledge through regular contact with experienced mentors. The goal is to accelerate startup growth in terms of scale and market value. "As mentors, we are given the opportunity to share our knowledge, expertise and philosophy, as well as the experience gained over the course of running our own businesses," says Dr Steven Fang, Group CEO of Cordlife Ltd, ACE Deputy Chairman and also Mentoring Sub-Committee Chairman. "Apart from sharing expertise, mentors will also be able to share their contacts and networks to help startups in business building."



Mr Clinton Ang (left) and Dr Steven Fang

Closely connected to Mentoring is the second focus – Networking – which aims to provide suitable platforms for startups to network with fellow entrepreneurs, potential investors, mentors, customers and partners. "We want to build a community for people to initiate formal and informal networks to drive innovation and entrepreneurship," says Mr Teo. "This is an important part of the overall ecosystem to support and promote entrepreneurship."

The ACE Networking Sub-Committee Chairman is Mr Clinton Ang, Managing Director of Hock Tong Bee Pte Ltd. A fervent believer in the power of networking, he says, "It's not just what you know, but who you know! I encourage all aspiring entrepreneurs to get involved in the startup community – be proactive and take the initiative to be in the know."

Networking is of particular importance when a company starts to venture overseas. New markets, new cultures and new partners can be a challenge to even the best prepared entrepreneurs. To help, ACE's third focus – Overseas Chapters – aims to replicate at least some parts of what ACE does in overseas markets, providing startups with a ready pool of connections and resources to tap as they look beyond Singapore's shores.



ACE's first Overseas Chapter will be set up in Beijing and eventually rolled out to other cities, providing startups with a ready pool of connections and resources.

Mr James Tan, ACE Overseas Chapters Sub-Committee Chairman and Co-founder of 55tuan.com, explains: "The size of Singapore's domestic market means that going global is a natural and necessary step for companies that want to grow. We also recognise that sometimes an idea that might not work in Singapore might work overseas given the right ingredients. Each ACE Overseas Chapter will provide a platform – a wok – for the sprinkling of these ingredients. We hope that this results in many good dishes!"

"The first Overseas Chapter will be set up in Beijing and, like a startup, we will iterate and perfect the model as we move along and eventually roll it out to other cities."

The fourth area is ACE Startups, which replaces the youth-focused YES! Startups scheme, and provides aspiring Singaporean entrepreneurs with funding support. It offers grant support of up to \$50,000 to help entrepreneurial individuals take the first step in starting and building new, differentiated businesses.

"The new scheme now opens the grant to all Singaporeans who have a brilliant business idea and are looking to start a business for the first time," says Mr Sim Choon Siong, the ACE Startups Sub-Committee Chairman and SPRING Singapore's Director of Entrepreneurship Development. "Any Singaporean with a good, differentiated business idea, the dream to make it big, and the drive to execute it can apply for this grant."

Increasing awareness and changing mindsets

The fifth area of focus is Communications – reaching out to all Singaporeans to promote entrepreneurship and a greater awareness of what ACE can do to help startups. "The entrepreneurship scene locally is very different from what it was when ACE first started," says ACE Communications Sub-Committee Chairman, Mr Prakash Somosundram, who is also Social Media Director at Yolk Pte Ltd. "Currently there are many competitions, platforms and publications that are dedicated to the startup community. We are looking at galvanising the current resources available in the ecosystem to work better and to amplify the message and ACE's capabilities, taking them to a whole new level."



Mr Prakash Somosundram (left) and Mr Sim Choon Siong

To achieve this, ACE will undergo a brand refresh, as well as develop a communication plan to reach out to a wider audience, especially with the youth, says Mr Somosundram. "One of the big plans is to evolve the website from being purely informational to something that would become a hub for startups. In a nutshell we are looking at bringing ACE into the social media age to catalyse a whole new movement of change."

And change is what will be required to develop a truly vibrant startup sector in Singapore, says Mr Teo. "We want to inspire a diversity of Singaporeans to come forward and pursue entrepreneurship, to encourage people to be risk takers and to think differently. One of the problems today is that we tend to look at obstacles before opportunities. So a key objective for ACE is to get people to see the opportunities, think about how they can achieve them, and make them a reality, rather than thinking about what is stopping them."

To find out more about ACE and how it can help you turn your ideas into a new business venture, visit <http://ace.sg>. Learn how two Singapore companies – In Vitro and I Heart Board Games – had successfully leveraged the support available to start and grow their businesses.