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Coronavirus: Vote of confidence for Singapore's adaptability to online work, school

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The business and education continuity plans over the circuit breaker period to cope with the coronavirus pandemic requires the workforce to work from home for most businesses and students to have home-based learning.

Many people wonder whether Singapore can cope with these new and stringent requirements. I shall review the past infocomm technology strategies and plans to assess whether our workers and students are equipped to deal with the new situation.

A Digitalisation Plan for Singapore was developed in 2014 with the objective of making Singapore a Smart Nation. That was followed by the Infocomm Masterplan targeting for 2025 for both the public and private sectors. The aim of the plans was to have productivity growth using IT for all work processes. This would create more higher-skill jobs. The plans also included using IT for supporting an ageing population.

Actions have also been taken under the SkillsFuture programmes to create a digital workforce of local talent. At the same time, Enterprise Singapore drives the digital transformation of enterprises in their business processes, business models and organisation.

As chairman of the governing council of the Singapore Quality Awards given for business excellence, I can observe that an increasing number of companies are interested in digital transformation for business excellence. For many years I have encouraged the council to include digital transformation as one of the criteria for the awards of excellence, which it did.

From my own experience of running a listed company, as chairman of NSL, I have seen that the management has always been conscious of making good use of IT for its work processes. I also chair the company committee of digital transformation to make sure we are up to date in the use of IT.

From the above observations on our efforts to be IT literate, I think our workforce by and large can cope with working from home.

The use of online learning for schools and institutes of higher learning (IHLs) also has a long history. I recall that about 10 years ago, I had a discussion with Dr Cheah Horn Mun, the then director of education technology, Ministry of Education (MOE), on online learning for schools. I was interested because I was then the chairman of the Raffles Institution (RI) board of governors and wished to make sure RI was in line with MOE's requirement. Dr Cheah shared with me the ministry's Master Plan on Self-Directed Learning and Collaborative Learning. The objective was to have a child develop 21st-century competencies to achieve success in the knowledge-based economy. So online learning was very much the target of all schools in Singapore even back then.

The IHLs, too, have adopted online learning for a long time, not so much as a replacement for classroom learning as to complement it, enabling students to benefit from other sources of learning tools. At the same time, it equips students with the lifelong learning ability very much needed later in their lives. This is deemed necessary because work processes change very rapidly due to changes in technology. They need the new know-how. Therefore, the students at the IHLs should have no problem in adopting home-based learning.

As a matter of interest, adoption of online learning in UniSIM (predecessor of the Singapore University of Social Sciences) was mainly due to considerations over learning continuity.

When it was started in 2005, 100 per cent of the students at UniSIM were part-time students who were working adults. They had to cope not only with their learning, but also with their full-time work, family commitments and, for some, frequent overseas job assignments. With such scheduling constraints, it would be difficult to depend entirely on classroom teaching.

As chairman of its board of trustees, I had to drive home the importance of online learning. Professors had to work hard on the change in teaching methods as they were more used to classroom teaching. Furthermore, UniSIM had to depend on about 800 part-time lecturers. We had to ensure they were adequate in conducting online teaching, and we helped them by arranging many training programmes. They had to pass a test to be engaged. On the whole, we were successful in adopting online teaching as the main tool for learning. I was glad that when I retired as chairman in 2014, more than 50 per cent of the courses were conducted by e-learning.

My observations are admittedly limited by my own experience. But having been in education for decades, and with broad exposure to industry and business through board appointments over the years, I dare say I have a unique vantage point from which to say that I am confident Singapore's Smart Nation plan and digitalisation plans for business and education continuity can proceed smoothly. Of course, there will be some teething problems but I believe we can manage them.

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