

Annie Koh

Vice-President – Business Development and External Relations, Associate Professor of Finance Singapore Management University

I DON'T think we want to pip London and New York as a global top spot in terms of being a financial centre or hub. We want to be up there with them and be a key financial centre in Asian time zones.

So Finance Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam's call for finance professionals to be nimble and smart is timely. We need deep knowledge of regional culture and challenges, and also deep industrial knowledge (of trading and maritime finance activities) to complement our strengths in these areas, knowledge of infrastructure projects (power plants, solar energy, roads, ports and cities etc) and the understanding of where growth is coming from the region – growing middle-income wealth and cross-border financing challenges.

Banking and finance is about financing human and corporate activities for the long term – so the ability to work with a cross-border network of central bankers, other regulators and knowledge and understanding of peculiarities (legal, cultural, political) in different regions in diverse regional markets and alignment with global standards and requirements will serve to build Singapore's comparative advantage as a global financial centre. Think London and its role in Europe versus Geneva, Frankfurt and Zurich as regional players linked to London as a global play.

Then Singapore as a financial centre will shine as we work with regional financial centres to meet the unmet needs of the region and link our regional capabilities with global standards. We are at an exciting crossroads in the development of Singapore as a financial centre – and it is no longer enough to tap the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS) or the Institute for Banking & Finance (IBF) alone to make this happen. The rest of the trade and tax and legal ministries and real business are partners to help build competitive edge. A global financial centre links human activities and not just money.

Yeoh On Jin

Executive Chairman PwC Singapore

FOLLOWING the global financial crisis, it is tempting to look to the impact of the global reform agenda to predict the future shape of the financial services industry and how Singapore will fare as a leading global financial centre.

However in our view, the more powerful forces impacting the industry are new technology and demographic megatrends. Innovative digital platforms and customer interfaces, rather than just information technology (IT) being the background infrastructure, will be core to financial institutions' new business models. Providing mobile solutions to reach new market segments and geographies will drive future growth for those who can leapfrog to a new technological model.

With growth in global trade flows shifting to the East and South, Singapore's strategic location and proven agility augurs well for greater dominance in global financial services – but the inertia of the broad and deep talent pools in London and New York must be overcome.

Attracting international skills to Singapore may be part of the answer, but the key to success is encouraging local talent to develop cutting-edge technology, financial and risk expertise alongside the best in the world.

Mark Newman

CEO ING Commercial Banking Asia

HAVING worked in three out of the four financial centres – London, Hong Kong and Singapore – it is clear that Singapore possesses strong fundamentals, despite an absence of a large domestic market.

Singapore largely complements the other financial centres. The country's competitive edge is its ability to work with the global economy, as well as with emerging markets in South-east Asia which are becoming more significant. The region's commitment to establish the Asian Economic Committee (AEC) by 2015 will enhance Singapore's position as the gateway to the South-east Asian countries, further reinforcing its position as a key financial centre. The country also enjoys an unrivalled position as the region's commodity trade hub. Experience in trade finance built up over the years will continue to be Singapore's strategic asset for a place among the top financial centres.

Hughes Delcourt

Country Executive, ABN AMRO Bank NV Singapore and Chief Executive Officer ABN AMRO Private Banking Asia & Middle East

GIVEN its relative size, Singapore is highly competitive as a financial centre as demonstrated by its notable ranking among the top four global financial centres. It has built a dominant position as a regional trade hub and a critical mass of foreign and domestic banks. The country's robust regulation, transparent framework and corporate governance have been key elements of its success as an international financial hub. Regionally, Singapore's status as a safe haven has also nurtured its wealth management industry.

Improving domestic competitiveness is important, but to enhance its long-term prospects, Singapore could look at focusing on external growth opportunities, to leverage on its ability to quickly adapt and move ahead with global consolidation and advances in technology. This includes continuously developing and attracting talent through education and training programmes to support its growth.

On the flip side, soft factors such as Singapore's thriving arts and culture scene and being ranked as one of the most livable cities in Asia are plus points in its aspiration for the global top spot. Singapore should also continue to promulgate policies that support competitive costs of doing business and living as these are critical components in the overall scheme of the top financial centre rankings.

Philip Yuen

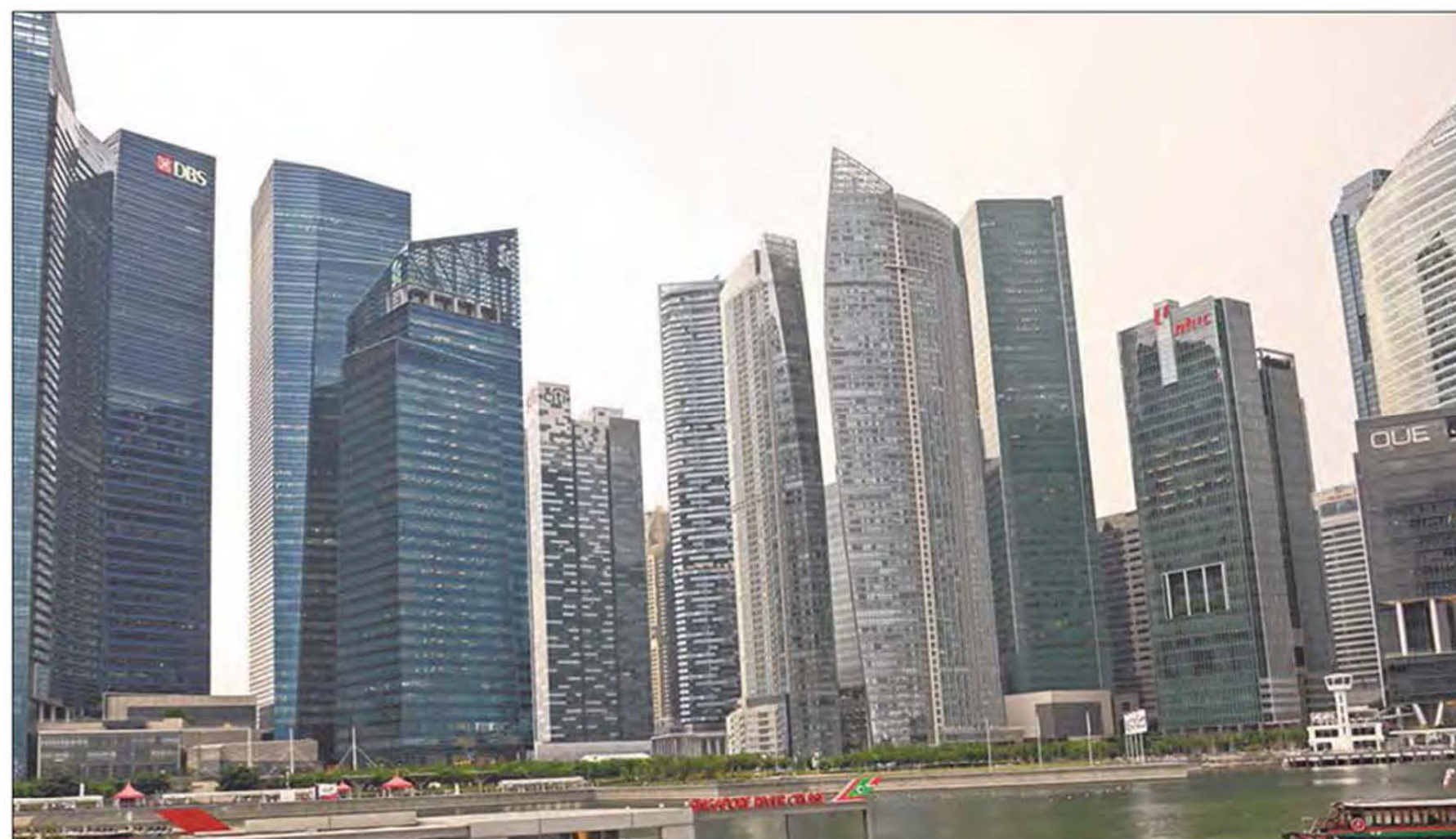
Chief Executive Officer Deloitte Singapore

WITH global financial centres accelerating their play in the world arena, the battle between these centres has become increasingly competitive. Using the incremental benefits approach is no longer proving effective in maintaining competitiveness, and Singapore should place bets around key trends that will impact the global economy. These trends can create interesting spaces and business strategies for Singapore's financial services industry to explore.

THIS WEEK'S TOPIC

How competitive is Singapore as a financial centre? What would it take for Singapore to pip its rivals (particularly Hong Kong, London, New York City) for the global top spot?

Top of the game



FILE PHOTO

In order to harness these opportunities, Singapore should position itself as a financial centre that is in the thick of digital and fintech activity. This activity will no doubt increase with the growing importance to address the needs of trends like the rise of the "uber" economy, where the growth of the middle class results in constrained and shared resources; and where there are different government measures regionally and globally. In addition, the industry should develop innovative and unconventional B2B and B2C financial solutions to cater to the trend of the silver tsunami and meet the financial needs of a rapidly ageing world population.

Alain Reas

Chief Executive, APAC & EMEA Swift

FINANCIAL centres that will prosper will be those that define and leverage clear competitive advantage over others. Singapore has many advantages in terms of delivering world-class financial services, and one of those is the maturity of its payments and messaging processing infrastructure.

In today's rapidly evolving global markets, competitive financial centres need to have a solid, resilient, interoperable and scalable infrastructure to underpin any financial activity. For example, it is in part thanks to the strong financial infrastructure of MAS that Singapore has been able to absorb the growth in yuan transactions that it has seen in recent years. And thanks to use of international standards in this infrastructure, Singapore further elevates its position as a globally accessible financial market.

Added to that, geographically, it is the gateway to the Asian region. We believe that with a financially integrated system, Singapore could build upon its financial infrastructure and use it to enable growth in the regional market, thereby giving itself a competitive edge against other key global financial centres.

Lee Fook Chiew

Chief Executive Officer Institute of Singapore Chartered Accountants

A VIBRANT accountancy sector is a fundamental building block of top financial centres. A trusted and reliable business environment, based on high quality financial reporting, is crucial to being a top financial centre. Investors rely on accountants to ensure the availability of accurate and reliable financial reports that are prepared and audited according to prescribed standards. This information serves as the basis for a wide range of business and investment decisions, and their accuracy and reliability are critical to the efficient operation of capital markets.

To boost Singapore's competitiveness as a global financial centre, we need to bolster the necessary talent, expertise and knowledge base in the accountancy sector, with its plethora of specialist pathways to business and finance. This will enable the accountancy sector to sustain the quality and standards of financial reporting and significantly raise business and market confidence, and to better support the financial sector in Singapore. In this respect, Singapore's goal of developing into a leading global accountancy hub is a step in the right direction, and should be leveraged on in its quest to be the top financial centre in the world.

John Koh

Managing Director WWRM Private Ltd

TO eye the global top spot as a leading financial centre, Singapore would need to address both sides of the equation in terms of talent supply and demand. On the talent supply side, we need to continue developing more professionals to meet the ever-changing needs of the financial industry. Both academia and industry must continue working in tandem to roll out programmes which meet the needs of the industry, and the industry must continue to provide adequate jobs to graduates. MAS has done a great job in engaging with academia

and industry but more needs to be done in designing incentive schemes and mentorship programmes to ensure that we have a continuous supply of strong talent in this area. The IBF and local universities such as SMU, NUS and NTU must continue collaborating at tertiary level so that knowledge and skills are constantly being honed and updated to meet new needs. Concurrently, the polytechnics and ITEs can do more to build up skill levels for entry-level jobs within the financial industry.

The present FICS framework is an excellent tool in promoting standards and certification, and more can be done to ensure a seamless flow of competency standards from our learning institutes to the actual workplace. We must continue to encourage financial institutions to consciously tap Singapore as their key regional learning hubs and to provide assistance for them to do so.

Mark Micallef

Area Vice-President, Asean Citrix Systems

SINGAPORE is home to about 200 banks servicing both local and regional clients. Its stable political environment, excellent infrastructure and highly skilled professional labour force make it an attractive base of operations for global financial organisations – contributing to Singapore's growing role in the global financial sector.

To get to the top spot as a financial centre, Singapore must be able to offer the industry the best work environment to attract and retain the right talent. With the consumerisation of IT, there is a growing demand for Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) and flexible work schemes. Singapore's strong infrastructure network makes it easy for companies to implement mobility strategies such as desktop and app virtualisation, mobile device management and mobile app management that enable employees to work anytime, anywhere on any device. Workplace mobility can help financial organisations based here attract top talent, improve retention rates and increase productivity, while reducing real estate expenditure.

Leong Soo Yee

Head ACCA Singapore

AS a resource-scarce nation, Singapore depends heavily on talent acquisition, development and management to create more opportunities for enterprise while ensuring the country's prosperity. The future of Singapore's progress depends on how we maximise the use of our talents. For Singapore to continue to be an internationally recognised leader among global cities, employers should continue dedicating resources and investing heavily in this area to cultivate talents and to continue to build a strong talent base. Finance professionals should also continue to invest in themselves by expanding their skill-sets so that they are more prepared for what the future can bring.

In particular, as Singapore heads deeper into the 21st century, it is equally important to recognise the implications, challenges and opportunities brought about by new and emerging technologies in our quest to be THE global financial centre of choice for investors.

The world has entered what some regard as an era of "Digital Darwinism" where technology is evolving too fast for many individuals and organisations to adapt to changes. As the rate of change accelerates, accountants and finance professionals – who are active players in any financial centre – need to understand well, embrace and use emerging digital technologies such as big data; new, evolving and emerging Internet-enabled payment platforms; new methods of digital service delivery and the increasing use and acceptance of digital currencies. Singapore's rise to the top will be accelerated with the faster and more widespread use of these new technologies.

A robust and transparent regulatory and business environment, sound governance and ethics, and a strong socio-political environment will also contribute towards Singapore's quest to be an unrivalled global financial centre.

Peter Scott

General Manager, Asia Pacific Avaloq

SINGAPORE has raised the stakes and its status as a serious financial centre in recent years, outstripping the likes of Switzerland as the world's fastest growing wealth management hub, according to recent data. Owing largely to excellent connectivity, a world class information technology (IT) infrastructure and excellent local and foreign workforce, we expect this trend to continue. Consumers across the world – and especially in Asia – are becoming increasingly tech savvy, so it has never been more important for financial institutions to evolve in line with the technological revolution, in order to meet demand and stay ahead of the curve and the competition. The Singaporean government's commitment to strengthening the city-state's positioning as a luminary in technology adoption, which I predict will continue to improve Singapore's ranking as a key financial hub in the future.

Johnny Lu

Managing Director, Asia Pacific GMC Software Technology

WHILE Singapore ranks consistently in the reputation category of the GFCI, it would be beneficial for financial leaders to take a look at how their companies communicate with their stakeholders, specifically their customers and how to improve it. A 2013 survey on corporate reputation indicated that Singapore's banking sector had the best overall reputation, with customer perception having a critical impact on the sector's ranking.

Customer communication management (CCM) enables financial institutions to truly engage with customers, and more importantly, enables customers to interact with financial institutions how, where and when they want, through print, online or via a mobile device, as they wish. In our experience, using a multichannel approach for a highly personalised service can raise customer perception of brands and companies, and allow Singapore to set best standards in the industry.

Chris Mead

Regional Director, Singapore & Malaysia Hays Recruiting Expert Worldwide

MANY employers in Singapore tell us that skill shortages remain an issue, and this is likely to limit its potential to surpass its rivals in financial services. Results from our Hays Global Skills Index published in 2013 showed that a low score for education flexibility (0.8) may negatively impact Singapore's ability to match the skills of graduates with the skills needed in the economy.

A low score in education flexibility indicates that there is considerable scope to expand the output and quality of the local education system. Singapore's score of 0.8 does not compare favourably with Hong Kong (1.7), the UK (4.3) and the US (6.6).

Singapore received a talent mismatch index score of 5.9. This relatively high score means that the numbers of long-term unemployed and vacancies are both increasing, suggesting that the available labour does not have the skills employers want. In comparison, Hong Kong had a score of 4.8.

The government's decision to push companies to consider locals above foreigners is good for the Singapore economy as a whole. However, due to ongoing skills shortages, overseas talents are still needed to fill vacancies where local Singaporeans are in short supply.

Ang Swee Meng, Allen

Group Managing Director Aldon Technologies Services Pte Ltd

SINGAPORE has a world-class infrastructure for financial services comparable to the world's top financial centres. Many of the elements of a global financial centre are in place including a transparent legal system, effective regulatory framework, sound financial institutions, strong banking system, reliable telecommunications services etc. However, there are other areas in which Singapore can improve. These include world-class standards of corporate governance financial reporting, accounting and auditing practices and availability of specialised financial services talents.

Many local companies have joint ventures with overseas partners and trade with partners from many countries. Many have become or aspire to be MNCs. They may need expert advice on cross-border forex, tax and risks issues and compliance with regulations of foreign jurisdictions. Most of the local companies use local banks. I think that in order for Singapore to be the top financial centre in the world, our local banks should build up their technical expertise in financial services so as to be able to advise local companies on complex international financial issues as they spread their wings overseas.

Faisal Rafi

Managing Director Xchanging Singapore

SINGAPORE has established itself as a regional financial hub, as evidenced by the high and growing influx of financial activity and foreign direct investments in recent years. However, in order to become more competitive on a global level, it is essential for Singapore to take the lead by harnessing technology that will allow financial services and industries (FSIs) to attain exceptional performance in aspects crucial to today's financial scene, such as intelligence and compliance.

Intelligence is key in today's data-centric society, and FSIs need to shift beyond legacy systems and adopt technological solutions that enable real-time processing of information. Only by doing so will they be able to harness useful business insights, make well-informed investment decisions, and develop a competitive advantage that gives them an edge above the rest. Also definitive of today's financial scene is the need for regulatory compliance, which can be achieved by engaging the right solutions to maintain and ensure effective adherence to global regulatory standards.

Deploying the right technology enables direct end-to-end processing and traceability of financial transactions – thus eliminating the need for large back-offices and ultimately driving greater speed, efficiency, cost-effectiveness and compliance for

the complete list of views from CEOs, go to <http://businesstimes.com.sg>

businesses. By providing investors with integrated technological infrastructure and a secure business environment, Singapore will thus be well-positioned to cement its spot as a global leader in the financial space.

Leong Yee May

Senior Vice-President Orange Business Services Asia Pacific

IN 2013, the World Bank named Singapore as the world's most business-friendly economy for the eighth year running. Thus, not surprisingly, Singapore has been a preferred location for MNCs setting up their Asian headquarters. Singapore's attractive tax rates, strong legal system, and the use of English as its lingua franca, all contribute to its competitive edge as a financial centre. Furthermore, the emergence of Asean and India has provided additional incentive for businesses that wish to take advantage of Singapore's location as a gateway to Asia's next burgeoning economy.

As seen in the latest GFCI report, leading Asian centres are faring significantly better than weaker regional counterparts. However, Singapore's ranking has stagnated, along with its scores in the various areas of assessment. To boost Singapore's competitiveness, improvements need to be made all around.

In enhancing ICT speed and security, the ongoing ICM Masterplan is a step in the right direction. With business operations increasingly conducted online, an extensive and reliable ICT infrastructure is paramount to Singapore's competitiveness. Also, in light of the recent tightening of labour and immigration laws, Singapore needs to invest heavily in its workforce so as to maintain, and even increase its supply of skilled labour. For Singapore to break through the ranks, it will need to evaluate itself in aspects beyond the economic in order to continue to attract investment and strengthen its position as a leading financial centre of Asia.

Neeraj Swaroop

Chief Executive Officer, Singapore Standard Chartered Bank



WE cannot underestimate the government's efforts in establishing Singapore as one of the world's leading financial centres in just over four decades. Singapore has taken all the right steps – English as the main language; having good infrastructure; stable political environment; common law; a deep global talent pool and attracting multinational corporations (MNCs) to set up business here – good reasons for it to be a premier hub for wealth management, private banking and commodities trading.

Unlike the rest, Singapore does not have a huge domestic market. Hence, it positions itself as a regional centre and has done well in facilitating business between the East and the West (mainly the US and Europe). The opportunity for Singapore is to be THE international financial centre for Asean and can build on the North-South flows, especially between China and South-east Asia. Singapore knows individual markets in South-east Asia much better than the rest, so it can also be the gateway between Asean and India; and Asean and the Middle East.

Singapore is on the right track, first by promoting the integration of financial markets under the Asean Economic Community, second by securing a spot on the world map of Islamic finance, and finally by being a yuan hub.

In addition, financial institutions like Standard Chartered can work even more closely with the government to identify new niche trends such as yuan and infrastructure financing, and tap these opportunities via Singapore. We will also continue to promote Singapore as a base for our clients' business and as the gateway to the region.