

by aaron tan

THE Government called recently for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to improve productivity, but it is a job role that has kept Mr Tristan Koh busy for the past few years.

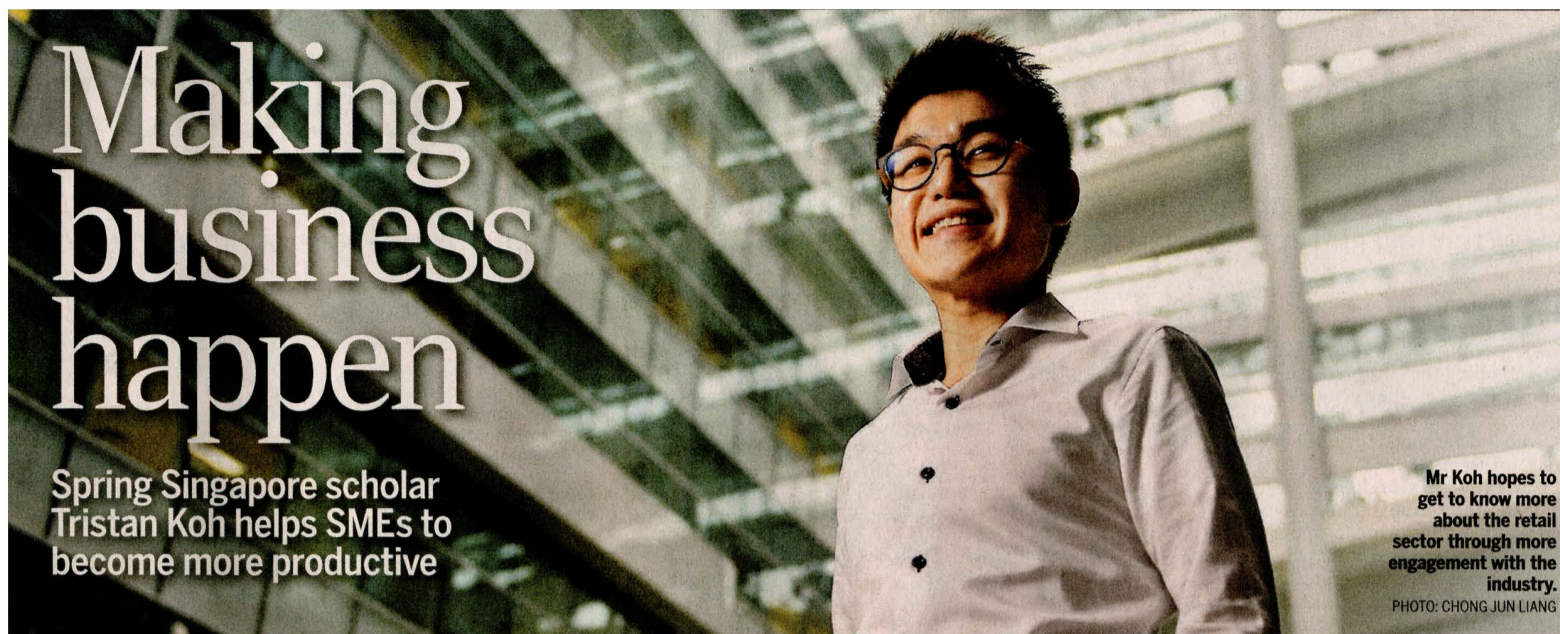
Since 2011, the 29-year-old Spring Singapore scholar has been tasked with helping SMEs in the food services and retail industries become more productive by adopting technology and streamlining business processes.

"For a start, SMEs need to be able to measure how productive they are, so they can pinpoint areas they are not doing well in," Mr Koh says.

"We do propose some productivity indicators SME bosses can adopt and track through a business information system," he says.

Mr Koh, a Spring Executive Development Scholarship (EDS) holder, picked up these business insights through his work at Spring's industry development group.

Launched in 2008, the EDS is a local undergraduate scholarship which aims to discover and develop talent who are keen to be part of Spring's mission to grow Singapore enterprises.



Making business happen

Spring Singapore scholar Tristan Koh helps SMEs to become more productive

Mr Koh hopes to get to know more about the retail sector through more engagement with the industry.

PHOTO: CHONG JUN LIANG

The bosses have been nurturing us by giving us a lot of opportunities to get in touch with the industry. We're also given more responsibilities as we gain more experience.

— Mr Tristan Koh, senior manager, Spring Singapore

It offers multiple career paths to those who wish to contribute to enterprise development work at Spring or join leading SMEs to champion their growth.

Helping SMEs grow

A big part of Mr Koh's job involves engaging SMEs on a one-on-one basis and at industry events.

For nine months, he was also seconded to Luxasia, a retail firm, as part of the career opportunities offered by Spring. During the stint, he experienced the nuts and bolts of running a business, from sales and marketing to business operations like setting up a new store.

The hands-on experience was invaluable, says Mr Koh, who joined Spring right after graduating with a business management degree from Singapore Management University.

"It's important to get first-hand exposure, apart from business interactions with SME bosses," he says, adding that the experience gave him a sense of the challenges SMEs face, and what it is like to run a business.

More importantly, he says the exposure will go a long way to ensure Spring's programmes and grants are relevant in helping SMEs grow their business. "Whenever I'm involved in any industry programme, I always ask myself if it is what the industry really needs," he says.

His exposure extends to overseas study trips as well. Less than six months into the job, he visited Japan with 11 Singapore SMEs to learn how Japanese companies apply the 5S methodology to streamline work processes.

5S is a workplace organisation method that uses a list of five Japanese words to organise a workspace for efficiency and effectiveness.

"We were given opportunities to visit factories and see how they run their operations using the 5S methodology that's ingrained in the culture of Japanese businessmen," Mr Koh says.

As SMEs are usually caught up with their day-to-day operations, he says they may not be able to see how things can be done better.

"But after the trip, those we took to Japan were able to identify which processes could be made more efficient," he says. "Some even managed to cut costs as a result of those improvements."

Put to the test

Like most scholarship holders, Mr Koh was given big projects to test his capabilities. In 2012, he worked with trade associations such as the Restaurant Association of Singapore to organise a conference for the food services industry.

"Coordinating the event took a lot of hard work, but it was fun and made me appreciate the perspectives of other stakeholders," he says. "When things didn't go as planned, I had to think on my feet and assure people we were going to make it."

So far, he has done well enough to rise through the ranks, from a senior officer when he started out to the senior manager he is today. Moving forward, he hopes to deepen his knowledge of the retail sector through more engagements with the industry.

"The bosses have been nurturing us by giving us a lot of opportunities to get in touch with the industry," he says. "We're also given more responsibilities as we gain more experience."

With the business skills he has honed so far, Mr Koh does not discount the possibility of starting his own business one day. But for now, he wants to continue to help more SMEs succeed.

"To see they are moving in the right direction, as well as providing positive feedback about our initiatives, gives me a sense of satisfaction," he says.

"At the end of the day, I feel I've done something for the companies and have helped to make business happen."