

Young graduates who dislike office routine and answering to bosses are striking out on their own



**W**hile many of his peers have just started working, Mr Mohamed Juffrie Mohamed Juma'at, 24, runs his own videography firm. "I have the freedom to direct and every day is different. I can choose which projects to take on and pick the crew I want to work with," he says.

The bachelor graduated from Republic Polytechnic with a diploma in new media in 2009. He started working as a freelance videographer in 2010 while doing national service and set up his own firm last year.

The desire to be rid of office routine and answering to bosses, and the wish for empowerment, flexibility and job satisfaction are driving many young graduates to start their own businesses.

Experts from universities and human resource firms say the trend has been growing since 2009.

Associate Professor Hooi Den Huan, director of Nanyang Technological University's Nanyang Technopreneurship Centre, estimates that the number of students striking out on their own after graduation has jumped "by about 50 per cent" from 2009 to last year, although the base figure remains small.

At the National University of Singapore (NUS), more graduates from the NUS Overseas Colleges programme are returning to start companies, says Dr Lily Chan, chief executive of NUS Enterprise. The programme arranges internships for students in start-ups overseas, such as Stockholm in Sweden and Silicon Valley in the United States. "There are more than 100 start-ups by returning students since 2005," she says.

The Singapore Management University says it has 174 students who started 58 ventures over the last three to four years.

Experts say the trend shows that young Singaporeans are becoming more adventurous. Mr Gary Loh, honorary secretary of the Innovators and Entrepreneurs' Association, says it also shows that they are "more bold and assertive".

"They want to pursue their dreams while young and are able to accept that it may end up in failure, but are willing to try before accepting defeat," he says.

Associate Prof Hooi says another reason for the greater willingness among younger Singaporeans to venture out is that they do not feel as much pressure to bring home a paycheque as people 10 to 20 years ago did.

"Many kids these days are well-provided for and have understanding parents, who support their plans to postpone employment for a year or two to have a go at building their own business," he says.

Mr Juffrie recalls borrowing between \$5,000 and \$8,000 from his parents to start his videography business. "They were hoping I'd work in a company but remained supportive. I've since paid them back and make it a point to take them out for meals now that my income is sustainable." He declines to say how much he makes a month.

Associate Prof Hooi adds that most students will give the professional ladder a shot first before venturing out on their own. This is true of Ms Jocelyn Teo, 26, who runs Aiclay (www.aiclay.com), an online business selling miniature food items such as cupcakes, burgers and biscuits made of clay.

She set it up in 2009, around the time she graduated from NUS with a degree in communications and new media. She then worked as a promotions scheduling executive with a sports broadcasting company for a year while managing Aiclay part-time.



Polytechnic graduate Mohamed Juffrie Mohamed Juma'at, 24, runs his own video studio and is happy that he can choose the projects and crew that he wants.



Miss Lim Shu Ning (left) and her mother, retired accountant Lim Chau Lee (right) run a craft business, knitting and sewing accessories and decorative items.

ST PHOTO: MATTHIAS HO

# LOOK WHO'S THE BOSS

But she realised her passion was with Aiclay. "The nine-to-five job became increasingly dreary and I found little meaning in it. I decided to focus on Aiclay as something I love doing and work for myself."

It has been three years since she started making her model morsels full-time and she still enjoys her work.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF MISSYPIXIE SINGAPORE  
 Fashion blogshop owners Sharon Lin (left) and Kelly Ong, both 29, quit their full-time jobs to be their own bosses.

As for Ms Sharon Lin and Ms Kelly Ong, both 29, they started their fashion blogshop Missypixie in 2007 when they were still communication studies undergraduates at Nanyang Technological University. Upon graduation, they found full-time jobs - Ms Lin worked in public relations and Ms Ong in events management.

Ms Ong says she was prompted to run Missypixie full-time when she saw how much her boss then was charging a client for services she rendered.

"I thought, 'Why was I not paid the amount the client was paying?' The difference in the rates was vast," she says. "I decided that if that was what I ought to be earning, I'd go out and earn that amount."

Around that time, Ms Lin says she started to feel burnt out. After work, she would reply to e-mail from Missypixie's customers

at night and pack parcels on weekends. "I slept at 3 or 4am every day. I had no social life. At times, my father would help me send out the parcels," she says. "I knew that I needed to choose. Since Missypixie was something I started with Kelly, it was hard to let go of it."

They decided in 2011 to commit full-time to their business. Says Ms Lin: "I like that I don't need to report to anyone and have flexible hours."

They head to their office in MacPherson four times a week to check stocks and do photoshoots. They decline to reveal how much they earn a month, but they say the initial sum was comparable to what they used to earn in their previous jobs.

Ms Ong says: "I get to spend lots of time with my family and can go for holidays anytime." The only thing is that "Sharon and I can't be away at the same time."

Ms Gwen Lim, manager in the human resources division of recruitment firm Robert Walters, says being one's own boss lets one gain first-hand experience in every aspect of a business.

"This can include areas you were never familiar with, such as accounting or marketing. You will be able to see personal growth and advancement in different fields, or discover new strengths," she says.

"If you decide to return to the corporate workforce, employers will look at this entrepreneurial spirit as an advantage."

Mr Kelynn Choo, 30, who runs bubble tea shop iTea at the Institute of Technical Education (ITE) College East, remembers how he "did everything by hand" when he set it up in 2011. "I assembled and painted everything myself," says the NUS mechanical engineering graduate.

"I came up with my own drinks, my own menus, my own pricing. I also had to learn about time management and handle manpower and rental costs."

All the hard work has been worth it, he says. "It's tiring but fun. When I see empty cups on the tables, I know I've done something right."

It is important for such ventures to be fuelled by passion. Associate Prof Hooi says: "Do not go into a business because everyone else is doing it or you feel it's cool to do it. Do it for the value it creates for society. This way, you will be more committed to the cause and not give up easily."

Being your own boss is not always plain sailing, of course.

The entrepreneurs SundayLife! spoke to cite unstable income and the lack of medical or dental benefits as some of the cons.

Ms Lin says: "Some months, when we earn less, we pay ourselves less. The future is unknown and there is increasing competition from other blog shops too."

Agreeing, Mr Loh says: "Entrepreneurship is a journey and not a bed of roses."

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## WESLEY TAN: SHELVING BUSINESS

When Mr Wesley Tan (above) quit his full-time job as a shipbroker two years ago to be his own boss, his mother's heart sank.

"I was not happy. I felt it was too soon for him to start something on his own. He had not seen enough of the working world yet," says Mrs Tan Soi Fun, 60, who works as a logistics coordinator in a furniture company.

But the 27-year-old was insistent. Last month, after more than a year of trial and conceptualisation, he launched Slingshot, a modular wall-mounted shelving business (myslingshot.com.sg).

Buyers can configure their own shelving units using the pre-fabricated pieces he designed. A basic configuration costs between \$400 and \$600, and prices can go up to \$1,500 for more complex designs.

The economics degree graduate from SIM University joined a shipbroking firm in 2011 but did not enjoy his job.

After more than a year of having to work late nights and entertain clients, he decided he had had enough. "I have always wanted to do something on my own and I felt it was a good time to try."

"Young people like me like to make our own decisions instead of following pre-set policies. I get to determine my company's culture, the possibilities are infinite and I will get to see the fruits of my labour."

Around that time, he had just moved into a five-room HDB flat in Simei with his wife and was looking for space-saving measures in the form of wall-mounted shelving.

"I found that the market offered either cheap solutions or very high-end customised designs. There weren't stylish, affordable shelves I could buy off the shelf," he says. "That's why I decided to go into this business."

His wife, public servant Melissa Tan, 27,

says she was supportive of his idea, but also tried to play devil's advocate.

"I wanted him to consider what he was getting himself into, so I asked him a lot of questions," she says.

Over the next one year, he dug into his savings and looked for interesting ideas on the Internet. Working from home, he taught himself to render shapes using a computer software program, learnt how wall-mounting was done and found someone in Indonesia who could make and supply his designs.

He spent about \$13,000 of his savings on a website and prototypes.

Mid-way, his wife became pregnant with their first child.

He says: "I knew my responsibilities had grown. I'm very thankful that my wife was patient, even when I got impatient with myself. I would ask her, 'Am I doing things right? Should I do something else?'"

Business is slow at the moment with only a handful of customers. While slightly discouraged, he says it is too early to tell how far he can take the business.

"Everyone's waiting for me to succeed, they want to see a success story. But for every successful story, there may be nine that failed. My success is not guaranteed," he says.

Mrs Tan says she tries to keep his spirits up by focusing on the positive. "I tell him to celebrate the little successes, such as the website being up and running, getting his first customer and so on."

"I also remind him, 'Whoever said being an entrepreneur is easy?'"

His parents are currently supplementing his income.

He says he has given himself two years to break even. Currently, his running costs are about \$5,000 every quarter.

"If I don't manage to stay afloat in two years, I'll look for a job."

**LIM SHU NING: CRAFTS**

Miss Lim Shu Ning, 24, has never had to answer to a boss. She began running her craft business, Momshoo, in 2009, while she was still studying.

When she graduated with a visual communications degree from the Nanyang Technological University's School of Art, Design and Media last year, she considered taking a year to do internships and run Momshoo at the same time.

Her mother, retired accountant Lim Chau Lee, 55, recalls: "I was quite horrified by that idea then. I felt she ought to go and work for someone, to learn from bosses and colleagues on how to do things."

Miss Lim tried – "not very hard", she adds – to look for a job but decided at the end of last year that she would focus on Momshoo full-time.

"More and more opportunities were opening up and working on them was occupying a lot of my time," she says.

When she started Momshoo (www.facebook.com/momshoo), it was meant to be a part-time business.

It was what she calls an "ad(venture)" with her mother to sell handmade accessories and decorative items that they designed themselves.

Their range of whimsical products has since expanded to include hand-knitted items, ranging from sheep rings to cacti. Prices range from \$7 for a handsewn badge to \$60 for a knitted plant, which takes four hours to complete.

Her start-up cost was low – "just a few hundred dollars to buy fabrics", she says. Her mother helps in the production and also comes up with design ideas.

"Craft is in my blood. I've always enjoyed working with my hands," says Miss Lim, who is single.

The former Art Elective Programme student at Nanyang Girls' High and National Junior College picked up sewing at the age of 13, after her mother took her to a patchwork class.

Mother and daughter run the business from their home, a condominium unit in Toa Payoh. Miss Lim is an only child and her father is a retired lecturer.

The items made for Momshoo were initially only sold online. Later, she began selling them at flea markets. She now also stocks her wares in four multi-label speciality shops, including Cat Socrates and The Redundant Shop.

**"I enjoy the time and flexibility that I have. I am my own saleswoman, product photographer and photo editor. My material cost is not high, but the work is labour-intensive."**

MISS LIM SHU NING on her decision to run her own craft business full-time

She is pleased with Momshoo's progress thus far. The National Library Board has hired her to conduct fabric badge and leaf accessory workshops at the libraries till March.

When she is not holding a workshop, knitting or sewing, she goes out to meet stockists and people from events companies.

"I enjoy the time and flexibility that I have. I am my own saleswoman, product photographer and photo editor," she says. "My material cost is not high but the work is labour-intensive."

In a good month, she can earn a profit of \$2,000. She earns half of that during slower months.

She is content with the amount she makes, she says, adding: "Of course, it would be nice to earn more money, like some of my peers. But I enjoy what I'm doing and that compensates for the lower income."

Her mum is her biggest supporter.

Mrs Lim says: "I'm glad my daughter is so different. Her career at the moment is very different from others so I don't need to compare her with other people's children. As long as she is happy doing this, I'm happy."

Touched by her mother's affirmation, Miss Lim tears up.

She is, however, uncertain how long Momshoo can be sustained.

"Nothing is permanent, so I will see what happens. I don't plan long-term. I've only planned for the year. If this becomes a chore and I don't have so many opportunities anymore, I may consider getting a full-time job," she says.

"I'm not sure what I'll do but it'll definitely be in the creative industry."



PHOTO: BUSINESS TIMES FILE

**"I did not like the pay, the boss, the lack of growth and what I was doing. I felt I was not empowered to make my own decisions."**

MR DELANE LIM (middle) who did not like his job and set up a youth development outfit which made \$1 million in revenue last year

**DELANE LIM: YOUTH ACTIVITIES**

When Mr Delane Lim wanted to set up his own business nine years ago at the age of 20, his parents told him he was crazy.

"They did not want to fund my venture. But now, I fund them and they are happy," he says, laughing.

The 29-year-old bachelor heads Agape Group Holdings, a youth development organisation which has grown from a one-man show to a 20-staff outfit that made \$1 million in revenue last year.

When he started it in 2005, all he knew was that he wanted to run leadership, character-development and team-building programmes for young people, but he had no idea how to get the funds to do so.

He credits his vision to Singapore Youth For Christ, a Christian organisation that reaches out to the young, where he had volunteered after secondary school.

"I told myself that if I had a company, its focus would not be to make money, but to make a difference. I wanted my business to touch lives," says Mr Lim, who has a diploma in marketing and advertising from a private school.

The impetus to strike out on his own came after he worked for 1 1/2 years as a trainer at a sports and adventure company in 2004.

"I faced four problems with that job. I did not like the pay, the boss, the lack of growth and what I was doing. I felt I was not empowered to make my own decisions," he says.

He quit the company and registered Agape as his company. However, with little money to execute his ideas, he decided to take up another full-time job as a procurement and quality manager at an adventure training company.

He worked there for two years and realised there was money to be made in being a consultant to schools and companies.

He decided to turn Agape into a business consultancy so that it could finance its own programmes.

His first customer was a secondary school in 2007, which hired him to run a character and leadership training camp. He spent \$8,000 of his savings running that. He did such a good job that the school started recommending his services to others.

Slowly, business picked up. Besides schools, his current clients also include the Timbre Group, which runs several live-music restaurants and bars and other music-related businesses, as well as agencies under

various government ministries, for whom he conducts team-building activities.

"An entrepreneur needs resilience," he says.

"Between 2005 and 2009, there were some months when I was 'eating grass'. Income was unstable and I was extremely stressed in 2008 as I was in national service, and trying to study and run my business at the same time. "Eating grass" is a Chinese phrase which means earning so little that one cannot afford to buy food.

That year, he completed a distance-learning course to earn a business administration degree from Australia's Curtin University, as well as a post-graduate diploma in human capital management from the Singapore Human Resources Institute.

However, his body could not take the strain. After suffering breathlessness and flu for three months in 2010, he went for a check-up, which uncovered a heart blockage.

That year, at the age of 26, he went for a heart bypass.

Today, he still suffers from health problems which he declines to elaborate on. He chooses not to let these get him down and focuses his energies on his never-ending workload instead.

"There are days when I feel like giving up. In fact, every year I ask myself, to continue as an employer or to

be an employee? There are so many things to worry about all the time," he says.

His employees, aged 19 to 56, top his priority list.

"If I shut down, where will my staff go? This company is not just about me, but the people working for me and the families they have to feed."

As a former employee, he is also all too aware that they could have the same grouses he once had about his employer. "I need to make sure they love me, the boss, and that they love what they are doing and love the pay, and also feel that they can grow in this company," he says with a grin.

Some of his employees have left the company to join his competitors so he says he tries his best to pay them the "market rate". He also allows some employees to run their own businesses outside office hours.

"I've been there before. As long as they declare their business and it does not clash with company interests, I'm fine with it," he says.

He knows he would have fewer worries if he were an employee or a freelancer.

"But I'm an entrepreneur because I want to provide meaningful employment. Who knows, maybe 10 years from now, I may decide to be an employee and I may end up being an employee of a current employee," he says.