

S'PORE TALENT: Flying the flag high overseas

Even as Singapore releases a new work pass to attract top foreign talent, home-grown ones are flying Singapore's flag high in South-east Asia and beyond. Tay Hong Yi speaks to five Singaporean executives to understand how they got to their positions, what people here can do to gain overseas exposure, and why exposure abroad is needed to clinch top regional and global roles.



Mr Ivan Zeng, general manager of Hong Kong, Taiwan and Macau at Lego, says any Singaporean who wishes to climb up the totem pole in a global firm needs to gain overseas experience. PHOTO: COURTESY OF IVAN ZENG

Focusing on payoffs, not trade-offs, of working abroad

Mr Ivan Zeng, 38
General manager of Hong Kong,
Taiwan and Macau, Lego Group

Toy giant Lego may be known for its iconic colourful building blocks, but behind its fun image is a complex global business and a serious need for talent with international experience to develop and market products that appeal to diverse consumers.

Based in Hong Kong, Mr Ivan Zeng, general manager of Hong Kong, Taiwan and Macau at Lego since August 2021, is one of them.

It is the 38-year-old's first overseas posting after he took on a succession of regional marketing roles that saw him travelling for half the year in Asia and Europe on average while based in Singapore, since joining the firm in 2013.

"The opportunity to work overseas is both a professional ambition and very much a personal lifestyle choice for me," he said.

His biggest pillar of support has been his wife, who took care of their newborn daughter – now 15 months old – alone for five months, before the family was reunited in Hong Kong.

He said any Singaporean who wishes to climb up the totem pole in a global firm needs to gain overseas experience – even if the top roles at these companies are based in Singapore, a popular choice for major firms to set up regional and global headquarters.

"The reality is that very senior people who are based in Singapore don't run a Singapore business, but run a regional market or global business out of Singapore."

Those who wish to take on these top roles, he said, must understand how macroeconomic trends and customer preferences vary across multiple countries, which can come only from direct experience.

For instance, he has had to brush up on his business Mandarin "a lot more" to understand the lingo Taiwanese consumers respond to most favourably.

Only then is a leader sufficiently informed to evaluate employees' recommendations and take ownership of weighty business decisions affecting several markets at once.

"My boss is based in Singapore... (and) if he didn't have that much experience at a global level, he wouldn't be able to challenge my opinions, and would only be able to take my word for it."

Mr Zeng recognises that not every firm makes it easy for Singaporeans to seek overseas opportunities. Danish firm Lego, he said, encourages staff to chart career plans and provides training and projects, with overseas postings transparently advertised.

There is an opportunity for the Government to partner the private sector to "increase the visibility" of overseas roles and how to obtain them, he added.

Mr Zeng also said Singaporeans currently in global firms who aspire to work overseas could ask to join global or regional projects.

"These can give you a short-term but valuable experience in knowing how things work, how you can deliver value, build relationships and find out more about the lifestyle in those markets."

He also suggested Singaporean employees reframe their perception of working overseas by focusing on the payoffs, rather than trade-offs.



Ms Cynthia Liaw says her intent in her second working stint in Cambodia – at Panda Commercial Bank – is to build the digital banking and blockchain ecosystem in the country. PHOTO: COURTESY OF CYNTHIA LIAW

Roles in emerging regions 'equally challenging'

Ms Cynthia Liaw, 54
Chief executive officer,
Panda Commercial Bank

Ms Cynthia Liaw did not plan to be based overseas for work, even though she loves travelling for assignments.

This changed when she was offered a role as chief executive of Maybank Cambodia in 2015.

"While the role as a CEO of a bank was a good opportunity, it required me to relocate and I had to consider the needs of the family," said Ms Liaw, 54, who was head of virtual banking and payments with Maybank Singapore then.

She moved back here in 2018 and took up her previous Singapore role again.

She then left Maybank to take the helm at a local bank in Cambodia – Panda Commercial Bank – as chief executive three months ago.

On what made her first relocate to Cambodia in 2015, she said: "A good friend of mine then encouraged me to fly back weekly in the beginning and to treat it in my mind like a regional role that required frequent travelling."

This arrangement helped minimise the impact on her family. Her husband, also 54, is a retired pilot, and they have three children aged 21 to 24.

"The bank's products and services offered in Cambodia were not as complex, and I was able to learn the fundamentals of bank risk management," she said of her

first stint there.

"Here in Cambodia, we have to determine our own lending rules based on the bank's own risk appetite and targeted segment."

There are also misconceptions about working in an emerging region like Cambodia that Ms Liaw hopes to dispel. "(For) those of us who come to work in corporate settings, it is hardly a 'retirement' role."

"The roles here are equally challenging and come with many other disadvantages."

For instance, the cost of education in Cambodia with comparable quality to that in Singapore is high.

"As the pay is not significantly higher here than in Singapore, many of us come for a purpose, and not strictly for the money."

She said her intent in working there now is to build the digital banking and blockchain ecosystem in Cambodia.

Ms Liaw is cautiously optimistic about the new Overseas Network and Expertise Pass.

"There is definitely a possibility that the pass will cause Singaporeans to be crowded out of opportunities to take on these top roles, or not be groomed for these roles."

She suggested that some measures to evaluate the success of the pass could include how the profitability of the organisations that hire such talent has changed compared with past performance and that of its peers, whether the ratio of Singaporean to foreign talent in top roles has been maintained, and whether Singaporean staff numbers have increased overall with expansion.

"If (the new pass allows Singapore) to attract more global or regional companies to set up their headquarters here, creating more employment for both local and foreign talent, or bringing in more profits and tax revenue, then the pass has succeeded in making Singapore better off than previously."



Mr Tan Wern Yuen, seen here at a potato farm in Thailand that supplies to PepsiCo, which he joined in June 2020, says the Singapore market is too small to support top roles without a global or regional element. PHOTO: PEPSICO

Seeing overseas stints as a career investment

Mr Tan Wern Yuen, 44
Chief executive officer of the Asia-Pacific, Australia, New Zealand and China, PepsiCo

Think of Jakarta, Chengdu and Bangalore, rather than holding out for a glamorous expatriate role in New York, Shanghai or London that comes with a cushy benefits package.

This is the advice Mr Tan Wern Yuen, chief executive of the Asia-Pacific, Australia, New Zealand and China at American food and beverage giant PepsiCo, has for Singaporeans who wish to take the leap overseas.

"(A role) closer to the heartbeat of an operating business in a scaled market... will offer more valuable hands-on experience to build on later in your career," said Mr Tan, 44, on the deep exposure to day-to-day operations that stints in those cities in major markets can offer.

He added that expatriate packages are increasingly uncommon and usually reserved for a select few in senior positions, which means most aspiring Singaporeans will need to see going overseas as an investment in their own career.

"Sometimes (Singaporeans) ask for a role in Singapore to be guaranteed for them when they come back," he said, noting that such requests give employers pause in offering opportunities, especially when there is much more talent

in Asia that qualifies compared with two decades ago.

"You've got to have confidence that you deserve the bigger role when you come back."

After spending six years as a civil servant upon graduation from Oxford and Cambridge universities, Mr Tan moved to Boston Consulting Group for six more years, the latter four of which were spent in Chicago.

"For the first two years, most of my clients and projects were overseas; I slept in my own bed no more than five days in a row."

Stints at McDonald's in Taiwan and Walmart in China followed.

"It was a classic case of a strategy consultant wanting to own the results and execution, (rather than) just providing advice," he said of his move out of consulting.

In June 2020, Mr Tan joined PepsiCo, reporting to chief executive Ramon Laguarta in his Singapore-based role.

He said Singaporean employees are among the best in analytical, communication and cross-functional collaboration skills, but the domestic market is too small to support top roles without a global or regional element.

"What you get in Singapore is not necessarily enough to compete internationally."

There is a wide range of programmes and support for Singaporeans who want to venture overseas, he added.

As someone who has been a top foreign executive abroad, Mr Tan is upbeat about the benefits of the new Overseas Networks and Expertise Pass for Singapore.

The risk of the pass depriving local talent of opportunities is low as it is in the interest of firms to employ as much local talent as they can, he said. "If you are a company, you want your teams in (each market) to represent as much as possible the population - that's when you get deeper consumer insight and a relationship with real consumers in the country."



Ms Farzana Hairudin, who has worked in Singapore and Switzerland and is now working in Japan, says her overseas experience has helped her build networks in a way staying here could not. PHOTO: COURTESY OF FARZANA HAIRUDIN

SINGAPOREANS SEEN AS VALUABLE TALENT

When I introduced myself (as a Singaporean) at work in Tokyo and Europe, I always received very positive reactions about Singaporeans being hardworking, good at work and (able to) get stuff done. The general perception seems to be that Singaporeans are competitive and valuable talent.



MS FARZANA HAIRUDIN

Positive experience as S'porean working overseas

Ms Farzana Hairudin, 33
Human resources director, Proctor and Gamble Japan

Less than a decade into her career, Ms Farzana Hairudin has already worked in two countries - Singapore and Switzerland - and has just begun her stint in a third: Japan.

In April, the 33-year-old was made human resources (HR) director at the Tokyo office of American consumer goods giant Procter and Gamble (P&G).

Ms Farzana, who joined P&G in 2016, said she had aspired to work overseas since graduating from Singapore Management University with a degree in business management in 2013. "I chose global companies that could provide career opportunities beyond Singapore."

Her first employer after graduation was technology giant Microsoft, where she was a regional campus recruiter from 2014 to 2016.

Upon joining P&G, she took on various roles in Singapore before her first overseas posting as a senior HR manager at the firm's Europe regional office in Geneva.

The Covid-19 pandemic hit almost as soon as she arrived in January 2020, and staff at the Geneva office had to switch to working from home three months later. This meant Ms Farzana had to rapidly find her footing in her first overseas posting, even as the pandemic swept Europe.

"Though I was new to the organi-

sation and to the country, being in HR, I had to support employees to make the shift quickly and guide them on safety protocols, (so) I took it as an opportunity to quickly build relationships."

Her overseas experience has helped her build networks in a way staying in Singapore could not, she said. "For example, when working on a new project, I now have the ability to reach out to someone in Europe or Japan who may have done similar work to... offer a unique perspective."

Asked about challenges faced in her current role, Ms Farzana, who is married, said she felt there was "some expectation" that foreign talent should assimilate to local customs and ways of doing things.

"It is important to listen, observe and seek to understand the context before you go about proposing all kinds of changes."

Nonetheless, the diversity in background that foreign talent brings is crucial for her work, which involves helping to design new HR policies, such as flexible working and leave schemes that meet the needs of as many employees as possible, she said.

The Singapore brand has been an asset in her experience, she noted. "When I introduced myself (as a Singaporean) at work in Tokyo and Europe, I always received very positive reactions about Singaporeans being hardworking, good at work and (able to) get stuff done."

"The general perception seems to be that Singaporeans are competitive and valuable talent."

Ms Farzana suggested that Singaporeans working overseas seek out fellow Singaporeans to stay connected to home and stave off homesickness.

"My favourite memory was a National Day potluck we did by Lake Geneva and, as you walked towards this group of people dressed in red and white, you heard familiar Singlish words and saw Singaporean dishes."



Mr Nesa Subrahmaniyan, who rose through the ranks after joining Saudi Aramco in 2009, credits his steady progression to the meritocracy in place at the firm and his mentors. PHOTO: COURTESY OF NESA SUBRAHMANYAN

From writing on energy to being on the corporate side of it

Mr Nesa Subrahmaniyan, 51
Director of communications and business relations, Saudi Aramco

Mr Nesa Subrahmaniyan had already worked for a decade in energy and commodities journalism, including a stint at global outlet Bloomberg, when an opportunity to join the energy sector he wrote on came knocking.

In a chance meeting, the Singapore office head of Saudi Aramco, a Saudi Arabian state-controlled oil company, suggested to Mr Subrahmaniyan that he join the firm.

This was in 2008, when the former journalist felt the time was ripe for a career change.

"I found the trade flows of oil and gas very fascinating, so I was trying to go and be on the other side - the corporate side."

He added: "At the same time, I realised being a journalist was going to be much harder with the emergence of social media (such as) Twitter and Facebook."

He joined Saudi Aramco's media relations unit in January 2009. He then rose up the ranks to his current position as director of communications and business relations two months ago.

For almost 14 years, he has been based in Dhahran, in the kingdom's Eastern Province, where a sprawling gated community has been built for Aramco employees to live and work.

"I told myself: 'Let's do it for five

years and see how it goes' - now I'm on my third five-year plan."

Mr Subrahmaniyan credits his steady progression to the meritocracy in place at the firm, and mentors who took an interest in him and helped him to hone his business skills, beyond writing.

"One advantage I had coming from Bloomberg was that I was trained to get to the point quickly and had a fast turnaround time."

He added: "They know what I'm doing is trying to help the company succeed... Doing things well and making sure they are successful is something ingrained since I was young, back home."

The Singapore brand name has been an asset, he said.

"The (perception of) ability to follow through, the work ethic... goes with you in a lot of places."

As for Singaporeans who aspire to take on overseas stints, he said they should feel invested in the society there and their employer, beyond having an expatriate benefits package or shorter work hours.

Citing growth prospects in emerging places such as Rwanda, he added: "Don't be afraid to be a bit more adventurous... the more challenging the situation, the better the rewards - not just financially, but the satisfaction of contributing to a country's growth."

Mr Subrahmaniyan is married with two sons aged 14 and 16. His wife, a volunteer tutor aged 44, was a polymer engineer before moving with him to Saudi Arabia.

Video calls with relatives and trips back home at least once a year - apart from during the pandemic - help the family feel rooted to Singapore.

Singapore's food culture also helps. "People get very curious about Singaporean food - some have had it, while others have heard about it."

"My wife makes very good nasi lemak... and that's one thing that helps (with feeling rooted) too."

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