

YOUNG BUSINESS LEADER OF THE YEAR

# Carro CEO Aaron Tan wants ‘007’ staff who can make themselves redundant through AI

Co-founder of used car unicorn doesn’t use gut feeling to make decisions – ‘I need the data in front of me’. BY DERRYN WONG

IF YOU can't pull "007" hours or use artificial intelligence (AI) to automate your own role, Aaron Tan, co-founder and chief executive officer of used car and automotive services platform Carro, doesn't want you.

Tan, who took the Young Business Leader of the Year Award at the Singapore Business Awards 2025, spoke to *The Business Times* about how he runs Carro and what he looks for in talent.

"My No 1 criterion is hunger...the person must be hard working. Secondly, I think what's more important now is the ability for that person to think both inside and outside the box, how we look at and harness AI to make his or her role redundant," he said.

Founded in 2015 and currently valued at more than US\$1 billion, Carro was the first automotive marketplace startup unicorn in South-east Asia.

In the past couple of years, Carro has shifted away from growth and towards profitability, which has been helped by the increased adoption of automation and AI, said Tan.

In its financial year ended March 2024, its revenue was around S\$1 billion, with gross profit up 49 per cent to S\$143 million. Earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation, and amortisation increased almost 11 times to S\$43 million.

In FY2025, revenue increased by around 15 per cent, while gross profit grew more than 20 per cent.

## No deadweight

Carro was founded as a tech startup with the idea of selling used cars on its platform without a middleman. Its ethos is in contrast to established tech giants such as Meta or Google, which means less largesse

in the form of unlimited parental leave or personal project time.

"I don't subscribe to this Silicon Valley kool-aid stuff. I'd say I'm a bit of a Chinese towkay-style boss...old-school in expectations, but modern in trust. I don't micro-manage, I'm not breathing down your neck. But I expect you to work hard when it matters – 007, not 996. I'm all about results, ownership, and stepping up when the heat is on," he said.

"996" refers to working from 9 am to 9 pm, six days a week, while "007" is being available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Both terms spring from China's hyper-competitive tech sector.

007 is a "baseline" more than a hard rule, he adds, a criterion for weeding out those who are not committed, which benefits the company in the long run.

"As a startup, you cannot carry deadweight. It's super important not to. We want people who want to prove themselves, people who want to be No 1 or win. When you bring such people in, naturally, everybody's level goes up."

Tan admits that his expectation of constant availability has also led to what he describes as some "cardinal mistakes", such as calling his financial controller while the latter was on honeymoon.

"I honestly didn't know he was away," he said with a laugh. "But the idea is to be available as and when needed."

## Intelligent agents

While the company is adopting more AI and automation, Tan said that it is less about making humans redundant and more about using those technologies for maximum impact.

"I would much rather bring someone



Aaron Tan, co-founder and CEO of Carro, took the Young Business Leader of the Year laurels at the Singapore Business Awards. PHOTO: TAY CHU YI, BT

that can think about how to use AI effectively in any organisation...if you can make yourself redundant, you can make others redundant and automate more. Make the humans more productive, let them do the high level stuff and leave the mundane \*\*\*\* behind."

That is because Carro has ramped up the application of AI and it has helped its bottom line "significantly", said Tan.

For example, 80 per cent of its customer service in Hong Kong is now fully AI-driven and it has also been implemented to help car salesmen deal with customer queries.

Spending less time on things that can be handled by AI, such as car recommendations or vehicle pricing, gives them more time for tasks which humans are better at, such as negotiation.

But another major value-add is in giving insights to inform the company's next steps.

"AI can go through millions of call logs and make sense of the data....it can tell you exactly what you want to know. From an optimisation standpoint, this is amazing and something that we didn't have up until one and a half years ago. It has trans-

formed the way we look at locations and procurement, for example."

Instead of choosing the next location based on population or potential market size, Carro analysed call logs from its customer service representatives to find the optimal place instead.

That grounded, data-driven approach comes from Tan's background: he has a degree from Singapore Management University's School of Information Systems and a master's degree from the Carnegie Mellon University School of Computer Science.

"I need the data in front of me, and then we will make an educated decision based on the data that we have. That drives the company."

## Trust fund

Most of his daily work is speaking to investors, at public engagements and the media, company updates, plus board meetings.

Tan is on the boards of more than 40 entities, including the Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS) and National Library Board (NLB).

Despite that, he does not find the duties overwhelming and values the breadth of experience.

"With SUSS, I have learned so much about running a university and even managing an endowment fund, (with NLB) I learned a lot about running and managing physical properties and engaging with the public...these are things I cannot learn just from running Carro."

Tan said that the high level of trust he has in his management team makes this possible.

"I have a very good team of minus ones. The company is self-managed by about 40-50 of them...they are effective in helping me keep my sanity," he said.

That ties back to his management style: While he demands much from his employees, he also gives them trust in return.

"If you do your part, I'll always have your back. It's tough love – with a lot of trust baked in."

derrynwong@sph.com.sg