

FirstDate: Why looking for love in your domain makes sense

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Matching within one's industry has advantages, but there's more to a relationship than a shared reality.

Kenneth Tan

Romance within the same organisation or sector is hardly new. But is dating within your industry the most rational way to find a partner?

When the Government Technology Agency (GovTech) began piloting FirstDate, a Singpass-verified platform that uses an algorithm to match single public officers aged 21 to 35 from different agencies, many questions revolved around what it was trying to achieve.

The team that came up with this app during GovTech's annual hackathon said the aim was to "test whether placing greater emphasis on shared values and preferences, with fewer matches at a time, could encourage users to give each introduction more consideration".

Amid this ongoing experiment, there lies another broad question: Why can someone from our working world seem such an appealing partner?

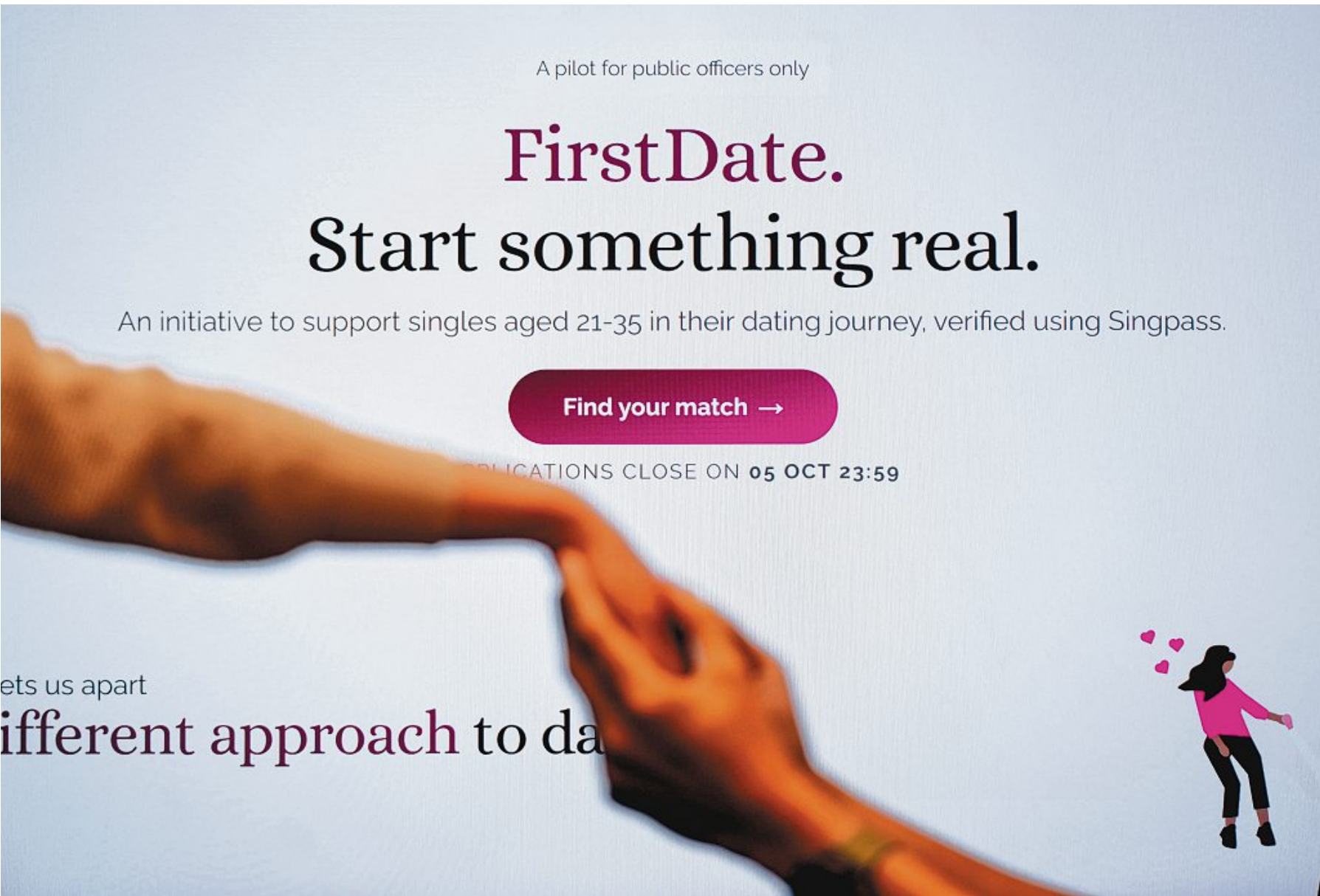
THE COMMON GROUND

One of the most familiar findings in relationship science is also one of the least romantic: We tend to form relationships with the people we encounter.

In a classic study, researchers found that the layout of the buildings helped shape friendships by bringing some neighbours into more frequent contact. Proximity creates repeated contact, and repeated contact breeds familiarity and liking.

Workplaces generate exactly this kind of contact. They bring the same people together, week after week, in pursuit of shared goals.

Yet, when we talk about sector-level matching, we move from physical proximity to psychological and cultural proximity. Even when two people work at entirely different



For time-starved Singaporeans whose working hours leave little room for traditional socialising, an industry-wide filter could reduce the "search costs" of finding a compatible partner, says the writer. But an efficient way to meet someone is only the beginning of finding out whether you want to share a life. PHOTO LIANHE ZAOBAO

organisations or government agencies, belonging to the same broader industry creates an immediate, low-friction common ground.

In Singapore's 2021 Marriage and Parenthood Survey, 57% of never-married respondents who were not dating cited limited opportunities to meet potential partners.

In my own research, I distinguish between three conditions: wanting a partner, being ready to commit, and having the opportunity to meet someone suitable. A person can want a relationship and feel ready for one, yet struggle to find a setting in which to begin.

For time-starved Singaporeans whose working hours leave little room for traditional socialising, an industry-wide filter could reduce the "search costs" of finding a compatible partner. Common ground still needs a way to bring people together, and that is the gap FirstDate tries to fill for the

public service.

THE POWER OF 'SHARED REALITY'

A dating profile tells you what someone wants you to know. However, the appeal of a partner in the same industry or sector goes beyond convenience.

People do not end up in professions at random: Our interests and values steer us towards particular careers, and occupations in turn attract and retain people who fit them. Research on similarity and attraction has also consistently shown that we are drawn to people who share our values and backgrounds. A profession is, in this sense, a pre-filtered pool.

Beyond convenience, alignment in sectors or industries provides entry into a shared occupational microculture. Every professional sector – whether public policy, healthcare, fintech or education – develops its own microculture, complete with specialised jargon,

unspoken norms, unique stressors and implicit values.

For example, two teachers at different schools may recognise the emotional investment behind a difficult conversation with a parent. Two healthcare professionals may understand why a decision made during a shift stays with someone through the evening.

We may spend less time explaining the situation and more time talking about what it meant to us. For people whose work is important to their identity, that contextual empathy can be particularly appealing.

In social psychology, this fuels a powerful state known as shared reality, which refers to the comforting sense that another person views the world through a similar lens –sharing our implicit judgments, concerns and understanding of what matters.

Partners who experience a strong shared reality feel closer and describe a sense of merged

minds. A common professional outlook offers a ready-made foundation for it.

There is another layer to the attraction. Professional background can suggest something about education, earning prospects and social standing. These may reassure us, and perhaps our families, about a potential partner's suitability. Yet those expectations can also run ahead of what we know about the person.

BLIND SPOTS

Knowing the pressures of someone's job does not tell us how that person will respond to our needs. Indeed, research shows that work-related support from a spouse is linked to better work-family balance and family satisfaction, alongside less relationship tension for spouses. The useful lesson is that understanding needs to translate into support.

Furthermore, a shared professional mindset is not the same as compatibility. Similar values may draw two people together, but how a couple handles conflict and what each partner wants from family life matter more for whether a relationship lasts. A compatibility score should not be mistaken for the odds that a relationship will succeed.

Common ground can also become an echo chamber, with couples sharing their profession's blind spots as well as its outlook. And, because partners are motivated to protect a shared reality once it is established, a change of heart, such as one partner wanting to leave the sector, can feel like a threat not only to a career but to the relationship itself.

Furthermore, research on self-evaluation suggests that being outperformed by a romantic partner in a field core to one's identity can trigger uncomfortable friction. When a partner achieves a major milestone or promotion in our own specialised domain, pride and envy can arrive together.

Dating within the same organisation adds risks of its own: concerns about favouritism and fairness, particularly when one partner has a say in the other's appraisals or when senior leaders are involved; break-ups at close quarters; and advances that are unwelcome, especially across lines of power.

A SENSIBLE STARTING POINT

By ruling out matches within the same agency, FirstDate sidesteps much of this. I suspect this is the sweet spot: A partner in the same field but at a different organisation offers much of the shared understanding with far less of the entanglement.

In an age of swipe fatigue on dating apps, FirstDate could reduce this rejection mindset and decision fatigue by providing only one match at a time to build thoughtful connection. However, an efficient way to meet someone is only the beginning of finding out whether you want to share a life. For participants, the useful question is what the apparent common ground reveals as they get to know each other. Does a similar professional outlook extend to what they want from family life? Can they disagree comfortably? Do they make time for each other when work is demanding?

Those answers emerge through interaction, where building a relationship means learning whether that common ground extends to the life two people want to build together.

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