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Headline: Founder's 3 year journey: Ground up to Tiger Global-backed multimillion-dollar startup

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Growing up, I've always thought of myself as a risk-averse person – a stickler for rules. But looking back at my three years in Hong Kong, it seems like a whole different story.

My first startup right out of university was challenging with the long hours and little pay. Not to mention the added stress of having close to zero experience and learning everything from scratch.

But as they say, every end is also a new beginning. The day I left the company I started was also the day I bought an air ticket to Hong Kong for a job interview with a company that barely showed up on Google – and that, ladies and gentlemen, was the start of something new.

An unexpected detour that took me from Singapore to Hong Kong

In 2018, I graduated from Singapore Management University's business school and stumbled into founding a startup with an acquaintance. We were both first-time founders and finding our way in life – a.k.a. adulting.

We had some initial successes, and as cheesy as it seems, we complemented each other like yin and yang – I was the prim and proper university graduate, while my Co-Founder was the street hustler that got things done.

But as time went on, our differences started to fuel disagreements, and before I knew it, I was burning out.

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So in December 2019, while browsing tickets for a three-month sabbatical to Taiwan, I explored and applied for some freelance opportunities to keep the trip financially viable. Within 30 minutes, I received a response from Henson Tsai, the Founder of a Hong Kong-based B2B omni-channel social commerce startup SleekFlow. And he asked if I would be open to an interview next week. In Hong Kong.

While I wasn't expecting such a quick response, I really empathised with his drive and passion. It reminded me of me when I was working on my startup. Besides, I didn't mind escaping Singapore's humid weather. So with my dwindling bank account balance, I "YOLO-ed", bought my plane ticket and flew over the following week.

Taking the most expensive cab ride of my life

Upon landing in Hong Kong on Christmas Eve, I received a message from Henson, who asked to push up the interview by two hours. Seeing that it was already noon, I sprinted to grab a cab.

And as luck would have it, I hopped off the red taxi at SleekFlow's HQ with a dream and a cardigan (and SG\$80 less in my wallet). At this point, I've already spent SG\$1500 on my plane ticket, hotel, and transportation. And the thing is, up till then, I wasn't even hired and haven't even met my prospective boss yet!

But when I finally did, I got to understand Henson's vision for SleekFlow better – to be the number one SaaS company in the world. Honestly, I expected such a bold claim to come with a team of a proportionate scale. But at that time, SleekFlow had a grand total of three employees: Henson, the Founder; Peter, the backend developer; Paul, the frontend developer. All three of them were working in a room with just enough space to fit four people with a product that looked like the first iteration of Facebook Messenger.

I didn't think much about the prospect of hearing back from Henson again and spent the next few days exploring Hong Kong before heading back to Singapore.

To my surprise, a week or so later, Henson offered me the position as the fourth person in SleekFlow. Having wanted to experience working overseas, particularly in Hong Kong, since my younger days as an aspiring filmmaker, I jumped at the opportunity.

We all need to start somewhere

I took a one-way flight to Hong Kong on the 26th of January 2020 with promises to visit family and friends back in Singapore every three months. Little did I know that three months turned into 19 months when COVID-19 hit.

There was a lot of uncertainty and doubts during that time. It was an understatement to say that the first few months were tough. Apart from dealing with the mask, rice and toilet paper shortage, I also had issues getting a Hong Kong bank account set up and had to constantly transfer money from Singapore.

But things were taking off at work. As the pandemic drove everyone indoors, more businesses understood the importance of WhatsApp to engage and support customers better.

At SleekFlow, while we initially set our sights on American and European markets that were less affected by COVID-19, we decided to hunker down and focus on Asia as we noticed that people in Asia were starting to shift their day-to-day activities online.

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With that insight, we built tools centred around retail businesses' needs. Starting as an omnichannel platform that merges popular messaging channels like WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Instagram DMs, and Telegram into one, we evolved to offer more holistic services like routing chats, setting automated workflows and customising chatbots fit for a world dealing with social distancing.

As the only non-technical person apart from Henson, everything that did not involve coding or finances was basically mine to tackle. I was writing blogs (in both English & Traditional Chinese!), doing SEO audits, putting out ads, pitching to customers, and even doing customer support at two am – an experience I will fondly remember as it led to a product that has impacted businesses globally.

Almost a month after, we landed our first hospitality customer. And even though our platform was glitchy at the start, the customer stuck with us while we gradually resolved our issues.

But of course, that version of SleekFlow's long gone. And as much as I have changed, SleekFlow has undergone a series of upgrades, including a payment solution that allows consumers to buy directly from chat platforms to cater to the rise of social commerce.

The reality of building a startup is that you need to be as adaptable as a Swiss Army knife. My role at SleekFlow changed almost every three months, and in the past year, I was even sent back to Singapore to grow the ASEAN region for three whole months!

One night, while in a hotel room in Malaysia, I found myself randomly scrolling through Slack, and I came across our monthly active members' dashboard:

It really put things into perspective – how we went from a four-person office to 60 people in Hong Kong, closing our US\$8 million Series A funding round, launching in Singapore and Malaysia in 2021, followed by the United Kingdom, Brazil and Indonesia in 2022, and growing headcount by 30 times in 2023.

My journey with SleekFlow has brought me some incredible experiences and connections in Hong Kong and beyond. My role has since transformed from taking over performance marketing in 2021 to spearheading the Partnerships team. Since joining in 2020, SleekFlow has now established itself as a comprehensive social commerce ecosystem with over 5,000 users in over 20 countries.

Conclusion

Takeaway #one: Punch above your weight

Scared? Just do it. Don't think it'll work? Just do it. In the early days of joining SleekFlow, an important lesson I learnt is: Don't short-change yourself. It can be putting out a higher quote, asking customers if they need an upgrade, or even asking for a salary raise. If you've thought of it, try acting on it – "realistic" is relative.

Takeaway #two: Be open to changes

In a startup, change is normal and the only way to know what works for us is to test it out. That's why a shift in mindset is necessary. Do not expect that decisions are set in stone, and always be willing to push things out (even if it's not perfect), be experimental, and consistently work to improve processes.

Takeaway #three: When there's a will, there's a way

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Being the “good” kid growing up, I’ve never really questioned authority or why things need to be done a certain way. But after working in Hong Kong for three years, I have learnt to think out of the box as people will throw curveballs, and there’s always a crafty way to get around it. So, weigh the pros & cons, pay the price and quickly get a grip on what’s happening to thrive.