

RIDING THE SMART NATION WAVE

James Dunn

The concept for dating business Lunch Actually came to founder Violet Lim while she was working at Citibank. "In banking, I was surprised to see that many of my colleagues were single and not dating. I found that rather curious, since most of them were eligible and attractive. I decided to dig deeper, and realised that like many other busy professionals and executives in Singapore, they were all busy and virtually 'married' to their jobs."

Yet it wasn't until a work assignment abroad that Lim chanced upon the concept of lunch dating. "I could immediately see the potential of this business due to my interactions with my single colleagues. Lunch is 'short, sweet and simple' - long enough for you to get to know someone, yet it was not too long that it would become awkward. I noticed that my banker friends, no matter how late they work, would make time for lunch. So rather than always eating with people whom you already know, why not lunch with someone whom you do not know, and who knows, something might come out of it!" she says.

The result was Lunch Actually, which she and her husband launched in 2004, based on data analytics, an in-house personality-matching algorithm and more recently, machine learning to enhance the matching process.

Lim says she was "blessed" to have started her business in Singapore because it is a great place for entrepreneurs. "The government encourages entrepreneurs to start businesses here, offering many grants and tax deduction options (such as StartUpSG and the Angel Investors Tax Deduction scheme), and we tapped into other government startup and tech grants. Local start-ups have a good support system to start and expand their business," she says.



For Charlotte Lim, there is a stark - and compelling - reason why Singapore has always been a place where entrepreneurship has been encouraged. The co-founder of job-matching platform JobTech adds that it's been "driven by the need for economic survival against a backdrop of limited resources".

Now, in the 21st century, the city-state backs entrepreneurs in a variety of ways, seeing them as potentially vital tools to meet the future needs of the economy, to create high-value jobs and even to meet the country's social needs.

Under its Smart Nation efforts, Singapore deploys a range of initiatives designed to encourage innovation. This involves building an ecosystem around start-ups, which entails government funding schemes, university incubation programs, venture capital funding, accelerator and mentoring schemes and public-sector procurement practices, as well as providing the telecommunications infrastructure to enable business.

And the combination works. "Having an environment that supports the rapid development and deployment of technologies

and products, with ongoing refinement to solve real-life problems at scale, is the key to promoting a successful entrepreneurial culture," says Lim.

"Smart Nation is a multi-agency, whole-of-nation effort that enables the infrastructure – such as access to financing, conducive business regulations, facilities that support pilot testing etc – to drive that. For example, there are programs for various parties to come together to develop ideas and proof-of-concepts to address specific business problems," she says.

DEEP NEURAL NETWORK

Charlotte Lim co-founded JobTech in 2016, with artificial intelligence (AI) researcher Ang Wee Tiong. "We met at a tech networking event in 2016, at a time when the unemployment rate in Singapore was at an all-time high since the global financial crisis. We thought it would be meaningful to use Wee Tiong's AI expertise to connect people and jobs more efficiently, and to help people keep pace with the changing needs of industries. We started JobTech to do that."

The platform uses AI to build a "dynamic skills map" from more than 150 million online job listings, that automatically clusters skills to show where and how well they connect, and the combination of skills necessary for a job, says Charlotte Lim.

"This helps us to provide precise matching of job requirements and talent profiles at scale, and to monitor fast growing and new, emerging skills. The skills map continues to grow as millions of online job postings are fed through our deep neural network every week."

Both (unrelated) women drew on plenty of government assistance. As a business driven by AI and data analytics, Charlotte Lim says JobTech benefited from an initiative by AI Singapore – Singapore's national AI program – that funds deep-tech AI-driven projects.

"The project involves the development of a platform to help university students and graduates select course modules that would equip them with the skillsets necessary for their aspired career pathways based on industry demand. This initiative also gives us access to young, promising AI talents," she says.

LIFELONG ADVISER OF LOVE

Lunch Actually has established a strategic partnership with AI Singapore, which is assisting it in AI-driven "personality matching," says Violet Lim.

Lunch Actually reached out to AI Singapore when it was developing its recently launched Viola.AI, which is billed as the world's first blockchain-powered relationship registry and "Love AI". Violet describes Viola.AI as an AI-engine that can perform deep learning about each user's personality, background, and behaviour, to become a "lifelong love adviser".

"We reached out to AI Singapore for potential collaboration for this innovation in the dating and relationship industry very early on when we started working on Viola.AI. At that time, AI Singapore was newly set up," Violet says.

"We were the first company to showcase an idea to the management team of AI Singapore, and they have been very supportive of our project. We are pleased that the collaboration is confirmed and we will be collaborating with AI Singapore and Singapore Management University to focus on creating a robust AI matching engine that leverages on our existing matching model, huge database and domain knowledge in the matchmaking service," she says.

As a matchmaking business, Lunch Actually is accredited by the Social Development Network (SDN), under the Ministry of Social and Family Development. SDN works to foster opportunities for singles to interact in social settings and form meaningful relationships, with the ultimate aim of starting new families.

"Under SDN, there is a grant for dating agencies called the Partner Connection Fund (PCF) that supports promising dating-related projects," says Violet Lim. "We have benefited under this grant to develop and enhance our dating products. Being an SDN-Trust Accredited dating agency helps boost the level of trust and credibility of our agency," she says.

While it may seem uncommon for a government to support dating services, it is in line with how Singapore wants to use all the tools available to it to drive better economic, career and social outcomes for its citizens.