

# From busking to doubling firm's revenue

Imagine you had about \$800 left in your start-up's account and pay day was coming up for the staff.

Faced with this stark truth in August 2018, Mr Ender Jiang did what no one expected – he started busking at Hougang MRT station near his home.

The founder of media technology start-up Hiverlab is quick to add that, at the time, money from a project was on the way and he did have some savings.

"But I still wanted to challenge myself and see how much I could push myself to respond to such a scenario," he says.

He took himself off the company payroll and busked with his harmonica twice a week for about a month, taking in "dozens of dollars every day", which boosted his morale. At the time, his company had three full-timers, including himself, and four interns.

"It's not about the result, it's also about the process," he says of the experience. "Since I'm very confident in having this resolve, I believe that any future challenge won't be an issue for me as well."

It looks like Mr Jiang, 37, will not have much time for busking for the time being, as Hiverlab is projecting to double its revenue when its financial year ends in July.

Its staff numbers have more than doubled from about 10 pre-Covid-19 to 28 now, and the company is expanding into another unit at its Toa Payoh headquarters. It has also gone regional, opening an office in Vietnam last year. Branches in India and Indonesia are in the works.

Hiverlab's products help businesses transform digitally using immersive technologies such as virtual reality (where users enter virtual environments) and augmented reality (where digital



content is superimposed on the real world, like in the Pokemon Go app).

It has been a hard slog for Mr Jiang, a permanent resident originally from Tianjin, China. He came to Singapore in 2009 to work in a creative agency and set up Hiverlab five years later.

For the first three years or so, "the industry didn't really exist", he says. "People were also questioning whether there was any value in this technology."

Still, his team never lost faith and gradually built an impressive portfolio of big-name clients across 14 industries as diverse as banking and retail, as well as culture and religion. Its efforts have also been recognised by tech giants, and it

has been accepted into the Microsoft Mixed Reality Partner Program and Facebook's Independent Software Vendor Program for Oculus, a virtual reality platform.

As the pandemic disrupted normal routines and accelerated digital transformation across all aspects of life, it also changed his company's direction as he "realised the importance and urgency of making technology very accessible to the user".

"Before Covid-19, people saw a lot of entertainment-driven movement in immersive tech. But during Covid-19, we felt we needed to help industries build valuable applications for business operations, communications and training," he says.

With these needs in mind, Hiverlab launched three products last year.

RealityCast allows users to create augmented-reality webinars; CloudExpo helps them build experiences online, such as a virtual showroom for products; and TheHub is a remote collaboration tool for workplaces that uses immersive technology. These offerings have been well received, with several multinational companies signing multi-year contracts, he says.

One of its notable projects last year was creating a personalised experience for the Singapore Management University's graduation ceremony, where graduates created avatars by uploading selfies

Mr Ender Jiang, founder of Hiverlab, with the Oculus Quest 2 virtual reality headset. With the pandemic accelerating digital transformation, the firm is focused on creating innovative immersive technology products that are readily accessible to users. ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

and watched themselves "go on-stage" to receive their certificates, among other immersive experiences.

More exciting innovations are on the cards, including one in the logistics industry that uses data "to help the business to grow, maintain and even expand, so (it) becomes an essential part of the business. So this is something we feel is really a great achievement".

Certainly, Hiverlab seems well placed to play a bigger role in the immersive technology sector, which is projected to have a market value of US\$209.2 billion (S\$280 billion) by next year, according to the Infocomm Media Development Authority.

Even as he races to help companies transform digitally, Mr Jiang revels in finding new uses for technology in his personal life. He built a Covid-19 map of Singapore as a data visualisation project to share with friends last year.

Fatherhood has also spurred him to learn along with his children, from shooting a 3D documentary chronicling the development milestones of his sons, aged five and one, to designing a machine learning platform that encourages his elder son Edison to write Chinese characters correctly.

"I feel I'm growing my skills and, meanwhile, he's also growing his cognitive capability, so it is really a multi-beneficial journey," says Mr Jiang, who is married to a post-doctoral research fellow at the Agency for Science, Technology and Research.

"All these things I learnt are being applied to how we operate a company. So it's really a great benefit. I didn't feel any stress, I didn't feel any challenge because it's a fun part of my life."