

Singapore must position itself as an innovation-led economy: Iswaran

He stresses need to nurture a mindset that embraces calculated risks, accepts failures

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IT has never been easier for companies with innovative products, services, and business models to reach global markets – but a key question is how Singapore can position itself as an innovation-led economy, said Minister for Trade and Industry (Industry) S Iswaran on Tuesday.

To that end, the government is embarking on industry transformation maps for more than 20 sectors, with productivity being an “important dimension” in each of these. After all, productivity will be “the key basis of growth” going forward, said Mr Iswaran.

He was speaking to university students at the Ministry of Trade and Industry Economic Dialogue 2016, which focused on ways Singapore can seize global opportunities in the future economy.

“The future economy holds significant opportunities for all of us, notwithstanding some of the uncertainty we see around the world. And in particular, the digital economy allows good business ideas to take root in any part of the world, presenting unparalleled potential for enterprises,” said Mr Iswaran.

To tap this potential, both businesses and Singaporeans have their part to play. While businesses must continually innovate and embrace the digital economy, workers must deepen their skills to be nimble – especially amid rapid technological changes and evolving industry trends.

But apart from a deep mastery of



The future economy holds significant opportunities for all of us, notwithstanding some of the uncertainty around the world, says Mr Iswaran. PHOTO: MTI

skills, Mr Iswaran stressed the need to nurture a mindset that embraces calculated risks, and accepts setbacks as a learning experience.

“The key is that such skills must be complemented by a greater appetite for risk and tolerance for failure, especially in the context of innovation; a willingness to venture into uncharted waters and embrace opportunities, and to stay resilient and flexible, even in the face of adversities,” he said.

The Ministry of Trade and Industry event, held at the Singapore Management University (SMU) campus, also featured a wide-ranging panel discussion.

Disruption was a popular theme, with panellists from the private sector urging students to embrace

the opportunities offered up as a result of technological disruption.

Candice Ong, managing director, Zalora Group, pointed out how the digital revolution has changed not just e-commerce but, at a more basic level, consumer choices.

“I think (technology) has fundamentally changed the way consumers consume media, how they procure goods. . . This is not only about e-commerce. This is also about how payments have changed, how logistics have changed – all to basically cater to technological changes, whereby lifestyles have fundamentally changed,” said Ms Ong.

The future of Singapore’s manufacturing sector was also discussed, with Vincent Chong, president and CEO-designate, Singapore Technologies Engineering, voicing his belief that there remains “a lot of room” for innovation and growth in the advanced manufacturing segment.

“(This means) high value-added products that are not differentiated by manpower costs, but by intellectual property,” said Mr Chong, citing the example of robotic satellites.

Mr Chong was agreeing with remarks made by SMU president Arnoud De Meyer, who had dismissed views that Singapore’s manufacturing sector is losing its competitiveness due to high labour costs.

“This is of course only true for factories producing commodity-type products, using standard industry production processes. I believe very strongly (that) Singapore can retain manufacturing plants which can respond to high levels of complexity, and produce proprietary design products,” said Prof De Meyer.

