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## Local start-ups mimicking Silicon Valley tech giants like Google and Facebook by building quirky offices

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Founder and CEO of goGame David Ng (left) belting out a song on a karaoke machine during a birthday celebration for three of his employees at their Tai Seng Avenue office. The mobile game publisher's office has an industrial feel and a fully stocked bar. Mr Ng, who sometimes zooms up and down the office on his Segway-like Ninebot Mini, wanted to install a rock-climbing wall in the office too, but could not because of safety regulations. ST PHOTO: MARK CHEONG



Dora the cat is a permanent fixture at the 3D Matters office in Science Park. She stays in the office overnight, and has an automatic feeder, scratching post and litter box. ST PHOTO: LISABEL TING

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Gametize co-founders Keith Ng (seated) and Brenda Nicole Tan (far right) with employees in a meeting room that doubles as a makeshift cinema. Their Keong Saik Road office is filled with an eclectic mix of bric-a-brac. ST PHOTO: LISABEL TING

At 3D Matters' office in the Singapore Science Park, company co-founder Hayden Tay sometimes finds the view of her computer screen obstructed by Dora.

Dora is the office cat. The 2½-year-old feline - named after the cartoon character Dora the Explorer - has free rein of the office, and one of her favourite spots is sitting between people and their screens.

"It may sound strange, but she doesn't really bother people. Instead, she makes the office environment more relaxed," said Ms Tay.

3D Matters is among a group of local tech start-ups that are emulating the quirky, unorthodox offices of Silicon Valley giants such as Google and Facebook.

From having pet-friendly policies to installing bars, karaoke machines and day beds, they hope to create a more flexible, engaging environment for their employees.

Mobile game publisher goGame's office in Tai Seng Avenue, which spans some 4,000 sq ft, has an open bar stocked with beer, wine and an assortment of liquor, as well as a karaoke system. Tired employees can nap on a day bed, or relax in a small "park", complete with a lamp post, fake grass and a bench.

## MORE THAN FUNKY DECOR

**Google and Facebook had the culture before the office. A colourful, engaging, welcoming workplace is undoubtedly a fantastic human resource tool, but it needs to ring true with employees, or it will only ever be a new coat of paint.**

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MS LYNNE ROEDER, managing director for recruitment firm Hays in Singapore.

"Gaming is a creative field and you need to inspire people," said goGame founder David Ng.

The office was renovated last year at the cost of "a few hundred thousand" dollars, and opened in December. Mr Ng also wanted to install a rock-climbing wall and a trampoline in the office, but was thwarted by safety regulations.

## **PERKS TO BOOST PRODUCTIVITY, ATTRACT TALENT**

Ms Lynne Roeder, managing director for recruitment firm Hays in Singapore, said: "The aim of funky workspaces is normally to improve employee engagement, productivity, performance and retention."

However, she added that offices also need to have a good management culture to match the fancy furnishings: "Google and Facebook had the culture before the office. A colourful, engaging, welcoming workplace is undoubtedly a fantastic human resource tool, but it needs to ring true with employees, or it will only ever be a new coat of paint."

Mr Ng of goGame agreed: "It's important to create an environment that people will enjoy. I always tell my guys that if you love what you do, and do what you love, then it no longer feels like a job," he said.

Ms Brenda Nicole Tan, co-founder of Gametize, agreed.

"Can you imagine working in a space with cubicles and white walls and staring at a screen all day? It'll be very hard for you to come up with ideas, and you'll feel very 'sian'," she said, using the colloquial term for being bored.

Gametize is a local gamification platform developer. The start-up, which specialises in creating audience engagement content using gaming elements like scoring and competition, has also eschewed a corporate set-up for a more relaxed environment.

Its office in Keong Saik Road is a 1,100 sq ft space filled with an eclectic, cosy mix of bric-a-brac.

In a corner stands a treadmill desk where employees can work as they work out, and above the entrance to the toilet hangs a tongue-in-cheek cardboard ERP gantry.

One of their meeting rooms doubles as a makeshift cinema, with comfy bean bags, a projector and sound system. Scattered around the room is an assortment of colourful rubber balls, while on the shelves stand several board games as well as a collection of liquor.

As the firm has flexible working hours and allows employees to work from home, the system could be abused by work-shy employees.

Hence, company co-founder Keith Ng said that bringing the right people on board is important: "Because of the amount of freedom we give them, the hiring process is quite stringent.

"We test their aptitude, their street smarts and their skills, and before I hire them I meet up with them over coffee two or three times."

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Ms Siti Suhailah, who works in project management at the company, had three such meetings with Mr Ng before she joined Gametize last month. She worked in the civil service, then in a public relations agency before making the switch to a start-up.

"It was very hectic, and could be a little stifling at times," she said of her corporate days.

She was so used to fixed, early working hours that on her first few days at her new job, she turned up at work so early that no one else had arrived yet, and she was locked out of the office.

"This is all very new to me," she said with a laugh, "but I wouldn't change a thing."