

3.17 Case Study of Singapore¹

3.17.1 Profile of a Woman Entrepreneur

Despite her busy schedule, I managed to complete 3 rounds of personal interviews with Ms Sun Ho, the successful women ICT entrepreneur, each time for more than 4 hours at her office besides the various email correspondences and whatsapp messages between us. I am glad to have the opportunity to get to know Sun and am impressed by her passion in the education technology business.



Miss Sun Ho is the middle child in a modest family of 3 siblings. Her father worked 3 jobs including a full-time job, driving taxi during the nights and distributing newspapers in the morning while her mother was a part-time baby sitter. Although her parents were not educated, they still sent her to attend computer class during school holidays while she was 10 years old. She scored full marks for her basic computer class which sparked her interest in computers. Her talent and interest became apparent when she attended Nanyang Girls High School. Sun assisted the teacher in data entry work and was the champion for her inter-class Mathematics competition at 13 years old. Unlike the “typical” girl, she was not interested in Home Economics. Instead, she decided to join the Aero Modelling Club to create aeroplanes. During Junior College, she was one of the 2 girls whom completed computing at A levels. Sun graduated with a Bachelor of Science (Information Systems and Computer Science) from National University Singapore in year 2000. She did not pursue her honours as she was eager to earn money to support her family.

¹ This case study was conducted by Irene Boey, Consulting Director, Integral Solutions (Asia) Pte Ltd, Singapore.

Sun started as an intern developing SAP-based Sales Force Automation software at Toppan Forms. Then upon graduating, she joined WorldGroup Consulting and helped to deploy Onyx CRM onsite at Mobilink in Pakistan before moving to Chicago to work for Tellabs Inc. When the dot.com bubble burst, she returned to Singapore and carry on working as programmer at ST Dynamics.

She joined Hello Technology in 2005 to gain experience in Sales and Marketing and continued as Head of Sales & Marketing till 2009. This opportunity enabled Sun to learn about business related activities like business models, pricing, profit margins, partnerships and particularly how to sell technology products and services, delivery and sales cycles. Beside account management and servicing of major anchor clients, she led the sales team in understanding and fulfilling customer requirements, often helping customers envision how they can get to the next level. She also drove Hello's new product direction, user interface aesthetics and usability engineering.

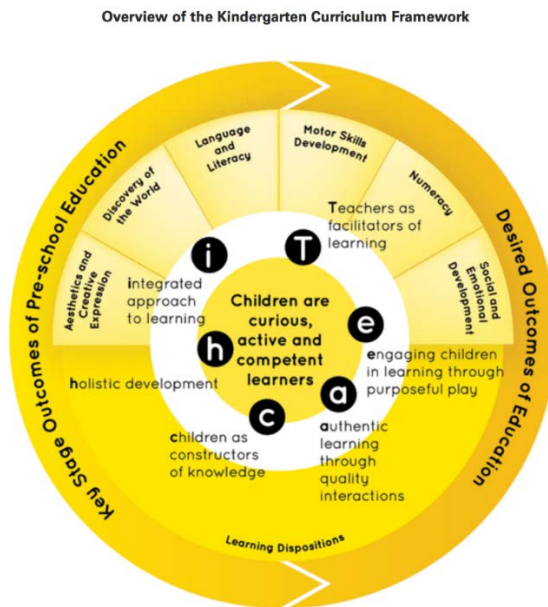
Throughout Sun's working career, her entrepreneurial spirit did not waver. She continued to try out business ideas after work. Amongst the different business ventures including import export business, fashion related products and services, she started a Board games' café with a few partners but this lasted for less than 6 months before selling her shares to her partners due to differences in management. Through these experiences, she learnt that business partners, talents and business management skills matters a lot in business as well as having a unique product that is scalable and can bring great value to its customers. Sun realised her shortcomings and wanted to learn more about business models, profit margin and selling and marketing techniques. This was also one of the reasons she joined Hello Technology and embark on Sales and Marketing career. The skills and experience in her working career were very useful for her entrepreneurial journey.

3.17.2 Profile of a Company

Inspired by the power of education as well as Facebook, Sun wanted to use technology to help children connect with each other across borders and to learn from each other through her Social Networking platform. She started working on the prototype with an intern in 2009 but the project did not take off as parents were not in favour of free-style communications amongst children although they liked the idea of learning from each other. They prefer their children to have a safe platform for communication. Instead of losing confidence, Sun decided to offer the Social networking platform to schools instead. She worked with Ministry of Education to offer her platform to primary schools. Primary schools adopted the platform for their upper level students aged 10 and 11 as a communication platform, especially during the school holidays. These experiences have contributed to the building blocks of LittleLives Inc.

Although Sun successfully broke into the education sector, her revenue was below S\$100,000 even with more than 100 primary schools signing up to her platform. With more than 50% market share and due to the low profit margin, she was aware she would not be able to sustain her business as Singapore’s education market was very small with only 185 primary schools in total. Moreover, schools were unwilling to pay higher subscription due to the platform being non-academically related and doesn’t directly impact the schools’ KPI.

While she was feeling worried, Sun was referred to an officer from the Pre-schools division of the Ministry of Education due to her work with the Primary Schools. Unlike Primary Schools, Pre-schools did not merely focus on literacy but on the holistic development of children through 6 learning areas where children acquire knowledge, skills and learning dispositions.



These areas are Aesthetics and Creative Expression; Discovery of the World; Language and Literacy; Motor Skills Development; Numeracy; Social and Emotional Development. This means they will be able to use her platform more extensively. Sun sensed the opportunity and readily accepted the challenge to develop her platform to suit the Pre-schools’ needs. Her efforts were rewarded with the adoption of the platform by a group of 50 Pre-schools.



As a result, LittleLives Inc was officially started in 2011. *“Education has a huge impact in my life and is the foundation of my success today. With a degree in Computing and a good career in Technology, I want to invest my time and energy in EduTech. I started LittleLives with the mission to create a world where education inspires children and brings joy in learning, where school allows children grow up with an understanding and love for people around the world. It takes a global village to raise a child”* said Sun.

Figure 1. Little Helpers for Parents



The target customers for LittleLives are Childcare Centers and Kindergartens in the Pre-School sector. LittleLives offers variety of services from their platform which mainly help schools manage their operations. These services can be assessed through their website or mobile application and include attendance and temperature taking, keeping track of learning activities of children in schools and field trip, enabling parents to track child’s progress daily as well as payment to schools.



LittleLives' business model is based on Software as a service (SaaS) which offers services through their centrally hosted platform to subscribers. Customers pay an average flat fee of S\$5 per child per month for the 3 modules including attendance & health; student/staff management and tracking of the child's learning journeys.



Sun describes LittleLives as “an EduTech startup which helps make the complex running of a school simple and enjoyable.” Currently, LittleLives has been adopted by 700 out of 1,800 preschools in Singapore. This means LittleLives has managed to capture 1/3 of Singapore's pre-school market share within 5 years with annual revenue grown to S\$1.1million from S\$100K. The team at LittleLives has also grown to 25 people. The startup is now a successful EduTech company and has already started its expansion plan overseas.

3.17.3 Findings

3.17.3.1 Success Factors

Here are some of the factors that has contributed to the success of LittleLives.

Nurturing Environment and Support System

Sun's early exposure supported by her family to attend computer classes has enabled early discovery of her interest at a young age. Her interest in computing deepened in the nurturing environment of the schools she attended. During her University days, Sun had her first taste of entrepreneurship by selling flowers which she enjoyed. She found her interest and passion as a result. Sun told me that:

"Ideas are like seeds which can flower into a beautiful garden in the right conditions. I grew up in an environment that allowed my trial and error to pave way for my success today, to be able to found EduTech startup LittleLives is a dream that I'm always grateful for. The environment in which we flourish may vary for different people. What worked for me was the freedom to make choices, exposure to different ideas, learning to be independent and responsible, combined with availability of high quality education which opened my mind. My family always allowed me to select my schools or courses, my hobbies, my adventures, even if that may sometimes lead to failure. When we were kids, my mum brought us to understand the different religions. She debated on the virtues of different ideals and showed us there is not just one right answer and shared her willingness to kindle discourse and exploration. When I started part-time work as a teenager, that gave me the life skills to thrive later. I learned to connect with people from different communities and be responsible for my performance & decisions. Finally, access to high quality education regardless of our backgrounds, that really provided me the skills to expand my mind and continue learning through life."

Hence, the importance of a nurturing environment and support from family and education are extremely important for an entrepreneur to try out ideas, build up confidence and discover her passion.

Supportive Mentor, Passion, Strong Determination and Clear Vision

Managing and growing the business is never easy. Other than the knowledge from education, skills and management experience from her career, Sun continue to actively seeks guidance and learn from mentors, read online materials and management books. She even hired a life coach for support and guidance. Sun elaborated that:

"Many founders have remarked to me that the entrepreneurship journey is lonely. Some have gotten support via founder communities, some from their loved ones while others just trudged through the hard days. During the toughest time in my journey, I sought to find companionship and understanding from various places. While I had a wonderful friend who stood by me, the one that made a great difference to my growth was my mentor and life coach."

Personal and professional life is often not as separate as we like to imagine it. That we are human and are affected by things that happen to us and around us. My life coach helped me to learn about myself, my strengths and also my blind spots. Sometimes she would point me to resources, research and books that enlighten me on the troubles I faced. Sometimes, just by bringing a different perspective and a kind word helped me break out from the dark to find light in hope. Having wise people by your side who believes in bringing out the best in you while being unafraid to tell you the hard truths is a blessing. I wish everyone will find mentors who guide them along their journey of life."

Other than having deep passion and strong determination, Sun is clear in her Vision. She wanted LittleLives to go global within 5 years but does not like the idea of getting her company listed. She hopes to continue adding value to holistic development in children, the smooth operations of school and to help educators and schools through knowledge sharing. A clear vision is important to enable Sun to inspire her team and steer the business in the right direction amidst technological disruptions that are the key feature of the 4th Industrial revolution.

Value and Culture

While LittleLives is an Education Technology business which designs tech tools to help schools manage their operations, Sun attributes their success to “*High Tech and High Touch*” where they focus on human factors such as unlimited training to give the schools peace of mind. They also share knowledge and experience in management from other schools. She is proud that her team pays attention to customers’ requests and are keen to solve problems for the customers.

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Talent Strategy

As talents are major contributor to growing a business, Sun’s growth strategy includes a Peer review bonus strategy which is also a staff retention strategy to reward and motivate her team. This strategy involves 360 performance review by the team and team mates voluntarily giving a share of their bonus to deserving team mates. Sun believes in “*hiring people who can think, lead and care rather than minions*” and she encourages the team to give guidance to new team mates. They adopted a flat organisational structure with only 2 levels which encourages team mates to take ownership and responsibilities for their own duties.

In terms of resources, LittleLives secure their talents mainly through referrals and job portals. They select candidates through task-based interviews by requesting potential candidates to do mini projects. They assessed the candidate’s aptitude as well as attitude to determine suitability for the job. At different stages of growth, there will be need for different skillsets and capabilities. While it’s always great to have team mates who grow as the startup expands, it is also necessary and inevitable to have renewals in the team.

Country's ICT Policies

Government policies affect business growth. The Singapore government's emphasis on increasing automation for companies to transform their business models has helped to increase motivation from the traditional education sector to adopt technologies. This has provided timely opportunity for Sun's Education Technology business to ride on current wave and penetrate into the Education sector in Singapore. Sun said that:

"The market is where our ideas seek to find a place to blossom. When the ground is soft and friendly, it makes for a better chance for success. The right government policies help soften the ground to encourage entrepreneurship and innovation. We truly benefitted from the vision of the nation's leaders to create a Smart Nation. In place of fear they presented hope of a better nation and lives through the use of technology in areas like healthcare, home, education and more. They created policies and programs to allow innovators to receive support for dreaming big while starting small and showing results. The government also put in place the right measures to prevent abuse and that creates an environment of trust and belief that good ideas and solutions will prevail which present the best outcomes to the people. A forward looking environment that is strong in execution of ideas, that is what helped us succeed thus far in our endeavour for innovation."

Funding

As Sun understands that funding is a very important component for business to succeed, she did not start business immediately after graduation. She worked to accumulate skills and experience as well as funds from her career. With that, Sun could self-fund the business with her own savings of S\$200,000 at the start. With clear vision and proven results, LittleLives was able to attract outside investors. Most of the investors came from referrals and partners who have seen the good work of LittleLives. Since 2012 and as the business grows, Sun has managed to secure more funding from five Angel investors and Venture Capitalists, thus working capital has grown to \$1,800,000. The funding has enabled the business to continue growing.

Going Global

The need for international expansion is natural for all SMEs in Singapore due to the small domestic market and high cost of business. With an average business costs of more than \$100,000 per month, Sun needed more customers to shoulder the ever-increasing development cost of the platform and other business costs. Moreover, some of her pre-school customers in Singapore have branches overseas and since LittleLives has the largest market share in Singapore for pre-school edutech, Sun and her ambitious team are ready for the expansion.



In 2015, LittleLives set up office in Malaysia and managed to offer their platform to 100 schools in 2 years. Initially, starting a new market proved to be very challenging. To learn about the local education landscape and finding potential clients was an uphill task. Their team basically went door to door to visit schools and often were turned down and kept waiting outside the schools. Eventually their persistence pulled off and the team started getting on track to signing schools and even receiving referrals from happy clients.



LittleLives was also one of the partners that collaborated with MySchool of Life to organise Malaysia's first International Pre-School Conference (IPEC) in Aug 2017 with Deputy Minister of Education as the Guest of Honor. The event aimed to connect early childhood operators and educators with academicians, politicians, practitioners and community leaders in an effort to gather insights and exchange views on the early childhood education system in Malaysia. It brought together educators and leaders representing 1,200 preschools in the region.



Sun was very excited to see educators and leaders sharing ideas in teaching, learning, and using technology to help the schools with operations and communications.



They are also accelerating their expansion plan and have opened offices in Beijing, China and Ho Chi Min and Hanoi in Vietnam in 2017. Challenges are different compared to Malaysia and the current challenge is localisation with more obstacles ahead. The team is excited to get started but are aware of the uphill battle they will face.

3.17.3.2 Challenges

The entrepreneurial journey is often challenging and Sun has her share of difficulties especially in starting and growing the business. Driven by her passion and determination, she has managed to overcome these

Applying Technology in Real Life Problems

It is one of the most common challenges for technology companies servicing end users. Sun has to improve her platform and application continuously by being on the ground and listening closely to her customers' needs and wants.

Challenge of Balancing Customer Needs with Organisation's Development Goals.

Sun tries to accommodate some of her customers' needs after studying the practicability of the need with her development team to see if the particular need is common for the majority of the customers and whether it is in line with internal development goals.

Predictability of Users

Users of systems will always dream or wish to have new features which are not predictable. Sun tries to improve this by sharing information of the industry as well as other users' needs in the same industry so as to influence user needs and improve predictability.

Competition

There are always other similar technologies available as well as many ways of implementation and trade-offs. Sun improves her competitive edge by developing useful features and serving customers better. The benefit of serving the current pool of 700 Pre-schools gave her precious experience and domain expertise in uniquely designing solutions that can positively impact the sector and individual Pre-schools.

Setting Up Standard Operating Processes & Ensuring Good Communication

As the business grows, it is important to set up proper processes and improve communication channels to ensure that the team works cohesively and effectively. At LittleLives, individual teams come up with their own processes to support their roles and their performances are tracked by matrices. Sun said that:

“Some of the important Indicators are tracked via OKRs (Objectives and Key Results) instead of KPIs as it is a more goal driven and advanced way of tracking results. Beyond tracking onboarding of new customers, usage, problems encountered by customers, and feedback from users, OKRs have clear objectives at the company, team and personal levels.”

Improvement of Skills and Knowledge

Other than reliance on experiences, Sun is always on the lookout for relevant online tools to help the developer and finance teams improve their skills, communication, budgeting, and align with industry best practices.

Improvement of Entrepreneur's Mental Strengths as Business Grows

Entrepreneurs often faced challenges throughout their journey. Sun hired a life coach, who is a psychologist by training, to be her leadership coach. The life coach advises her as a mentor and identifies areas to improve. The life coach gave her emotional support and helped her improve her mental strength. Sun describes her emotional turbulence when running her company as *“the velocity transcending from euphoria to despair is amazing. I really like this recent book I read and recommend to every entrepreneur, The Hard Thing About Hard Things. Ben Horowitz, the author, talks about ‘The Struggle’. It is real. He signed my copy of the book with ‘Sun, stay strong in the struggle!’ warms my heart.”* She has since extended the coaching to her management team which has produced great results. Amongst many areas that improved, the management team meetings with the coach helped identify gaps in the expansion plan and strengthened communications in the team. She believes that:

“Having a dedicated mentor (life coach) for any management team is an important asset as the coach looks after your personal and professional growth while giving independent advice and insights which is sometimes transformational.”

Sustainability of the Business

As Singapore has a very small domestic market and a very high cost of business, Sun is aware that it is not sufficient to find the right industry to develop a niche but to also globalise to develop larger markets to improve sustainability. Sun believes that:

“Due to the small Singapore market, only the top 2 companies in any industry can make some profit and only the top company of an industry can make 50% of the industry profits”.

Even though her company is the top company in the Pre-School industry, she strongly believed that to sustain the business, LittleLives needed to go global to get more customers and grow their market size. They started this by sending one of their directors to set up presence in Malaysia in 2015. He stayed in Malaysia full time to build the business there.

Raising Funds at Initial Stage.

It was not easy for Sun, as a female entrepreneur, to raise funds especially during her initial stage. When the idea of LittleLives was conceptualised in 2007, she found it difficult to get people to take her seriously especially being a young female. As a result, she had to depend on her savings to fund her business as a start. She said:

“The investors prefer to invest in male entrepreneurs especially in the Technology business as they believe that females are non-aggressive and less ambitious and may not be suitable to grow Technology businesses”.

Sun had to work doubly hard to prove and convince the investors to fund her growing business in 2012.

3.17.3.3 Policy Recommendations

While the business environment in Singapore provides support for entrepreneurship, Singapore’s policies and programmes for entrepreneurship and enterprise development are gender-neutral. Some of the programs that Sun leveraged on are:

iStart Programme by IDA in 2011

IDA has initiated the iStart Programme in 2011 for local infocomm start-ups to gain access to market, connections, funding investments, and high quality international mentors. iSTART programme seeks to empower the start-up community by attracting world-class start-up development platforms which provides training and mentorship for startup founders, and an Asia Pacific event which serves as a launch-pad for new products and services.

This gave Sun the chance to explore key overseas markets like Silicon Valley and China to meet mentors & partners. Sun feels that this is a very valuable exposure for young startups.

Spring Singapore’s Innovation Capability Voucher (ICV)

Apart from consultancy, ICV also supports SMEs in the adoption and implementation of pre-scoped Integrated Solutions to improve business efficiency and productivity. This help to give credibility to Sun’s platform and provides reassurance to potential clients interested in their solutions. The Market Readiness Assistance (MRA) by International Enterprise Singapore (IE) co-funds relevant cost when companies make their first bold step into other markets. It offers assistance in setting up overseas offices. Sun is in the midst of an application to set up more overseas offices.

Sun feels that Singapore government can have

“More cultural type programs that help startups understand and integrate with different local markets. Being Singapore entrepreneurs, our market is small and any help for us to think and succeed globally is a step forward.”

3.17.3.4 Advices for Women Entrepreneurs

When asked for advice that Sun would give to women entrepreneurs/women start-ups, she summed this up by saying

“Set an ambitious vision. Then set a direct path to the first milestone of that vision. To dream big and be strong in execution is what helps us be credible founders.

Our communication skills, ability to inspire and to build an awesome team would be what keeps us going daily. Find meaning in your work can help inspire your team moving forward. Good days are easy, but hard days require more than just grit to get by. A shared meaningful journey is what helps keep the team going. Understand your management team and help them grow personally and professional by investing in them.

And when things fail, communicate more. Be unafraid to seek help. Your vulnerability is not a weakness, but a strength. It allows others to see us as human, just like them. When people are comfortable talking what's not working, then we can start finding solutions that work.”

With information from the above case, we can itemize Sun’s advice to women entrepreneurs and startups as follows.

Dream Big, Have Ambitious Vision and Be Strong in Execution

Big dreams that are based on deep passion are important pillars for successful business to be sustainable. An ambitious and clear vision with strong execution strategy will provide the entrepreneur the strength to steer the business in the right direction amidst technological disruptions that are the key feature of the 4th Industrial revolution.

Ability to Inspire and Build an Awesome Team

An entrepreneur’s journey is demanding and lonely and no one can be successful by doing this alone. It is important to inspire the team to join in as “a shared meaningful journey” which can “keep the team going. Understand your management team and help them grow personally and professional by investing in them” to build that awesome team.

Unafraid to Seek Help and Start Finding Solutions That Work

It is common for entrepreneurs to face obstacles and challenges throughout their journey. It is important to understand that “Your vulnerability is not a weakness, but a strength. It allows others to see us as human, just like them”. Therefore do not be afraid to ask and seek help or collaborate

with others as this is when you are aware of what is not working and start to find solutions that work.

From the above information and my many other discussions with various women entrepreneurs, there is no straightforward advice for women entrepreneurs and start-ups since different women face different circumstances. The fact that women often need to juggle with many responsibilities, roles and different tasks all the time for work-life balance, they must have deep strong passion and be prepared to deal with different circumstances and added responsibilities as entrepreneurs to make their dreams come true.

3.17.3.5 Summary and Discussion

Sun is currently only 39 years old. Her opportunity to attend computer class at an early age helped her discover her interest early. Her interest deepened and confidence built up as she acquired her skills and knowledge through data entry work and computer classes at school and won the Mathematics inter-class competition. During her University days, she told me she has her first taste of entrepreneurship by selling flowers which she enjoyed. She found her interest and passion. As per my analysis above, valuable support from family and education as well as nurturing environment are important factors in building strong foundation of entrepreneurship.

Despite having a good career involving technology, Sun's entrepreneurial spirit did not waver. She started various businesses and despite the failures she continued to pursue her passion. She is ambitious, has clear mission and wanted to invest her time and energy in Education Technology business. She was persistent and continued to improve herself by acquiring knowledge from life coach, mentors and online information to improve her skills to manage her growing business.

The Singapore government's emphasis on increasing automation, Artificial Intelligence (AI) and big data for companies to transform their business models has helped to increase motivation from education sector to adopt technologies. This has provided the opportunity for Sun's Education Technology business to grow in the Education sector in Singapore and to gain the credibility. This provided Sun with added confidence to expand her business overseas.

Based on my thesis submitted for my MBA in entrepreneurial management: In order for the entrepreneur to be successful, it is important to abide by the 4 fundamental practices according to Larry Farrell, the leading authority on entrepreneurship. These fundamental practices seem to be the contributing factors for Sun's successful too:

Sense of Mission

Sun believes that she is creating value for customers, employees, and, herself. She found meaning in her business and her mission is to create a world where education inspires children and brings joy in learning, where school allows children grow up with an understanding and love for people around the world.

Customer/Product Vision

Successful Entrepreneurs have a single, integrated vision of customers and products. Sun does this by investing in R&D continuously to improve her platform and application and by being on the ground and listening closely to her customers' needs and wants.

High-Speed Innovation

This is the entrepreneur's ultimate weapon to stay ahead of the competition. Speed and creativity are major competitive factors in our global economy. It is important for the entrepreneur to feel that it is necessary to innovate and Sun firmly believes the only way to win competitors is to focus on developing useful features that served customers better and faster.

Self-inspired Behavior

Successful entrepreneurs love what they do and they're highly committed to their work. They will constantly try to get better at what they do and their performance is high. I can see Sun's persistent attitude, firm commitment and high performance which are the building blocks of her successful entrepreneurial journey.

As we can derive from the above case study, there is no single factor which contributes to success. Other than passion, the women entrepreneur will need to continue to build up relevant capabilities and skills which are needed to manage and grow her business at different growth stages. She will need to have the patience and determination to stay strong in her entrepreneurial journey based on clear, meaningful mission that she believes in order to build a sustainable business.