

Singapore eyes global ambitions with state-led investments in artificial intelligence, says CEO of SGInnovate

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IN BRIEF

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How AI can be deployed to deliver better, individualized and novel healthcare solutions is one of the city-state's latest cultural and social experiments, and is where part of the planned S\$150 million (\$109 million) funding announced in May by the National Research Foundation will be deployed over the next five years.

The regulators in Singapore are mindful that whatever innovation occurs must be scalable and relevant for the rest of the world, and part of this has to be done through more harmonized regulatory environments, among other things, Leonard told MLex in a wide-ranging interview during a visit to Hong Kong.

"What is important for America is also important for Singapore, but it does not work the other way around necessarily. If it is important to Singapore, it does not automatically mean it is important for others," he said

Singapore has been a leader in employing government guidance and support in advancing developments in high-tech sectors. The Monetary Authority of Singapore, or MAS, for example, has led a big push for innovation in fintech by creating the right mindset for that kind of innovation by asking the private sector how, for instance, blockchain can be adopted in a vast array of tasks in the financial services sector, including in automating identification compliance requirements, Leonard said.

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On the issue of optimal levels of government intervention, the state has an important role to play in creating the right regulatory environment, said Leonard, who was formerly an IT executive before being tapped to be vice chairman of Singapore's Infocomm Development Authority under the Ministry of Communications and Information.

For autonomous vehicles to become commercialized, many parts of the puzzle, such as legislation on traffic rules and insurance laws, have to be reviewed, because making such vehicles a reality doesn't just involve a group of engineers who build the vehicles.

"It is not [just] a tech problem, but it is also the systems, because the rules of the road are written for us," he said. "In that sense, the government has to be a very close partner in making some of these things happen."

While helping create the right environment and mental space, it is also important to ensure that the humans who use the technology are protected, and this debate can be best illustrated through the example of crypto-currencies such as Bitcoin, which run on blockchain technology.

"Do I love cryptocurrency? And am I uncomfortable with cryptocurrency? The answer to both question is: Yes. It is inevitable in that sense because I am not comfortable with the secrecy of cryptocurrencies. There are people moving money and we do not know who they are and unfortunately in today's world, those things are very relevant," he said.

Since Singapore brands itself as an innovation hub for the whole world, one area where the government plays an important role is in ensuring that the rules are harmonized across borders, so that companies can scale up and take their business ideas into markets elsewhere in the world.

In the area of fintech, MAS is working closely with its counterparts in other jurisdictions such as the Hong Kong Monetary Authority, or HKMA, and also the UK's Financial Conduct Authority to ensure that "if it is blue here, it is blue there. You do not have to go through the whole thing again," Leonard said.

The city-state's move into health technology, or healthtech, is aligned with its ambitions to be a provider of global solutions.

"It does not mean that credit card payments aren't a global challenge. We are not going to do something because it is simply for us. We don't say what is important to Singapore. We try to think what is important to many [other countries]. If it is important to many, it will inevitably be important to Singapore, because Singapore is part of the global community."

But health "is a tough one and a very tough one because of the established

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features for doctors and caregivers around the world" who feel some sense of discomfort in moving to new ways of doing things. As a sector, it is also a lot more complex than fintech, because it involves real lives rather than just financial transactions on payment apps.

"If something goes wrong on payment apps, it is frustrating. But if something goes wrong in health, that would mean an end of someone's life," Leonard said.

The Singaporean government sees its move into AI and healthcare as a "social and cultural journey" that can only come to fruition with the government playing a key role in providing the right environment – including regulations – to form a breeding ground for innovation, which is what defines the role of quasi-state bodies such as SGInnovate.

An important part of the innovation journey is translating the great research that is done in Singapore into real solutions, thereby taking them from labs into markets, because "research itself does not solve a problem but only gives you a path."

"We are doing it in research, but research itself does not solve the problem. It is a part of solution," he said. "If Alexander Fleming had done a lot of work on penicillin but had not done anything to make it available to others, it would not have become something that would have saved millions of people's lives."

The perception that somehow Silicon Valley is great because the government does not interfere is inaccurate, because it was with the help of US-government funding 50 years ago in areas such as defense that startups were formed that went onto become companies such as Fairchild, Intel and Hewlett Packard, Leonard said.

Singapore is not trying to emulate any particular model, nor is it working in isolation, but instead sees itself more as part of a network of contributors along with other start-up eco-systems like San Diego, San Francisco, London or Toronto, places where start-ups are blazing a trail in areas such as AI.

China is one of the world's leaders in terms of AI, thanks to investments from both major corporate backers such as Tencent, Baidu and Alibaba as well as from the government, and much innovation is taking place in cities such as Shenzhen, which has a cluster of companies that are doing cutting edge things on a number of fronts in the IT sector.

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