

Age not a good barometer of tech savviness, say panellists at Smart Nation forum

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SINGAPORE - As going digital becomes more prevalent in Singapore, especially with the Covid-19 pandemic, many people may assume that the elderly are less savvy with technology and, as a result, are in danger of being left behind in the nation's digital transformation.

But this is a misconception and people from other age groups can be vulnerable too, said panellists on Friday (March 12) during a discussion on not leaving anyone behind amid the Covid-19 digital tsunami.

Speaking at a Smart Nation and U panel on the topic, Minister for Communications and Information S. Iswaran noted that there can be a gap among senior citizens in their participation in going digital, adding later that the Government has launched a programme to help the elderly pick up tech skills.

"But I do want to very quickly dispel the notion that, somehow, seniors are not tech savvy because there are many seniors who put us to shame," said Mr Iswaran at the Marina Bay Sands hybrid broadcast studio where the panel was held and streamed live from.

Dr Carol Soon, the head of the Institute of Policy Studies' (IPS) Society and Culture Department, said while it is unfortunate that people often associate senior citizens as being not tech savvy, and very susceptible to misinformation, "we see that with other demographic groups as well".

She added that even for young people, it should not be assumed they are all savvy and discerning. She pointed to a recent IPS study that found young people had different capabilities in spotting fake news.

"That's also (a) very big challenge for policymakers, for representatives from the private sector and the people sector," said Dr Soon. "It is no longer as simple as... zooming in on one particular demographic like people of low socioeconomic status or seniors.

Another issue raised during the panel discussion was how the move to get computers and phones into the hands of children from vulnerable families to try to close the digital gap for them has created another problem.

The kids did not get enough supervision from their parents on using the devices and were thus prone to being exposed to online ills such as sexually explicit content.

On this, Mr Iswaran said it was very important that parents understand what avenues are available to them to manage their children's exposure, especially when the kids are younger. Investing in education on this is also key and he said schools play an important role.

The discussion also touched on whether universal digital access should be a basic right for everyone in Singapore to help plug the digital divide between people who have access and those who do not.

To this, Mr Iswaran said that universal access, to ensure everyone who needs access to the Internet gets it, "is something that we should be committed to".

"However, what form it takes is something we shouldn't be formulaic or doctrinal about," he said, adding that Singapore should be prepared to explore different possibilities to achieving this.

He noted that while some people may think having each Housing Board flat wired up with Wi-Fi is the way to go, cost considerations aside, it may make more sense for some people to have mobile Internet access instead.

But even as Singapore transforms digitally, one big concern is whether people without deep tech skills, or who are "tech lite", will be left behind too.

In a separate evening dialogue on tech producers in a post-Covid Smart Nation, Minister-in-charge of the Smart Nation Initiative Vivian Balakrishnan said that techies are important, but people with other skill sets are needed too.

"We actually need multidisciplinary teams - we need artists, we need musicians, we need designers. In fact, even more so now than before," said Dr Balakrishnan, who is also Foreign Minister.

For instance, he said that it is not enough now to just know how to code a website as people with an eye for design are also needed to create the site.

During the dialogue, an audience member said he was worried local tech companies might get left out as more and more tech multinational corporations set up shop in Singapore.

On this, Dr Balakrishnan assured that "we have to make sure that our local industry does not get left behind", noting that local companies are "still the bedrock of our society and our economy".

"The challenge, therefore, is how do we help you to compete with, or complement or be part of global supply chains," he said.

Another pain point for companies raised was a shortage of tech talent even as demand for tech rises.

Dr Balakrishnan said that while local universities have upped their intake for tech courses, it is not enough to meet talent needs here.

This is why the Government is trying to encourage people to make a mid-career switch to tech, he said, adding that Singapore will also "need talent from outside to complement us".

"We need a combination of confidence to (being) open, and to know that we can face the competition," he said.