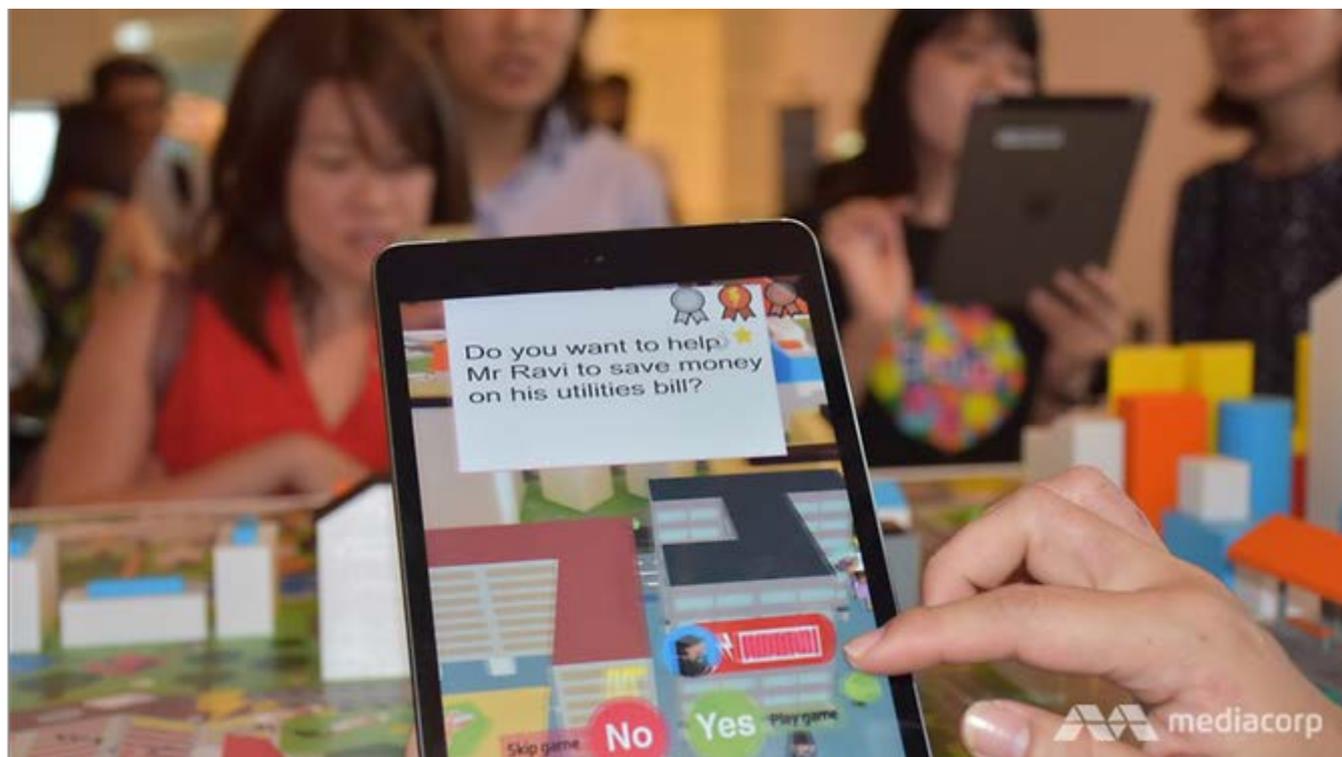


Commentary: Smart Nation a success if it helps Singaporeans tackle everyday challenges

Success in smart cities must start with the difficulties people face every day. This rationale must be applied in our drive towards a Smart Nation, argues SUTD's Poon King Wang.



Members of the public can download the smARt Nation app on their mobile phones and use augmented reality to experience the "possibilities of a Smart Nation". (Photo: Winnie Goh)

[By Poon King Wang](#)

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SINGAPORE: About a week ago, [Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said that Singapore “must do much better”](#) in realising our Smart Nation vision.

Over the last three years, Singaporeans have seen many new initiatives launched to realise Singapore's Smart Nation ambitions.

At the back of their minds, Singaporeans understand the importance of becoming a Smart Nation: A Smart Nation attracts investments and makes urban systems more efficient. They get it that their city will be better, in some way, in the near and far future.

But what many of them want to see more of, is how becoming a Smart Nation can help them with the challenges they face every day now and in the future.

Singaporeans are not alone. This is a recurring sentiment from our research work on smart cities and digital economies around the world.



A safety driver sits in a moving driverless car during a public trial run by Southeast Asia's leading ride-hailing firm Grab in Singapore in 2016. (Photo: AFP/Roslan Rahman)

So many smart cities invest in technologies to implement cashless payments, provide transport timings and improve public services.

But if these cities are already fairly developed, these new innovative technologies can feel incremental, and insufficiently compelling for people to switch from the old. Singapore, for example, already offers many convenient cashless and cash payment choices, a good transport system and efficient e-government services.

DESIGN FOR LIFE'S DAILY CHALLENGES

But if people do not switch, it slows the speed of diffusion of innovations. This impedes progress of smart city initiatives, and puts the ultimate success of the smart city at risk.

How can this be resolved? One way is through public engagement and communications about why people should switch. Many smart cities already attempt this persuade-and-educate approach, albeit with different degrees of success.

Another way is with time – implementations take time. Once cities scale up test-beds and sandboxes, people will be convinced.

A third way is with patience – results take time. Initiatives might feel incremental now, but once cities implement more of them, they will steadily add up to a "tipping point" where the benefits become self-evident.

Our recent research work suggests a fourth way. Drawing on the sentiments shared with us, this fourth way first asks people what their daily difficulties are. It then determines how smart technologies can help them overcome these difficulties. People can thus see the benefits of a Smart Nation more easily.



What if Smart Nation initiatives could target the everyday problems of Singaporeans? Then people can relate better and see the benefits.

TWO EXAMPLES - HEALTHCARE AND WORK

Take health for example. Singapore is waging a war on diabetes. It wants people to move more and eat less. There are many technologies that provide information, monitor health, manage diets, track activity and give nudges.

The problem is this: People do want to move more and eat less, but they tend to eat more and move less instead.

In other words, all these smart technologies can only do so much if people find it difficult daily to stay motivated to take care of their health, especially amid their busy daily schedules.

What if we tackled this daily difficulty that people struggle with? We would first measure their motivation levels. Such tools - and evidence of their efficacy - already exist. We would also take stock of their busy schedules, like how financial planners take stock of their clients' commitments.

We would then design smart health technologies and interventions - such as patient activation and self-efficacy scales - tailored to their motivation levels and schedules. People will thus find it less difficult daily to move more and eat less.

Success at the city-scale will be more likely.

Another example is work. It is a chief area of concern as more jobs are predicted to be disrupted by technology, and people worry if they will be displaced by automation.

Certain segments such as the professionals, managers and executives over 40 find it harder and harder to find new jobs that match their previous pay. The emotional and financial stresses add up. The social fabric is strained.

What if we tried to crack this challenge they are facing? There is emerging evidence that a job is not displaced all at once, but task by task, over time.

A 2016 MIT Sloan Management Review article pointed out that technologies can substitute and complement what people do, and this "fundamental economic reality ... is frequently overlooked: Tasks that cannot be substituted by automation are generally complemented by it".



Workers at a manufacturing facility in Singapore. (File photo: AFP/Roslan Rahman)

This presents a possibility. As workers' jobs are substituted task-by-task, what if we use and develop technologies to complement what workers do on the tasks that are not substituted?

The value of their work can thus increase, making it possible to mitigate, maintain or even raise the pay they receive. Workers will hence be able to see how smart technologies help them, if not every day, then at least whenever they receive their paycheck.

This proposed fourth way of tackling people's daily difficulties bridges the first three. People can see upfront how smart cities help them. It is easier to communicate and understand. And the benefits grow with time and patience.

URGENCY - BUILDING CONFIDENCE FOR THE FUTURE

Tackling daily difficulties also builds confidence for the future. There is an urgent need to build that confidence. Recent global economic, social, political and technological forces have left many unsettled.

People feel a nagging uncertainty, even unease, about the future. Children worry about their ageing parents' health. Parents worry about their children's economic future. We have noticed young millennials become increasingly worried as they transit through school into the workplace.

If Singapore's Smart Nation helps Singaporeans tackle their daily difficulties, confidence is shored up day by day. Over time, they become more confident and assured of their future, and the future of those they care about.

When that happens, the success of the Smart Nation vision and Singapore as a whole will be assured too.

Poon King Wang is Director of the Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities at the Singapore University of Technology and Design.

Source: CNA/sl

Read more at <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/commentary/commentary-smart-nation-a-success-if-it-helps-singaporeans-9125438>