

People

Helping businesses to overcome language barriers

Home-grown firm rolls out online translation service for multiple Asian languages

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While Sim Lim Square is a key retail hub of information technology (IT) products, the lesser-known Sim Lim Tower is a hotchpotch of shops and offices making a real mark on the online world.

Home-grown Verzttec Consulting, based in Sim Lim Tower, is quietly making ripples in the IT field by trying to "Uberise" translation services.

The company, which was started by former IBM executive Nicholas Goh, launched an Uber-like online service three months ago allowing people who need translations from English to Asian languages – such as Malay, Japanese, Korean, Thai and Vietnamese – to hire freelance translators.

"The users can upload their texts from a mobile device and get an instant quote on how much the translation would cost," said Mr Goh, Verzttec's chief executive.

The Swifttranslate application will check its pool of about 300 translators and assign the job.

The company earns a commission of between 10 and 20 per cent for each completed job, depending on the urgency of the assignment.

Its website is up and running, and Mr Goh added: "A smartphone application is on the way and it will be ready in a few months."

He said: "We are believed to be the first company in Asia that is pro-

viding such a service for multiple Asian languages. There is a company in Japan doing translations only between English and Japanese."

Mr Goh, 37, started Verzttec as a sole proprietorship in 2000 during the dot.com boom. He rented a 1,000 sq ft office in Sims Avenue and hired two employees, including a part-timer.

The University of Bradford graduate had worked at IBM as a business technology consultant for three years when he decided to strike out on his own.

"Starting and running a business was something that I have always wanted to do," he said.

Verzttec began designing websites for companies. It entered translation work unexpectedly, when French engine oil giant Motul hired it to revamp and translate the company's French website into English and seven Asian languages – simplified and traditional Chinese, Malay, Bahasa Indonesia, Vietnamese, Japanese and Korean.

"The company said it wanted to deal with one vendor and not seven vendors," said Mr Goh.

Mr Goh roped in his friends, including university pals, to help him with the Chinese, Malay and Bahasa Indonesia translations, but his company could not handle the other languages.

The limitation prompted him to expand his firm's services to include translation and interpretation. Verzttec grew and became a private limited company in 2003.



Verzttec Consulting, which former IBM executive Nicholas Goh started in 2000, began as a website designer but switched tracks and branched out into offering translation services. With a pool of 10,000 translators, even "Zulu or African languages, we can handle", says Mr Goh. ST PHOTO LAU FOOK KONG

It caught a big break in 2009 when Singapore hosted the 17th Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) Economic Leaders' Meeting.

Ten companies, including Verzttec and two other Singapore firms, vied for the job to provide instantaneous interpretation services. Verzttec won the contract.

During the two-day summit, which was attended by then United States President Barack Obama, Verzttec had a team of 24 interpreters at the venue round the clock.

"It was not the biggest project we handled, but it was the highest-profile," Mr Goh said.

He added: "It opened doors to government projects after that."

Today, the company has 48 staff members in Singapore and owns a 5,200 sq ft office space in Sim Lim Tower that it bought in 2011.

It also has about 260 staff members in offices in Bangkok, Yangon, Ho Chi Minh City, Xiamen, Seoul,

Tokyo, London and New York.

The company has a pool of about 10,000 translators that it draws from. Together, the translators cover around 100 languages beyond the Swifttranslate online service.

"Zulu or African languages, we can handle," Mr Goh said with a laugh.

Mr Goh and his wife, Ms Jenny Woon, are the biggest shareholders of Verzttec. They own 90 per cent of the shares, while an investment company owns the rest.

The couple, who married in 2005, run the company full-time. Mr Goh handles business development while Ms Woon oversees the administrative functions.

They have four children – three girls aged six, eight and 10, as well as a nine-year-old son.

Mr Goh declined to disclose the company's revenue but pointed out that American industry research firm Common Sense Advisory last year ranked Verzttec as the

29th-largest company in the world providing translation services into local languages – and the fifth-largest such company in Asia.

He is modest about being the only Singapore company on the list.

"There is still scope for the company to grow," he said, adding that three foreign investment funds have expressed interest in buying a stake in the company, although he is not ready to sell yet.

When asked whether machines will replace human translators, just as drivers risk being made redundant when cars become driverless, Mr Goh replied: "Not really."

He elaborated: "The mastery of language includes understanding the culture and history. Machines cannot be taught that."

"They can help humans with translation and improve productivity, but they cannot replace humans totally."

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