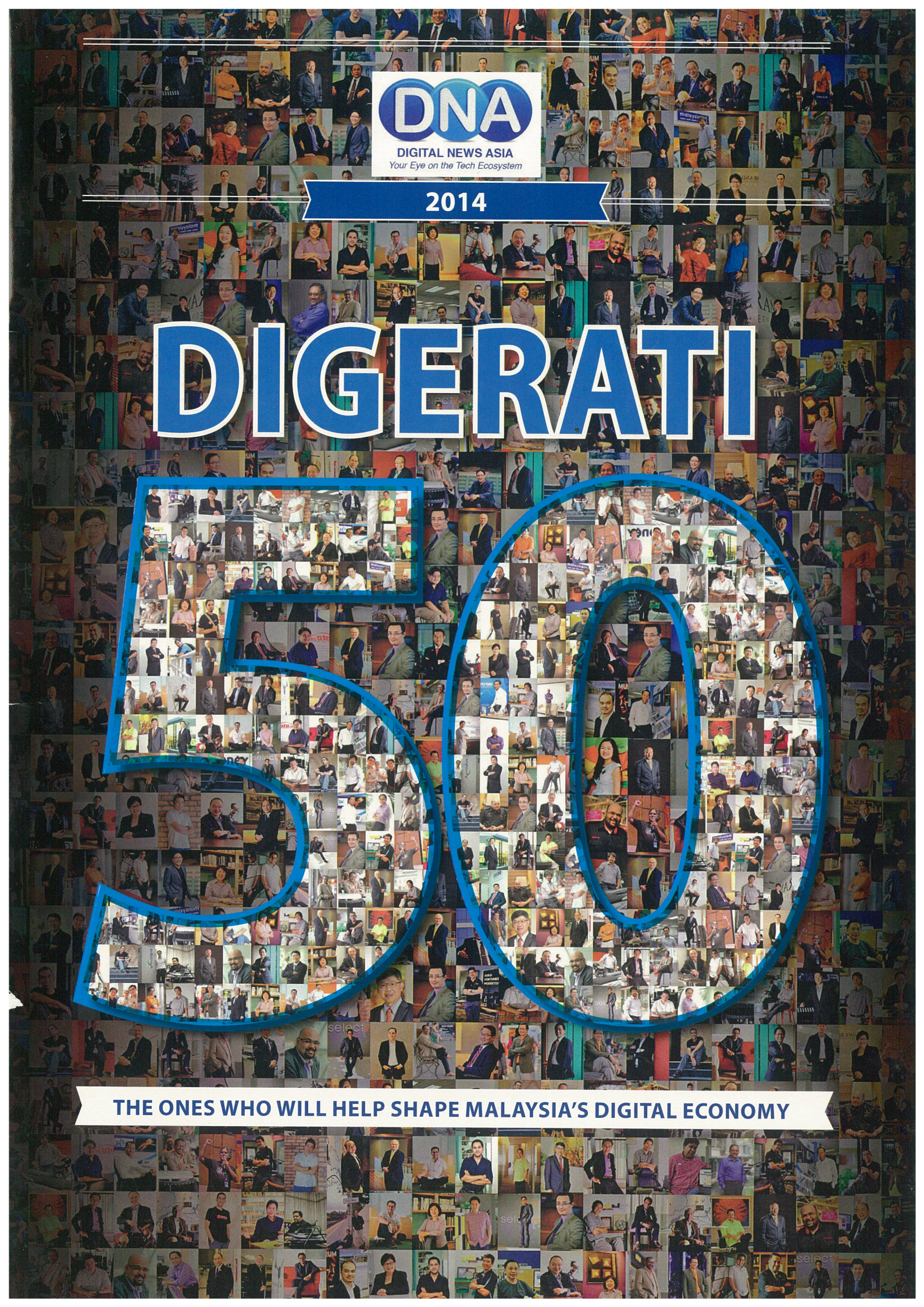
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THE ONES WHO WILL HELP SHAPE MALAYSIA'S DIGITAL ECONOMY

Building confidence in ENTERPRISE SPACE

THE story of Soft Space International and its founder Chang Chew Soon is perhaps one of doggedness and not just vision.

With his first startup having been sold, he spent more than a year with an advertising agency before deciding that he wanted get back into the tech space … and really needed to be his own boss.

Then serendipity stepped in. Some people he knew over at popular franchise Sakae Sushi came to him and asked if he could develop a 'digital ordering' system for the chain. He put a team together to develop a solution which worked so well, that it created a major problem: Long queues at the payment counter.

That's when Soft Space decided to develop a mobile-payment system that would allow credit or debit card payments to be accepted using nothing more than a smartphone or tablet.

It sourced a card reader from a Taiwan company, developed the software around it, and launched its Centralised Mobile-Point-of-Sales (mPOS) solution, with the idea that anyone – from retailers and field staff to mom-and-pop shops and roadside stall operators – would now be able to accept card payments.

Such a solution would need compliance and certification from banks and the credit card industry – which can be costly, so Soft Space decided to look for an investor.

"We wanted an angel investor, someone who would share our vision, yet at the same time be willing to give us the flexibility to operate independently without too much interference," Chew Soon says.

That's when the team met Vincent Lee, executive deputy chairman at media giant Star Publications, who pumped in RM2 million of seed funding.

"That gave us the mileage that we needed in order for us to achieve our certifications and to secure our very first contract with a bank," says Chew Soon.

However, he and his team then faced that challenge that has scuttled many a local technology startup: The lack of confidence big companies here have towards Malaysian-developed technology solutions.

Despite its mPOS solution having been certified by EMV for mobile payments, months of knocking on the doors of banks in Malaysia led to statements of interest at best, but no sale.

CHANG CHEW SOON
SOFT SPACE INTERNATIONAL

> "IT MEANS A LOT TO US, NOT FROM A MONETARY VALUE BUT MORE TO PROVE TO SCEPTICS THAT A MALAYSIAN TECHNOLOGY COMPANY DESERVES TO BE GIVEN A SECOND LOOK."

So Chew Soon went abroad, and while Malaysian banks were dithering, got his solution adopted by two major banks in Thailand, as well as one in Vietnam, in early and mid-2013.

The customer references from this were a wake-up call, and in October 2013, CIMB Bank rolled out a Soft Space-fuelled service and announced a marketing alliance with DiGi Telecommunications to help drive it.

Chew Soon is understandably proud of Soft Space being one of those rare Malaysian startups to have broken into the enterprise space. "It means a lot to us, not from a monetary value but more to prove to sceptics that a Malaysian technology company deserves to be given a second look," he says.

It has been a bumpy ride, but Chew Soon can't imagine doing anything else, saying that once you've gotten that taste of being an entrepreneur, "there is no turning back. We are the kind of people who will risk it all, even down to the last penny, because we really believe in what we do."

That's just the start. At the MSC Malaysia APICTA (Asia Pacific ICT Alliance) Awards 2013, Soft Space walked away with both the 'Best of Malaysian Startup Companies' and 'Best Financial Application' awards; while market buzz has it that the company has been valued at an incredible US$33 million by a global company.

Enough for Chew Soon to retire, perhaps? What would he do then? "I would imagine myself sitting on an angel investment fund or committee where I get to dedicate all my time to help groom Malaysian startups, and putting their name out there in the market," he says. "That would be a really awesome way to retire."