How to succeed in a hyper-connected world

International technology leaders praise S'pore education standards, efforts at NYT forum

SINGAPORE — When Mr Brian Chesky quit his job and moved to San Francisco six years ago, the US$1,000 ($S1,240) in his bank account was not even enough for his rent. Together with his friend Joe Gebbia, he took advantage of the hotel room-crunch during an international design conference in the city, inflating three airbeds that Mr Gebbia had, and rented their space out to visitors.

They made enough money for their rent and today run Airbnb, an accommodation site through which 175,000 people find places to stay in 350 countries each night. This includes 1,000 people from Singapore.

Nine million people have used Airbnb, and it has spawned an economy of people who photograph homes to be featured on the site, who clean and design the homes and who provide key exchange and check-in services. Even his mother, who wanted Mr Chesky to get a job with health insurance after he graduated from design school, has become a convert.

“I told her I was an entrepreneur, she said that’s just a fancy way of saying you’re unemployed still,” he quipped at a dialogue with The New York Times Foreign Affairs Columnist Thomas Friedman at the International NYT’s Global Forum Asia yesterday.

Skills and the environment to succeed in a “hyper-connected” world were themes discussed at the forum, which featured technology leaders such as HP Chief Executive Meg Whitman, McKinsey & Company Senior Partner James Manyika and Massachusetts Institute of Technology Principal Research Scientist John McAfee.

Several speakers backed Singapore’s numeracy and literacy standards as well as efforts to nurture excellence in science, technology and engineering. Referring to the Singapore Institute of Technology’s aim to groom thinking students able to learn and re-learn, Mr McAfee said the Republic would be “an astonishing place to be” if it achieved the feat.

But Singapore’s curriculum could do with more “creativity and weirdness”, he said. “In America, thankfully, we don’t lack renegades, weirdness. Halfway between is the sweet spot to be.”

Asked what qualities she sought in hiring people, Ms Whitman — who was President and Chief Executive of eBay from 1998 to 2008, and took over at HP in 2011 — cited similar traits: An interest in science, technology, maths and engineering, flexibility, and a tolerance for ambiguity and risk.

Several speakers yesterday also outlined what would constitute a great environment, as they praised San Francisco for its energy, buzz and innovation. Recounting what Netscape Co-Founder and venture capitalist Marc Andreessen had told him, Mr McAfee said four key elements of the city are the presence of good research universities, the cultural tolerance of risk, a legal system that respects contracts and privacy, and investors willing to put “deep pools of capital” in risky places.

While a new digital world with big data, mobile Internet and cloud computing is largely beneficial, it can leave many people behind.

The United States government can tackle the challenge of job growth sputtering and real wages on a downward trend by investing in education, immigration reform, entrepreneurship, infrastructure and original research, he said.

In his opening address, Mr Friedman had declared that workers of today can no longer be average. “Average is over. Every boss today has cheaper, easier, more efficient, faster access to above-average automation, above-average software, above-average cheap labour, above-average robotics and, most of all, above-average cheap genius,” he said.

“Everyone has got to find their own unique value contribution which justifies why they should be hired, why they should be promoted, why they should be retained in that job.”