Driven by challenges and a desire to learn

A passion for technology has helped software developer He Li overcome the obstacles in his career

By Aaron Tan

Six months into his first IT job at a technology-services company here, software developer He Li was thrown into the deep end. He had to design a user interface from scratch for a client in the insurance industry.

He had just completed a graduate diploma in systems analysis at National University of Singapore and was more adroit in programming than in the intricacies of user-interface design. "That was the biggest challenge in my career," he recalled. "The project took me out of my comfort zone, but I pressed on, reading articles online to learn more about user-interface design. Eventually, I figured things out and completed the design in less than two months."

Such challenges and the knowledge he picks up along the way have kept him going in the industry for more than three years. The 32-year-old Chinese national, who is here on an employment pass, came to Singapore in 2010 and lives here with his wife.

"Technology advances quickly, so you're always learning something new every day," he said. That includes finding new ways to fix software bugs, and he often ends up having to work weekends.

As for less tech-savvy clients, he once had to work with one who could not understand certain IT concepts. "I had to explain the concepts in layman's terms, so we could overcome the communication issues which were holding back the project," he said.

He quit that first job last year to join a start-up that builds business-analytics software for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

They need to dissect heaps of corporate data to boost their sales and business operations. He said: "Business analytics has become a big thing in the IT industry. As a software developer, I need to be familiar with business processes such as sales and financial management." So, he decided to pursue a Master of Science in finance from University College Dublin at Kaplan Singapore, a private-education institution. The course, which covers topics such as risk management and organisational behaviour, will equip him with the skills needed to pursue an IT career in the financial sector.

"Our lives are filled with financial activities – from withdrawing cash at ATM machines to topping up payment cards at MRT stations – which rely on IT," he said. "I want to contribute to that and make a difference to people's lives."

Despite working 12-hour days, he said he feels satisfied when the programs he writes, such as mobile-banking apps and enterprise software for large corporations, are useful to people and businesses.
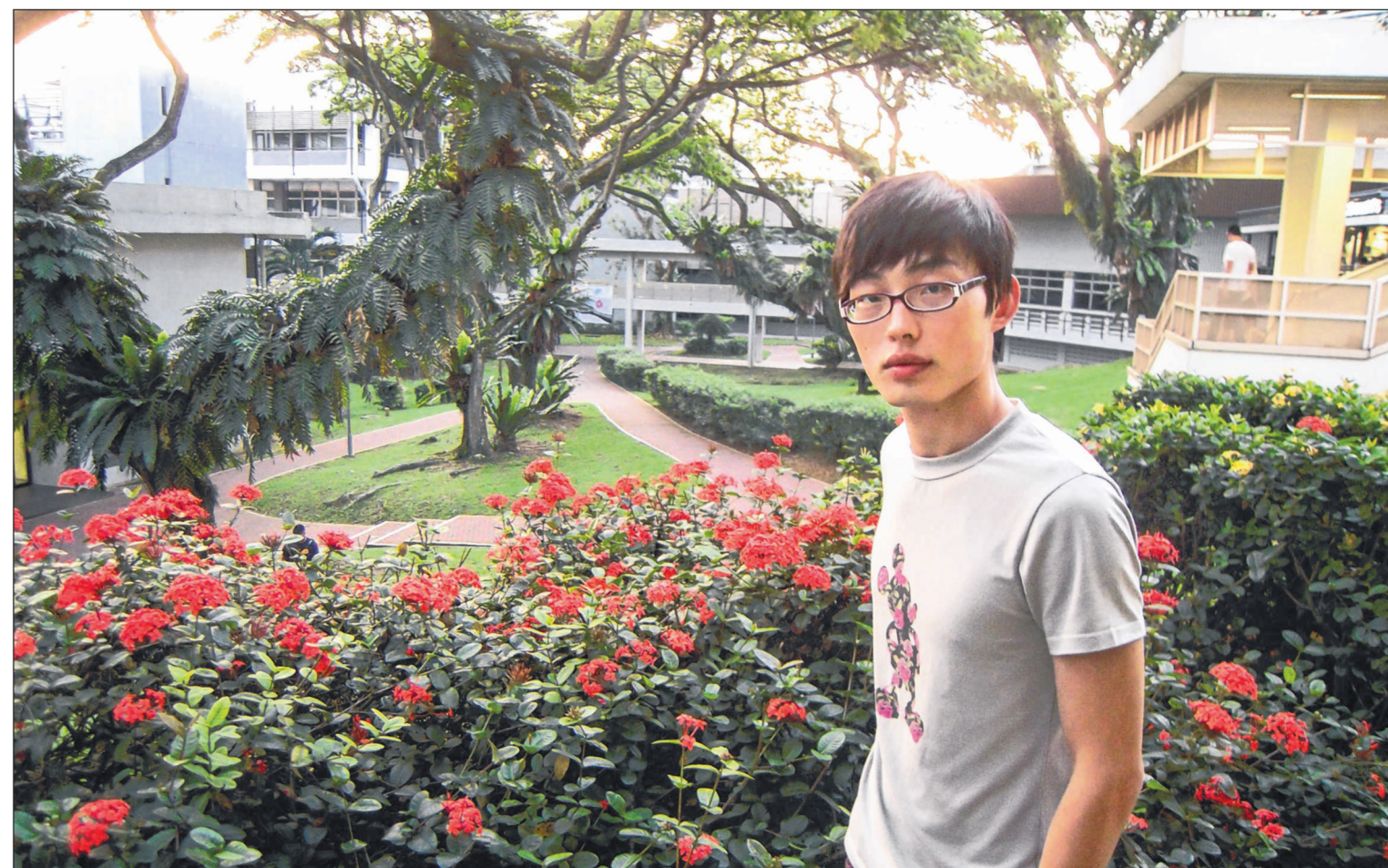
While fresh IT graduates often aspire to become project managers, he thinks it is more important for them to build a good foundation in programming.

"They should start by working as programmers for about two or three years," he said.

"The experience will be useful when they become project managers because they need to understand how things work before they can solve problems for clients."

Project managers should also keep abreast of improvements to programming languages over time, he said. "Otherwise, you may be confused when a developer approaches you about a programming error."

Aaron Tan is a freelance writer.

Mr He Li said that having a good foundation in programming is necessary in becoming a good project manager.
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