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GLINTS: LINKING YOUTHS AND JOBS

Sarah L. Y. Cheah, Vivien K. G. Lim, and Norvin Chan wrote this case solely to provide material for class discussion. The authors do not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The authors may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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On February 3, 2016, the three co-founders of Glints, a career portal start-up, were sitting in their office debating their options for the company’s future growth. Having recently moved to the new office from a shared facility and achieved positive cash flow from their business in less than three years, they knew that they had made the right decision about quitting school for the start-up. Their success had already attracted media attention: the previous year, the trio had been featured in the Singapore press.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The young dropouts in question—Oswald Yeo, Ying Cong Seah, and Qin En Looi—were 21-year-old students who had chosen to forfeit their scholarships and leave their respective U.S. universities to launch a start-up called Glints, which was a job-posting site for youths trying to enter the workforce. The three young partners convinced investors to fund their concept by pitching the service as “LinkedIn for youths,” connecting employers to young graduates. For the job candidates, Glints offered a “career preparation platform targeted at youths” to help them build their resumés. For the employers, Glints provided a platform to identify newly graduated job seekers. In short, Glints was indeed LinkedIn for youths, with the added dimension of providing services that prepared undergraduate and pre-university youths for their prospective careers.

The investors and media who were approached by Glints were fascinated by the fact that the three co-founders were so young. The three had traded off a more stable and predictable career path to launch Glints, and this bold move had sparked interest from several investors who considered taking a chance on the trio. Not surprisingly, the co-founders’ lack of experience and youthfulness shaped Glints’ early journey, including the need to make ongoing alterations to the business model during the first year of operations and a decision to expand Glints’ target market.

Amid comparisons to Mark Zuckerberg, Steve Jobs, and Bill Gates, who all dropped out of university to pursue careers in entrepreneurship, the co-founders faced the daunting task of looking for ways to make their new business grow. Although the seed round of funding implicitly valued Glints in the millions, the company was still far from that worth. Only 12,000 youths were using the Glints platform, and revenues lingered in the tens of thousands. The majority of the companies that engaged Glints for recruitment were either start-ups themselves or small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Multinational companies (MNCs) made up just 20 per cent of the client base, which meant that youths who were specifically interested in careers with MNCs might prefer to use a competitor’s platform that had a wider selection of MNC job vacancies. Notwithstanding this, the investors still expected Glints to grow, and the three young partners had to find ways to meet that challenge.

To the co-founders, there appeared to be two options for harnessing growth. The first would be to refine the service’s business model by making course corrections, also known as “pivoting,” in the quest for a better product–market fit. A second option would be for Glints to expand overseas by using the new connections and funds that had been provided to the team by its investors. As potential markets for growth, the Singapore-based Glints’ team was considering entry into neighbouring Southeast Asian markets such as Indonesia; the U.S. market was also under consideration. For Glints to survive, growth was mandatory, and the co-founders had to decide on the best way to make that growth happen.

THE CURRENT STATE OF GLINTS

The three young co-founders were able to recognize the challenge that people their age faced in trying to find employment. Many of these young job-seekers had empty LinkedIn profiles. Yeo noted, “Most adults use LinkedIn to show off their career experience. What about the millions of college graduates [trying to enter the workforce] each year with not much career experience to show? How will employers know who has the right skills for the job?”[[2]](#footnote-2)

In order to help young job-seekers overcome this problem, Glints posted advertisements for internship opportunities with carefully selected partners, including other start-ups. Glints also conducted workshops on career planning and resumé writing to help youths launch their careers. These services allowed young people to identify their potential and strengths, empowering them to take charge of their careers.

Glints occupied a position in a resegmented job-search market, a subsection of the job-search market as a whole (see Exhibit 1). The company managed to carve a niche for itself by offering a mix of services, matching up candidates and employers through job postings,[[3]](#footnote-3) and making the candidates more attractive by offering them classes on career preparation. Glints also provided a platform for companies to recruit high-quality employees and offered copywriting services to companies that wanted to make their brand and job descriptions attractive to potential candidates. Finally, Glints offered customized recruitment campaigns to its client companies, and this activity, along with job posting services, formed the two main sources of the company’s revenue. Glints charged employers a fee to create individual job postings (at SG$100 per job) or for value-added services like copywriting and social media outreach; employers could purchase all of these services as a bundle for SG$80 per month.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The job-postings market was a competitive one, dominated by key players like JobStreet Corporation Berhad, which had existed since 1997. The market share of the players followed a J-curve distribution, with JobStreet dominating the market in 2015 (10,722 job postings), and Singapore Press Holdings’ portal, ST Jobs (1,868 postings), Monster Worldwide (650 postings), and Glints (428 postings) trailing far behind.[[5]](#footnote-5) Because of the dominance of the established players, Glints decided not to focus its growth on the job-postings market and instead aimed to grow in the resegmented job-search market. To achieve this goal, Glints carefully screened the quality of the job postings on its site, striving to provide only the most interesting and exciting job opportunities for its candidates.

This method of compiling its selection of job postings reflected a deliberate approach by Glints to focus not solely on the employer’s needs (which might include acquiring personnel for menial or uninteresting jobs) but also to match the interests of its candidates with the employers’ requirements. Looi, the co-founder in charge of marketing and operations, explained the rationale behind this approach: “[W]hen we find good opportunities, like attracts like. Good people attract better employers. That is the reason we don’t include [poor quality] posts because, at the end of the day, they don’t really add value to anyone.”

Touting its service as “LinkedIn for youths,” Glints targeted an annual growth rate of 8.8 per cent in job positions open to graduates. Its value proposition to employers was to offer a low-cost alternative for hiring graduates, compared to the US$4,300 mean marketing spend per position for graduates. Glints’ value proposition for graduates focused on preparing them for their careers by providing opportunities like internships and skill-certification workshops.[[6]](#footnote-6)

GLINTS’ HISTORY OF PIVOTING

Glints did not start off in the resegmented job-search market. When the company was established in September 2013, it started as an internship placement agency, matching applicants and employers using an offline spreadsheet. In order to obtain mentorship and early-stage funding, Glints entered the 100-day JFDI Asia Accelerate Program, conducted by JFDI Asia Private Limited (JFDI Asia), Southeast Asia’s leading accelerator. An accelerator helped start-ups grow through a structured program that gave access to funding and mentors. JFDI Asia designed its program based on lean start-up methodology, which encouraged a start-up to adopt an iterative process of experimenting with and refining its business model in response to the progressive discovery and validation of customer needs. To find a successful business model around new product or service offerings, entrepreneurs were required to make many course corrections, also known as “pivots.” Frequent pivots were thought to improve a venture’s odds for success.

During the JFDI Asia Accelerate Program, Glints moved its operations online, providing an internship placement portal in March 2014. By the time the co-founders graduated from the Accelerate Program in July 2014, Glints had pivoted to its current business model of LinkedIn for youths, functioning as a career discovery and development platform for undergraduates.

The pivoting process was essential for Glints in finding its right product–market fit and meeting the real needs of customers. Initially, Glints had assumed that an undergraduate would be willing to pay a fee for internship placement services and that the fee-based revenue would be enough to cover the operating costs of the start-up. The co-founders realized that this assumption was incorrect when they conducted about a thousand short interviews and surveys with the students at the National University of Singapore. The interview findings showed that undergraduates would not be willing to pay for internship placement services, and in response to that information, Glints used the pivoting process to change its business model.

The co-founders knew they were moving in the right direction because each pivot was quickly validated by a surge in user growth (see Exhibit 2), with advertisements on Facebook and Google further enhancing the expansion. The LinkedIn-for-youths strategy had attracted 12,000 undergraduates (representing approximately 12 per cent of the Singaporean undergraduate population) and 1,000 employers using Glints in Singapore.

After the pivots, the partners repositioned Glints to provide job opportunities for graduates. Eighty per cent of the companies that used Glints to reach out to job-seekers were SMEs and start-ups, while the remaining 20 per cent were MNCs. Looi explained:

We don’t have any desired proportions [in the ratio of start-ups to SMEs to MNCs offering opportunities on Glints] as we simply discover the market problems that each segment faces and address them directly. SMEs and MNCs face the common problem of finding the right talent. However, SMEs lack the volume of candidates to choose from, while MNCs can’t find the right candidates to hire.

YOUTHFUL CHARISMATIC CO-FOUNDERS

Yeo and Seah became friends when they attended the same high school in Singapore, starting at age 13. Looi met Yeo and Seah at that same school at age 17. Their close ties helped the trio in their subsequent working relationships. Looi spoke of the team’s complementary abilities:

We met back in high school, Hwa Chong Institution, and over time, we realized that our skill sets and our personalities complemented each other. So Oswald Yeo is the chief salesman; Seah Ying Cong, the CTO [chief technology officer], handles product development and technology; and I deal with marketing and operations. We grew naturally into these [roles although] it wasn’t that we decided from the start. . . . Among [the] three of us, I tend to be impatient, like to work at a fast pace, and Oswald tends to be more people-centric and is able to connect with people easily. Ying Cong is the thinker who considers the many angles of the situations. In this sense, we complement each other.

The youthfulness of the co-founders was of much interest to Glints’ investors. In February 2015, Glints raised a seed round of SG$475,000 from a host of investors that included venture capital firms East Ventures, 500 Start-ups, SPH Media Fund, Infocomm Investments Pte Ltd (IIPL),[[7]](#footnote-7) 8capita, and Pix Vine Capital (PixVC), and angel investors John Tan and Darius Cheung.[[8]](#footnote-8) Victor Tan, the director of IIPL, revealed that his company had invested in Glints primarily because of a belief in the ability and passion shown by the co-founders:

For certain investments like Glints, we are investing in a company with interesting ideas, but more importantly, we see ourselves as investing in the talent behind [these ideas]. These three guys actually have very interesting stories behind them, and the amount of passion they demonstrated in the business was pretty amazing to us.

The investors were also impressed by the level of commitment the co-founders showed, as illustrated by their decision to forfeit their scholarships and take a leave of absence from their respective universities. Willson Cuaca, co-founder of East Ventures, explained why he invested in Glints:

First, [the co-founders] are young, and I always like to invest in the young because I think the sky is the limit. . . . So it is like you don’t know how to swim and you jump into unknown waters from cliffs, and subsequently you have to learn how to swim. If somehow you are able to come out of the water, then you will be very strong. It doesn’t mean that I don’t want to invest in the people who have experience. It’s just that they have their own frame of thoughts about how things should be done, so they are less open.

Second, Glints had traction and at the time of our investment, [the partners] had already generated revenue and were willing to take a leave from their schools. They are decisive, and entrepreneurs have to be quick to make mistakes and get back up. These are the traits of entrepreneurs that we want to see. As an early-stage investor, we are not looking for business; we are looking for founders.

Similarly, Boon Ping Chua, the chief executive officer of SPH Media Fund, the investment arm of Singapore’s leading media group, Singapore Press Holdings, was impressed by the level of commitment the co-founders demonstrated. He noted that while he had some doubts about their business model, he appreciated the passion and resourcefulness shown by the Glints team members, and those qualities were enough to convince Chua to fund the venture: “We invested in them because big outcomes always come when there is some unknown factor . . . and the guys were really committed toward their work and were ready to drop out from their school. I like to bet on people who are committed.”

At the same time, the various mentors of the young Glints team pointed out the challenge of the co-founders having a slight age gap between themselves and their target demographic (i.e., university graduates). Dr. Alex Lin, head of IIPL and an early mentor to the co-founders, pointed out that the co-founders’ own youthfulness might work against them in terms of their limited perspective and lack of experience. For example, the trio had mistakenly assumed that university graduates would be willing to pay a fee for internship placement services.

Echoing Lin’s sentiment, Meng Weng Wong, the co-founder of JFDI, voiced his own concerns:

[I am] worried about them because they are pretty young. A lot of things are learned in college, [and they have] no solid grounding in software engineering practice. I would be displeased if they gave up their liberal education just for a lucrative, short-term opportunity. Of course Peter Thiel[[9]](#footnote-9) would disagree. He funds school dropouts.

Due to their youth and inexperience, the trio benefitted greatly from the guidance they received from the JFDI and IIPL network of mentors. These advisors helped the Glints co-founders understand the weight of what they were trying to accomplish and pushed them to work hard in pursuit of their goals. In response, the young entrepreneurs made constructive use of the suggestions they received and pushed themselves to work hard on planning and problem-solving. Through such guidance, the co-founders came to view Glints as more than just an internship portal, and thus chose to expand their business model to capture the graduate employment market as well.

THE QUEST FOR GROWTH

Glints continued to refine its business model to find a better product–market fit. Looi made himself available through a live-chat app on the Glints website, talking to employers and graduates to determine how to do a better job of solving their problems and addressing their needs.

The biggest challenge for Glints was growth. To meet investor expectations, Glints would have to grow its revenue base, which was a six-figure sum during 2015, and it would have to increase the number of registered users on the Glints platform. Looi described the perennial challenge of growth for the start-up:

It’s not always an absolute number and not how many users and how much revenue you get; it’s always about the month-on-month and week-on-week growth. . . . We have covered 12 per cent of the market share, but the challenge that we always face and are still facing is how do we continue to grow? How do we grow even faster, now that we have touched the motivated market, and move on? How do we engage the majority?

Since MNCs made up only 20 per cent of Glints’ employer base, youths who wanted to pursue careers with MNCs might find Glints’ range of job offerings limited to SMEs and start-ups. Additionally, MNCs generally had existing relationships with their appointed executive search agencies for meeting their recruitment needs, thus making it difficult for new entrants like Glints to unseat the incumbent agencies and win over the MNCs as clients. Moreover, local universities like the National University of Singapore operated career centres that used highly trained staff to provide graduating students with on-campus career development and job placement services.

Glints appeared to have two options for achieving user growth. The first would involve harnessing an even larger share of the local undergraduate student market. To attract and retain undergraduate students, Glints would have to differentiate its services from those of the local university career service centres or complement them to address the underserved segment of the student market. The second path would be to capture new clients from the cohort of graduating students at polytechnic institutions in Singapore, a group that had steadily increased in size from 76,756 in 2008 to 87,636 in 2014.[[10]](#footnote-10) Like university undergraduates, the polytechnic students would be keen to seek out employment opportunities in their graduating years. To cater to these two groups of new graduates, Glints would have to refine its business model to provide compelling and innovative service offerings in order to engage the job-seekers and the employers, particularly the MNCs.

Besides gaining local market share, the young partners contemplated a second way to grow: expanding overseas. The U.S. market seemed appealing since it had a large domestic market and was also a place where the co-founders could resume their university studies while working on the task of expanding Glints. By 2014, the number of students enrolled in U.S. tertiary education increased to 26.8 million from 17.7 million in 2000.[[11]](#footnote-11) However, the U.S. marketplace was fraught with intense competition due to the presence of other providers, such as Simply Hired, Inc., Indeed, and Monster.

Alternatively, Glints might expand into Southeast Asia, but doing so would not be without its challenges. Unlike the U.S. market, which was relatively homogeneous in terms of language, needs, and buying behaviour, Southeast Asia was fragmented by differences in language, culture, and economic development. For these reasons, it was difficult for established firms to penetrate the area, let alone for start-ups with limited resources to do so. However, Glints would be able to leverage the connections of its investors, who had ties with the Indonesian market. Willson Cuaca, co-founder and managing partner of Indonesia-based East Ventures, explained:

If you go to Southeast Asia . . . you are in a kind of market where everybody speaks different languages. How you are going to optimize [for that] market? First, you have to learn the market and then the language. . . . This is the reason we invest in Indonesia, mainly because Indonesia is the single largest homogenous country in Southeast Asia. If you win Indonesia, you will win 40 per cent of the [Southeast Asian] market.

According to the British Council’s 2012 report, the number of Indonesian students enrolled in post-secondary education was estimated to grow from 5 million in 2012 to 7.8 million in 2020.[[12]](#footnote-12) The gross enrolment ratio at the tertiary level (total tertiary enrolment as a percentage of college-age population) rose from 14.9 per cent in 2001 to 30.7 per cent by 2011.[[13]](#footnote-13) This increase in gross enrolment ratio, together with the support of the local government to facilitate the access of its people to tertiary education, would present good growth opportunities for Glints.

THE DECISION

In sum, Glints had to decide between two options for growth: Should the company alter its business model and pivot toward a broader market fit? Or should it expand into an overseas market? Which option should Glints adopt?

EXHIBIT 1: GLINTS’ POSITION IN THE RESEGMENTED JOB-SEARCH MARKET

**Glintssss**

JobStreet

Randstad

PSB Academy

LinkedIn

Salt Branding

**Job Postings**

**Career Preparation**

**Recruitment**

**Social Branding**

**Networking Platform**

Source: Created by the case authors.

EXHIBIT 2: GLINTS’ USER GROWTH FROM JANUARY TO JULY 2014

Source: Company files.

1. Cheryl Ong, “Young Singapore Ivy League Dropouts Attract $475,000 in Funding for Startup,” *Straits Times*, February 11, 2015, accessed January 12, 2017, www.straitstimes.com/business/young-singapore-ivy-league-dropouts-attract-475000-in-funding-for-startup. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Terence Lee, “Glints Founders Defer Studies to Shake Up Online Recruitment, Raise $475k in Seed Money,” *Tech in Asia*, February 11, 2015, accessed July 12, 2016, www.techinasia.com/ivy-leaguers-defer-studies-shake-online-recruitment-raise-475k-seed-money. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “Jobs & Internships,” Glints, accessed July 12, 2016, https://glints.com/dashboard/jobs. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. SG$ = SGD = Singapore dollars; SG$1 = US$0.70 on February 3, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “Search Jobs,” JobStreet, accessed September 25, 2015, www.jobstreet.com.sg/en/job-search/campus/job-vacancy.php; “Job Search,” STJobs, accessed September 25, 2015, www.stjobs.sg; “Jobs,” Monster, accessed September 25, 2015, www.monster.com.sg; “Jobs,” Glints, accessed September 25, 2015, https://glints.sg. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. “Glints,” JFDI Asia, accessed July 7, 2016, www.jfdi.asia/portfolio/glints. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Infocomm Investments Pte Ltd (IIPL) was a subsidiary of the Infocomm Development Authority (subsequently known as IMDA, after merging with the Media Development Authority in April 2016), which focused on investing in promising technology start-ups in their early stages to enable them to scale globally. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Lee, op. cit. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Peter Thiel was a successful entrepreneur who felt that bright students should spend their time and energy pursuing technology-based entrepreneurship over higher education. He launched the Thiel Fellowship in 2011 to offer grants of US$100,000 to youths on the condition that they stop school for two years to create a new business venture; Alison Grisworld, “The Dropout Fallacy,” *Slate*, May 23, 2014, accessed September 25, 2015, www.slate.com/articles/business/how\_failure\_

   breeds\_success/2014/05/peter\_thiel\_drop\_out\_grant\_encouraging\_students\_to\_stop\_out\_of\_college.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. “Year Book of Statistics, Singapore 2015,” Department of Statistics Singapore, July 2015, accessed September 18, 2016, www.singstat.gov.sg/docs/default-source/default-document-library/publications/publications\_and\_papers/reference/

    yearbook\_2015/yos2015.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. “Education,” UNESCO Institute for Statistics, accessed September 18, 2016, http://data.uis.unesco.org/. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Nick Clark, “Education Indonesia,” World Education News & Reviews, April 4, 2014, accessed January 3, 2017, http://wenr.wes.org/2014/04/education-in-indonesia. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. “Education: Gross Enrolment Ratio by Level of Education,” UNESCO Institute for Statistics, accessed September 18, 2016, http://data.uis.unesco.org. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)