

Singapore announces Bridge2Tech: 3,000 year-long internships over three years as AI takes junior tasks

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Good morning, everyone. It is a pleasure to join you at SCS TechConnect. I am especially glad to see so many students and young technology professionals here.

Let me begin with a question. If you were graduating with a diploma or degree in technology today, would you be excited about your future? Or worried? I suspect, for many of you, the answer is a little bit of both.

AI can write software, analyse data and build applications. It can help smaller teams accomplish work that previously needed many people. These are exciting advances in the technology field.

But they raise difficult questions: Will there still be jobs for fresh graduates? Does what I have learnt in school still matter? How do I gain experience if AI is already doing some of the work junior professionals used to do?

And when you hear about graduates sending dozens, sometimes hundreds, of applications without receiving a reply, it is understandable to wonder whether you chose the right profession. These concerns are real. We should not dismiss them or offer easy reassurance.

Some of these questions remind me of my own experience. Almost thirty years ago, I graduated with a degree in Computer Engineering. The dot-com bubble had just burst. Technology companies were struggling, and people wondered whether the Internet had been overhyped.

Years later, even as the sector slowly recovered, people were asking: "Does IT really matter?" Technology was treated as a backroom function, a cost to control, or work to outsource to lower-cost countries.

I still remember presenting our organisation's IT plans to the leadership team. Instead of discussing how technology might help the business grow, the questions were about whether we needed to spend so much, whether the budget could be cut further, and if we really needed this technology?

Today, technology is central to nearly every business. But the uncertainty then was real. I do not suggest AI will follow the same path. AI is different, and we do not know how deeply it will reshape jobs. History gives me reason to be optimistic about opportunities, but it also reminds me that people need support to prepare for them.

Let us look beyond the headlines. The latest Singapore Digital Economy Report shows our tech workforce grew by 3.8% in 2025 to more than 222,000 professionals. The median monthly wage of resident tech professionals was around \$8,000, compared to around \$5,000 for resident workers overall. These are workforce medians, not starting salaries for fresh graduates.

More importantly, almost six in 10 technology professionals now work outside the Information and Communications sector. Tech employment in these other sectors is growing faster than in the traditional technology industry.

You could build AI applications for a hospital, strengthen cybersecurity for a bank, design automation for a manufacturer or improve digital public services. You do not have to work in a technology company to build a technology career. Opportunities are spreading across the economy.

But I understand why this may not match the experience of someone struggling to secure a first job. How can the tech workforce be growing while some graduates find it harder to get started?

Several things are happening at once. First, AI is changing how work is organised. A smaller team using AI may complete tasks that previously required more people. Companies are rethinking the mix of work done by people and machines, and some may take a more cautious approach to hiring while they do so.

Second, demand is expanding elsewhere. As more organisations adopt AI and digital technology, they need people to design, deploy, secure and improve those systems. Finance, manufacturing, healthcare and professional services increasingly need technologists who understand the industry problems they are trying to solve.

Third, employers increasingly want new hires who can contribute earlier. That is understandable — businesses face real competitive pressures. They still value strong technical foundations, but also look for practical experience, AI fluency and an understanding of customers and industries. At the same time, young people who have grown up with AI may bring fresh ways of solving problems that even experienced teams have not considered.

So, the challenge is not simply to make graduates more job-ready. It is also to help employers recognise and make use of what young people can bring to the table.

Both realities can be true — opportunities are growing across the economy, but the work, the expectations and the pathways into those jobs are changing. A growing profession does not necessarily mean an easier entry into it.

And there is an exciting side to this change. AI makes it easier to turn a rough idea into a working prototype. But a prototype is not yet a reliable product.

We still need people who can understand users, scale systems, manage complexity, secure them and improve them over time. AI changes what we can build and opens up new ways for people with different strengths to contribute.

There is a deeper challenge. Junior engineers used to learn by writing simpler programmes, debugging code, testing applications or maintaining systems. That work was not always glamorous. But it helped them make mistakes, learn from experienced colleagues and gradually develop judgement.

I remember almost three decades ago that my first job was as a consultant working on an administrative IT system for schools. I was part of a larger team of programmers and developers, responsible for just a small part of the system. It took months before I could contribute meaningfully. I had to understand the organisation's IT environment, its policies, its processes and how the team worked together.

I was fortunate to have seniors who patiently mentored me. That was how I learnt my craft. And I sometimes wonder: if I were starting my career today, would I have the same opportunities to learn?

AI can now assist with many of those junior tasks. If the work through which young professionals traditionally gained experience is changing, how will the next generation develop that experience? Some describe this as the disappearing early rungs of the career ladder.

Employers still need experienced engineers. But those engineers need to begin somewhere. We cannot expect fresh graduates to arrive at their first job already possessing years of practical experience. Nor can we simply tell them to learn more AI and expect everything to work out.

If AI is changing the first rungs of the career ladder, we must build new bridges between school and work — bridges that help young people gain experience, demonstrate what they can do and take that important first step into a meaningful career.

Building those bridges is a shared responsibility for educational institutions, employers, industry associations and Government.

We think about the journey into a tech career in four stages: Build strong foundations and relevant skills;

Apply them to real problems;

Transition into meaningful employment; and

Continue growing throughout a career.

Earlier this year, we expanded the TeSA for ITE and Polytechnics Alliance into TIP Alliance+, bringing our

autonomous universities into this partnership.

Today, I am pleased to announce Bridge2Tech , a set of expanded initiatives under the TIP Alliance+ focused on helping students build and apply before they graduate.

First, let me speak about 'build', and how we are supporting our students and fresh graduates in this domain.

Strong technical foundations remain essential. AI can help generate code. But someone still needs to understand whether that code is correct, secure, reliable and fit for purpose.

We are making industry-led SCS Skills Pathways in cloud, cybersecurity and AI more accessible to students. Eligible students can receive IMDA funding of up to 90% for approved courses and certifications, subject to applicable caps.

We are also introducing Domain Pathways. A technologist working in finance needs to understand financial risks and regulation. Someone building Government systems needs to understand public-service requirements and accountability. Healthcare technology must fit clinical workflows and patient safety.

Two months ago, we piloted a Financial Services Tech Domain Pathway with the Institute of Banking and Finance through the Young Talent Programme for AI in Finance.

Santhiyaa, an NTU student studying AI and Society, had some familiarity with technical concepts but limited exposure to their application in finance. Through the programme, she learnt about financial workflows, regulatory considerations and how AI could address business needs in the financial sector. Her team is working on an AI-powered solution to improve intelligence gathering for audit research. She has gained confidence in combining technical and business perspectives.

That is what we want Domain Pathways to achieve: not simply another certificate, but the ability to apply technology to meaningful industry problems. Today, we are announcing the Government Tech Domain Pathway , with applications opening in November. We are also working with partners on a HealthTech pathway for 2027.

Second, 'apply', which means to develop meaningful experience.

Many young people face a familiar dilemma — employers want experience, but how do you gain experience before your first job? Some students respond by collecting internship after internship. But internships should not become an arms race to fill a résumé.

NUS has found that while internship experience is associated with better employment outcomes, accumulating more internships eventually produces diminishing returns. Employers have told me the same. Quality matters more than quantity. What matters is what you learnt, contributed and built.

Take Joon Yi, a Singapore Polytechnic graduate who spent almost a year interning at NTU's Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine. He helped develop web applications for medical education, including AI-enabled tools. Over the extended placement, he experienced the full development cycle — understanding users, designing solutions, testing, deployment and improvement. He even saw medical students using tools that he helped to build.

He learnt more than programming. He learnt to communicate with users, clarify requirements and adapt solutions to real needs. These are precisely the experiences we must preserve as AI changes traditional junior work.

That is why we are expanding support for year-long internships across ITEs, polytechnics and autonomous universities. Our aim is to provide 3,000 year-long internship opportunities over the next three years. These carefully curated, curriculum-linked placements lasting 10 to 12 months, co-designed by institutions and employers, also provide funding support to encourage more employers to participate.

These are not simply longer attachments. Like apprenticeships, they give students time to contribute to substantial projects, learn from experienced colleagues and develop professional judgement.

This is a significant effort. For a three-year diploma programme, a year represents one-third of the course.

Our educational institutions have had to rethink curricula and academic schedules, while employers must commit time and resources to mentoring students and ensuring they gain meaningful experience and achieve the intended learning outcomes.

I want to thank our institutions, lecturers and industry partners for making this possible. I encourage all young

students to make full use of these valuable opportunities.

But if AI changes how young professionals learn their craft, we must also change how we develop them.

We will monitor the outcomes closely, learn from students and employers, and consider how to expand successful approaches over time.

Third, 'transition' — how do we recognise and develop talent in our industry?

Building skills and gaining experience must lead to meaningful opportunities. We are asking students to go beyond qualifications — to build, practise and demonstrate what they can do. Employers must also be prepared to recognise and value these capabilities.

Through TIP Alliance+, we are strengthening skills-based hiring. More than 200 employers have pledged support. A diploma or degree remains valuable. But qualifications alone cannot tell an employer everything about a person's potential. We therefore want to translate these commitments into actual hiring practices - from how jobs are advertised and candidates are assessed, to how skills and experience are demonstrated and recognised in organisations.

NCS, for example, is progressively moving towards skills-based hiring. For some roles, it is placing greater emphasis on relevant experience and industry certifications rather than prescribing academic qualifications.

For a Network Engineer position, NCS highlighted the Cisco Certified Network Associate (CCNA) certification and practical experience in network environments as key requirements.

And take Joel, a diploma graduate who secured a specialised role in NCS's cybersecurity penetration-testing team, working alongside degree-qualified colleagues. His industry-recognised security certifications and hands-on experience were important factors in the hiring decision.

I'm very happy that NCS gave this opportunity to Joel and did not look only at his academic qualifications. We want more employers to do the same.

This is the shift we want to encourage — recognising people for what they can do, not just the qualifications they hold.

I also want to make an appeal to employers. I understand why businesses want new hires who can contribute quickly.

But I would encourage you to look at young talent not simply as people who need training, but as people who can bring fresh perspectives, new ideas and AI skills that your organisation can benefit from.

They need opportunities to demonstrate what they can contribute.

Internships, apprenticeships and mentorship are not simply costs.

They are investments in your organisation's future – in people who will understand your business, your customers and your ambitions. And who may contribute much sooner than you expect.

Rachna Sampayo, Oracle's Senior Vice-President for Human Resources in Asia-Pacific and Japan, shared an example with me.

Two interns developed AI-powered analytics prototypes for Oracle's regional HR team. They explored how AI could streamline workflows, analyse employee sentiment and provide insights to support workforce decisions.

They were interns, still early in their career, applying new skills and fresh perspectives to real business problems – making a difference to the organisation.

Young talent is not simply an investment in tomorrow's workforce. They can help organisations create value today.

Finally, I'd like to touch on 'grow'. Careers are not just jobs.

Technology will keep changing after you secure your first job. Through continuing education, employer-led development and initiatives such as TeSA, we want professionals to deepen expertise, gain domain knowledge and move into emerging roles. Our goal is not simply to prepare someone for tomorrow's job, but to help them build a career that can grow through many waves of change.

When I started my career almost thirty years ago, I could not have imagined where technology would take us. And I cannot tell you exactly what your careers will look like thirty years from now.

But I can offer three pieces of advice: First, build strong foundations. Understand how technology works, what it can do and most importantly, what are its limitations.

Second, learn by doing. Use AI, experiment, build things, solve real problems and learn from people with experience. Don't be shy to ask.

Third, you must develop judgement that cannot be acquired simply by using the latest tools. This means looking past the technology itself. Understand the people, organisations and industries you want to serve. That is where many meaningful opportunities will emerge.

Lastly, I'd like to leave you with assurance that you do not have to navigate this transition alone.

Through TIP Alliance+, Bridge2Tech and our wider partnerships, we are strengthening the connections between education, industry and employment. We are building stronger foundations, meaningful experience, and career pathways into work for young graduates.

My generation helped build Singapore's digital economy. Your generation has the opportunity to shape Singapore's AI future.

I wish you all the best.

Thank you.

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