

Opening Address by Mr Melvin Yong, MP for Tanjong Pagar GRC and Assistant Secretary-General, NTUC at the launch of the Data Protection Excellence (DPEX) Network on 16 July 2018 at SMU Academy

Dr Lim Lai Cheng, Executive Director, SMU Academy,

Mr Kevin Shepherdson, CEO, Straits Interactive,

Our regional guests:

Mr Leandro Angelo Aguirre, Deputy Commissioner, National Privacy Commission, Philippines, and

Dr Sonny Zulhuda, Assistant Professor, International Islamic University, Malaysia;

Ms Chong Siah Fong, Senior Deputy Director, Ecosystem Development & Engagement, Data Innovation & Protection Group, IMDA

Data protection professionals,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good morning.

Introduction

Today, we live in a world where business and organisations collect our personal data every day – when we make a purchase online, when we book a private hire transport, when we pay for our meals at the restaurant, or when we make a post on social media.

Most of us do not think much about what and how these organisations use our personal data. When news broke earlier this year about how Facebook and Cambridge Analytica had mishandled the personal data of millions of Facebook users, many people woke up to the importance of data privacy and data protection. Closer to home, Singaporeans have shared concerns on how bicycle-sharing operator, oBike will handle the personal data of its customers after its closure.

Legislating Against the Misuse of Personal Data

In recent years, governments around the world have introduced rules on how organisations should collect, use, disclose and store personal data.

In July 2014, Singapore introduced the Personal Data Protection Act (PDPA), making it mandatory for all organisations to appoint a Data Protection Officer (DPO). The DPO is responsible for implementing policies and processes for personal data protection in their organisations.

To-date, more than 50 organisations in Singapore have found themselves in trouble for data breaches or for not complying with the PDPA. Most of the data breaches were operational lapses because staff were not adequately trained to handle personal data in light of new privacy-intrusive technologies.

In May this year, the European Union introduced the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR). Businesses in the EU must now ensure that their staff are equipped with the requisite knowledge and skills to comply with the GDPR, especially where it applies to new digital technologies that are privacy-intrusive.

Critical Shortage of Data Protection Expertise

Singapore is not alone in ASEAN in enforcing data protection laws. Yet, the fact remains that companies doing business in the ASEAN region are often seemingly in the dark about what is required to safeguard personal data. There is a critical need for businesses to adopt trusted data protection practices. However, with the progressive introduction of data protection legislation worldwide and a step-up in enforcement by an increasing number of countries, we are facing an urgent shortage of skilled data protection officers.

The International Association of Privacy Professionals (IAPP) estimates that there is a worldwide shortage of 75,000 data protection officers. In Singapore, we project that our industry will require more than 10,000 data protection professionals within the next three years.

While cybersecurity requires new technical skills at the system level, data protection requires business process and people related skills. These include business domain knowledge, project management and supervisory experience that are relevant to the care of personal data.

Singapore – a Regional Hub for Data Protection Professionals

As the regional headquarters for many multi-national corporations, Singapore has the potential to be a regional hub for data protection expertise and thought leadership, drawing upon the knowledge and experiences of international businesses and data protection practitioners.

This morning, I am happy to announce the launch of two initiatives that will serve to enhance data protection competencies in Singapore and the wider ASEAN region.

First, let me congratulate SMU Academy, Straits Interactive and their partners on the launch of the regional Data Protection Excellence (DPEX) Network to promote data protection excellence in ASEAN, especially among small and medium enterprises. In a collaboration with Straits Interactive, SMU Academy will be offering two new Advanced Certificates in data protection, leading to an Advanced Diploma with digital credentials. This is a first in the region.

Second, I am also pleased to announce the launch of a new Professional Conversion Programme (PCP) in data protection. Supported by Workforce Singapore and SkillsFuture Singapore, the PCP provides skills conversion to place and train PMETs, including mid-career switchers, in the role of a data protection officer. Participants will undergo an initial DPO hands-on training before being matched with employers participating in the PCP.

These initiatives will help professionalise the role of the data protection officer. The PCP will also help SMEs acquire their own data protection expertise.

Tapping on Retired Police Officers

I am also happy to note that efforts have been made to reach out to retired police officers and other enforcement officers. With their years of experience in investigation, compliance and case management, I am confident that they would make good data protection professionals.

Mr Goh Liang Kwang, a former deputy police commissioner, is an example of a retired police officer who has recently undergone data protection training, and has successfully combined his law enforcement experience and management skills with his newly acquired data protection know-how. Today, Liang Kwang regularly helps to train new data protection officers in investigating and preventing potential data breaches.

Former civil servant Mr William Hioe, now in his sixties, decided to reskill himself after his retirement. Over the last three years, he has taken no less than six certification exams in data protection and information security. Today, William is serving actively as a certified consultant in data protection, leveraging his 30 years of experience in information technology, policy development, project management and process improvement.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate that the launch of the Data Protection Excellence Network is a clear testament of a joint initiative between the private sector and academia to prepare Singapore's workforce for the future.

This is a future where digital technologies, artificial intelligence and robotics will disrupt and transform the economic and social landscape, and at the same time introduce new challenges in data protection.

Data protection presents new and sustainable job opportunities for Singapore and Singaporeans. The skills upgrading initiatives announced this morning serve to address the growing need for data protection competencies. These initiatives will equip our workers with the relevant skill sets as they prepare for new and emerging jobs of tomorrow in data protection. PMETs and retirees with a wealth of operational experience behind them can pick up new skills to function effectively as data protection officers or as consultants in data protection.

With all partners working together, I am confident that we will be able to help strengthen Singapore's competitiveness and position as a trusted, world class hub for data protection excellence.

Thank you.