Ethical hacking does pay

Teenage cyberterrorism expert recognised for his contribution to the Singapore IT industry

For a person still in his teens, 19-year-old Ankit Fadia has accomplished more than most people in their 50s have.

He is widely recognised by the info-com industry and professionals globally as an expert on cyberterrorism, and has even written several best sellers on computer security. He is also a founding partner of Kuala Lumpur-based venture capital firm Kunal Ventures that was set up in 1999. Mr Fadia is now looking to start his own IT security company, Fadia Solutions, within the next two months.

Since last March, Mr Fadia has been conducting IT security workshops for the Singapore Management University, and advising its School of Information Systems on its courses.

Last Saturday, the Singapore Computer Society acknowledged his contributions to the security industry by presenting him with an ITYouth award.

The Indian national flew in from Stanford University, in California, where he is in his second year of studies for a Bachelor's degree in computer science, for the ceremony. He told Digital Life in an e-mail interview: “When I graduate in 2007, I plan to come back to South-east Asia and expand my companies' operations.”

The younger child of an engineer and a housewife who live in Mumbai, Mr Fadia’s interest in computer security was sparked by news reports on people hacking into and defacing websites. He was 13 then.

Finding the idea of hacking more appealing than playing games on his PC, he decided to try it himself.

By 14, he was hacking into the websites of Indian magazines and leaving messages on how they could prevent such security breaches.

The dearth of easy-to-understand books on hacking spurred him to write the 600-page The Unofficial Guide To Ethical Hacking, which became a best seller, first in India and then America.

And it not only started him on the lecture circuit, but also got him jobs from intelligence agencies. For instance, one American agency enlisted his help in deciphering an encrypted message from Osama bin Laden’s Al Qaeda network.

Mr Fadia is one of three people who won an IT Youth award this year, the first time the award has been given to so many in the five years of its existence. The other two were Mr Aaron Tan Wei Cheng and Mr Lo Min Ming, both 20.

Mr Tan’s passion for IT started when he was 13. He turned his web design hobby into a business, which he later expanded to web hosting. He now earns over US$40,000 (S$66,000) yearly. Mr Tan is now looking into developing an intelligent helpdesk support system.

Mr Lo, a development technologist at Nanyang Polytechnic, developed a software program called People Connect. It helps people coordinate their schedules. He uses his IT skills to contribute community projects, such as setting up an IT laboratory for youths in Laos, and developing an Internet portal for teachers at Nanhua Primary School to reach out to parents.