

ALUMNI MATTERS: MAKING CITY LIFE BEAM

Khoa Pham

After a stint in Herbert Smith Freehills' Australian business, Khoa Pham found his perfect role in a Singapore start-up targeting Asia's booming micromobility sector.

For **Khoa Pham**, this was a job that could have been written especially for him. A tech start-up, headquartered in Singapore and looking at markets in Asia-Pacific that would hire out electric scooters and bikes, the company was looking for a lawyer to help with fundraising and everything associated with getting the business up and running.

As someone who rode everywhere in Singapore on an e-scooter, had long been interested in start-ups in the tech world and was looking to apply his legal skills in a business context, Khoa met the co-founder of the company, Alan Jiang, and duly joined as the company's third employee.



The tech start-up is Beam, which describes itself as a “micromobility” company. The business opportunity is huge: appealing to people in Asia’s congested and polluted cities looking to get around more easily, cheaply and in an environmentally sustainable way – as well as having fun while doing so. The opportunity occurred to Alan Jiang when he was working for Uber, where he discovered, among other stats, that 40 per cent of all Uber journeys were less than 3km, and that each journey on average only had just over one passenger (as well as the driver). That struck him as both inefficient and environmentally damaging.

Beam (the name chosen as a one-syllable, movement-sounding connotation which the founders gave themselves half an hour to think up) started in 2018 and has quickly become the largest micromobility company in Asia Pacific. It currently operates in its three target markets of Australia and New Zealand, north Asia (including Korea and aiming for Japan and Taiwan in the not-toodistant future) and Southeast Asia. The company now has around 100 employees. It recently celebrated 10 million rides.

Khoa is Beam’s general counsel (with two more lawyers in his team) and also president of the company’s operations in Australia and New Zealand. Alongside managing the Beam Group’s legal and insurance functions, handling the business in Australia and New Zealand is now Khoa’s principal responsibility from his base in Singapore. Pre-pandemic, he would travel often to the continent, but, with the need to quarantine, has restricted the number of visits. The number of cities signing up is growing fast: Brisbane is the latest, with Beam ousting Lime as the city’s preferred e-scooter renting service.

Running a new business presents many legal as well as commercial challenges, which can be exacerbated by the lack of regulations. That varies from city to city, Khoa says, the Australian cities will only let Beam operate once regulations are in place, while Seoul has permitted the vehicles to be used under guidelines while regulations are being developed and, in Malaysia’s case, Beam is working with local authorities actually to work up the regulations together. “We are not unique in this,” Khoa notes. “Others, such as AirBnB and Uber, have faced the same issues. I particularly enjoy this aspect of the job, in which I can bring my legal skills to bear.”

He could also add project management skills since there are multiple stakeholders to deal with, from the manufacturers (the vehicles are made in China) to the warehouses that store and repair the vehicles and “consumers” (the riders).

THE BEAUTY OF TECHNOLOGY



BEAM

Key to Beam's success has been the use of technology. Each vehicle is linked to the internet of things (IoT) which can control its usage (called "geofencing"), for example, imposing a maximum speed or preventing the vehicle being ridden in pedestrian zones. The technology also allows for virtual parking spots, designed to be in areas that do not get in the way of pedestrians and are not near waterways (to prevent any thought of the vehicles being thrown into the water). Users can get penalised for not returning the vehicles to virtual parking spots, but the company prefers to offer an incentive for returning them correctly, such as a credit or rebate. Not surprisingly, the technology is developing all the time, adjusting to the time of day, congestion and the concentration of people.

ESG is central to the Beam philosophy and approach. It is a certified carbon-neutral company. There is also a strong focus on social and governance issues. Beam has a and BeamForAll programme where they provide subsidised discounted rides to eligible groups who may not otherwise have access to their service. Beam partners with different causes, donating a portion of Beam-taken trips, including donating to the Country Fire Service Foundation in Adelaide. “We hope to be able to do more of these initiatives as we grow,” Khoa says.

Integrating with, and being supported by, the local community is another central feature of how Beam wishes to operate as a business. As Khoa explains, “These vehicles sit on the street and are visible, so they have to be embraced by the community. If you connect with the community and they feel like it is something for them, then they will respond in kind. We have people who look out for our bikes and scooters, picking them up and standing them neatly, if they have been dumped, or just calling us to let us know of a problem. That is very helpful, but only works if they know that we have the community’s interest at heart, not just our riders.”

Beam is going to extra lengths to assist local businesses, especially those that have been hardest hit by the pandemic. For example, the company has encouraged cafés and restaurants to have a parking place for the e-vehicles outside “so that we can drive footfall to them,” Khoa says. “Simple things like that can make a big difference.”

“All of us joined the company to make a difference to people’s lives.”

“We really believe that we have one answer to address Asia’s congested cities,” Khoa says. “It is not sustainable for everyone to have their own private cars on the road, and that is why there is such an appetite for our vehicles, and, hopefully, after we sort out the pandemic and people can move more freely again, demand will continue to grow.”

The ethos underpinning the company is simpler still: “All of us joined the company to make a difference to people’s lives,” says Khoa.

Khoa was born in Vietnam, but grew up in Melbourne after his parents emigrated. After studying law, he joined Herbert Smith Freehills in 2009 (before the merger, when it was Freehills), drawn by the firm’s commercial approach when dealing with clients, as well as the fact that it was a top-tier firm. “The firm was more in tune with business than others I came across, which suited me well because I always viewed myself as a lawyer with an interest in business.”

Khoa left to move to Vietnam, where he was for three years, before moving to Singapore where he worked in-house for another three years. He also has a number of business interests, including investing in, and advising, some tech start-ups in Vietnam (“where the tech scene is developing very rapidly”).

