



## Singapore – Central or Marginal

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Can Singapore continue to be a central hub or, geographically and psychologically, is it destined to become marginalised? Can Singapore be home to world leading professional service and consulting businesses or will they inevitably grow and prosper in the mass markets and knowledge communities of the USA, Europe, China, India and Africa?

The answer is that it will depend – but on what?

Last month I was in Nigeria. So close, less than a days travel away, yet so far from Singapore in many respects. Whilst I was in Nigeria my colleague was working in Australia and Japan. It appears there were more travelers from Singapore on his flights to Sydney and Tokyo than on mine to Lagos. However, I was surprised how many Asians there were arriving at Lagos airport. Some were citizens of Nigeria, second & third generation immigrants perhaps, but most were visiting for business. Indeed, the previous month the President of China, Hu Jintao, had been in Lagos. His second visit in two years as he had previously visited in 2004. Nigeria is becoming an increasingly important trade partner and source of oil for China and on this latest trip he signed multi-billion dollar contracts for both oil and infrastructure projects. The number of business visitors from China is clearly going to increase.

Singapore depends on keeping connected to where the action is. It seeks to add value to transactions, services and relationships whether the world comes visiting Singapore, transits through Changi or when Singapore goes out to interact with the world. I sometimes wonder whether that perfect taxi journey from the city to Changi airport, so impressive when the world comes visiting, is an obstacle to Singapore going out to interact with the world. The equivalent journey from the airports in Beijing and Heathrow/London, let alone Lagos or Dili, is not as pleasant. Indeed, the difference is such that some people might seek to avoid the experiences that are encountered in such places. In China a few months ago I was nearly stranded on a highway when I insisted on the meter being activated in a taxi I had taken from the international airport. I had refused to pay the requested rate [approximately three times the meter rate I reckoned] and as a consequence ended up being ejected onto the shoulder of a three-lane highway. Luckily for me a police car stopped and an officer joined in our 'discussion', which eventually resulted in my getting back into the taxi and the meter being turned on. It's clearly much easier and more pleasant to stay at home in Singapore. However, experiential learning has its limits in Singapore and the action is not always here, even in a virtual world.

Singapore is a wonderful hub. For us it is our home and business base. Indeed, most of our business takes place within Singapore and I cannot think of anywhere better to set up and operate such a business. But I have this nagging feeling that Singapore's strengths could increasingly become a source of disconnect from the world. The wheel of business is

becoming increasingly virtual, but that does not mean that all spokes lead into the central hub of Singapore. To extend the wheel and hub analogy; there is a risk of relying too much on seeking to add value within the confines of this very pleasant hub, rather than moving out along the spokes of the wheel and adding value at the point where the fast moving action is. This requires risk taking. After all, a hub is fairly stable at the centre of a wheel. The fast moving action and the learning from new experience happens at the margins. If we don't venture out along the spokes and add value where it is needed then others will take our place – securing the business and the learning for themselves.

This year we have had the privilege of working in over ten countries and in all hemispheres – ranging from China and Japan in the east to Nigeria in the west and from Europe in the north to Australia, Indonesia & Timor-Leste in the south. We are delivering leadership development, coaching and training programs and, we hope, adding value to our clients. What we know for certain is that we are lucky enough to be learning about all the places and organizations that we visit, whether we are staying in 5star hotels or behind razor wire. This is learning that we can bring back to our hub and build on for developing other added value services in the future.

So, can Singapore keep developing as a hub or might it move to the margins? On reflection, I don't think this should be an either/or question. Indeed, it's a trick question. I reckon that one continues to be an effective hub by understanding and learning from what is happening at the margins. Singapore is a world-leading hub in many respects but so, increasingly, is Dubai. I know that because I had to switch in Dubai from Singapore Airlines to Emirates for my Lagos flight. I also learnt something in Dubai, which is that Emirates are now, in my experience, the equal of Singapore Airlines. Their service is not quite as perfect but I loved their worldliness – the international crews and their different hub network, which can take us and talk to us about new and adventurous lands of opportunity.

Therefore, lets keep perfecting the hub but also exploring and learning from the margins. After all, many countries think they are at the centre and perceive everywhere else, including Singapore, as being at the margin. There will always be many hubs and their continuing success depends on keeping connected with the action. Virtual connections are important but they are not a source of deep understanding and new opportunities may be missed. Infrastructure, networks and systems can be replicated whereas, in contrast, experiences at the margins are unique and continuously enrich the centre.

So next time you feel marginalized, are stuck in a strange airport, stranded by the roadside, in dispute with a taxi driver or in a zero star hotel without hot water –remember, it's good learning, good for business, good for the soul and probably good for Singapore as well.

If nothing else, you will better appreciate the taxi ride home from Changi.

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