

# Inside Talk I: Building the World's Best Digital Bank

In conversation with  
Siew Choo Soh,

Managing Director, Head of  
Core Systems Technology,  
DBS Bank Singapore



The goal of DBS Bank, a leading regional bank based in Singapore, is to reimagine banking and make banking invisible to customers. In so doing, it seeks to enable customers to “Live More and Bank Less”. A frictionless experience is the key to achieving this, and the bank is enabling it by not only offering seamless user interfaces to clients but also providing the customer service to match. In an interview for the FinacleConnect, Siew Choo Soh, Managing Director, Head of Core Systems Technology, DBS Bank Singapore, talks about the bank’s digital innovation journey and top banking technology trends for the coming year.

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### **DBS has always been at the forefront for digital innovations in banking; what is in store on the digital front for 2018?**

Banking on the go, and on mobile in particular, is a key priority for us. We have already launched our digital-only bank in India and Indonesia, and will soon launch equivalent services in other markets as well. DBS is also focusing on using Artificial Intelligence (AI) to make banking interactions and experiences more enjoyable for customers.

An important initiative that we are part of is Singapore’s “Smart Nation” agenda, which aims to create a cashless society.

### **Big data and analytics will play an important role in the digital transformation of a bank – be it to provide personalized experience to customers or to enable employees to make smarter decisions. Tell us how DBS is leveraging big data in your bank’s digital transformation journey.**

The Bank has a lot of data, which is currently residing in different places and being used by different units in a piecemeal fashion. Our data analytics team leverages these assets to make better recommendations to customers. Also, various departments are putting data to use for internal purposes. The HR department, for instance,

uses data analytics to look at retention of our employees and top performers. We are in the process of creating a fully integrated Big Data and Analytics platform that provides a complete end-to-end big data and machine learning capabilities that is self service to the entire Bank. This platform will ensure frictionless access to data, and will enable us not just to provide a great client experience, but also help us manage Risk and Compliance as well as better employee experience.

### **Artificial Intelligence is considered to be a key technology trend that will reshape banking. How much of the discussion around AI is ahead of its time (or hype) and how much is real? Which business use cases should banks prioritize for 2018?**

We have been using predictive analytics for 4 - 5 years now, and are also leveraging machine learning and chatbots in many areas in the Bank. So, AI is clearly not hype. AI is an integral part of our agenda to make banking joyful. As one of the next steps, we are taking AI and machine learning to the platforms that are supporting them i.e. deploying AI to make those platforms intelligent.

### **An important element of digital transformation is to make sure internal teams embrace digital banking as a way of life and build a culture of innovation. Can you take us through initiatives that DBS has undertaken to make this cultural change successful – like, Agile, devops, open source technologies, etc.**

Our philosophy is to digitally enable the entire bank from the bottom up and to be digital to the core. People and cultural transformation is a big part of that. Driving cultural transformation so that all employees understand the need for change and the desired culture in the organization is the first part. The second is helping our people acquire new knowledge and skills. At DBS, we take this very seriously. There are various mechanisms and methods that we use to transform the skills of our incumbents. Dedicated classroom training programs is one way, but it is the least preferred option. Mostly, we believe in pairing employees who need to be trained with others who are native to those capabilities; we have found this to be one of the most effective methods of transforming people. We hire people with the required capabilities and pair them up with the incumbents, and

the result is that those capabilities are multiplied across the organization. This is rooted in the simple belief that in order to learn something, you must experience and practice it rather than hear about it in a classroom setting.

In my team, we have a very active learning program in a bootcamp setting. The format involves a short Sprints of learning, followed by Labs. The bootcamp attendees learn new skills or new technology, take those learnings, apply them to a use-case and demonstrate the implementation in 2-week sprints.

**In your opinion, which are the top three technologies that will have a major impact on the banking business models in 2018?**

The first is cloud, the second is data and the third is AI. Ultimately, the combination of the three together with agile culture is imperative for scaling any business. It gives any company the ability to experiment quickly and cheaply, and the intelligence to provide superior client experience through data and machine learning.

**Tell us about the top initiatives that were immensely successful for DBS in 2017**

We transformed our entire Hong Kong business landscape from front to back at one go as part of the Finacle implementation program. The bank needed a standardized, flexible, scalable and resilient core banking platform as part of its digital agenda. We partnered with Finacle for the transformation, which also extended to replacing our mobile banking, internet banking, ATM and IVR platforms. It was a huge project, completed in over 18 months.

We started work on a new technology stack on cloud native architecture two years ago. Six months into the journey, we started to feel that the value of the truly Agile approach was not just in Agile rituals, but also in having a truly Agile architecture and development practice. One year into the journey, we started to realise the benefits of extremely high quality releases, minimal production

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support resources required for these platforms and more importantly, solutions that delivered superior user experience. Using platform-as-a-service (PaaS) such as Pivotal Cloud Foundry, we started to realise the benefits of developer productivity. The platform empowers developers with superior non-functional capabilities such as auto-scaling, self-healing and easy deployment, so that their time can be focused on creating business capabilities.