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# USING TECHNOLOGY TO BECOME OTHERS' EYES

ISEE MOBILE APPS -  
FUNG KWONG CHIU MICHAEL



## ADJUSTING SAILS IN THE WIND TO REACH THE DESTINATION

Words frame the way we see the world. In the past, we used to say “the disabled”, but now we say “people with disabilities”. This change in language shows that we are more aware of equality and more willing to understand that different people have different needs and possibilities. The founders, Michael, Ching, and Yuen, believe that mobile apps

allow users to scan a specific QR code to read out the dishes on the menu, so that people with visual impairment could choose what to order in their own time. They thought that an annual fee of \$500 for each restaurant would be affordable and provide the enterprise with enough to support, while improving the lives of people with visual impairment — a win-win-win situation. But in the end, it was not about the amount; without any concrete benefits to them, restaurants would not subscribe even if it was \$50 a year.

“Visual impairment is just an entry point. Because the current platform supports screen reading functions but not images, anyone who can hear can use our app, and it can be readily applied to many other areas.”

They first designed a few free mobile applications with simple user interfaces, such as double swiping for the phone to read out the content, and double clicking to use the function. They hoped to solve the difficulties faced by people with visual impairment when they eat out, read the news and shop, but a lot of practical problems emerged in the process. Initially, they wanted to work with restaurants to

“Accidents happen — one’s fortune can change in the blink of an eye. One day you are having dinner with a friend, and the next, you are suddenly paralysed. Perhaps, unexpected things in life can make you realise that other people and events are closer to you than you think and result in empathy. The founder of the free mobile app, iSEE, has witnessed the needs of family members and friends with disabilities, and wants to use technology to help people with visual impairment.”



“In Hong Kong, social enterprises seem to have halos; people think that social enterprises are charities and can, therefore, somehow miraculously survive on their own. Since Hong Kong does not have social enterprise certifications, I would say we are a barrier-free technology company, as we employ staff with visual impairment and we promote barrier-free access to the Internet.” In the process of developing barrier-free access, they have studied international standards and local laws, and found no legislation related to web accessibility in Hong Kong, which is why people with visual impairment cannot access the content of most of the websites. “There are things that ought to be done, such as enabling the function for enlarging the font size of webpages. Foreign countries have laws to ensure that everyone has fair access to information.” In Hong Kong, however, people tend to focus on the business side: how much money they make, how many clients they have, when they will expand, and so on. Even in competitions, some judges asked them to “take their business more seriously”. “When a social enterprise gets too much funding, sometimes they may become overconfident and too optimistic, and overlook the reality.

After all, they must face society and the market.” When they entered the market, they found that the three apps that they originally wanted to develop — reading restaurant menus, recognising banknotes and listening to the news — were all received differently. Now they will first focus on developing iSEE, an app for instant object recognition.

**“We must keep trying and exploring, and if it doesn’t work, we can change it. I always say, ‘We won’t change our vision, but we can change our method thousands of times.’”**

said Yuen. They stressed that if a product failed to offer something that the market wanted, it would be a waste of energy to persist.

The company insists on using information technology to break down barriers. They hope to use mobile phone technology to help people with visual impairment break through the visual barrier and connect with society, improving their quality of life. But in the face of various difficulties, they have decided to develop their business in multiple directions.

**“Entrepreneurship and doing good deeds bring both gains and losses. The team is becoming more thoughtful and realistic, as well as more aware of the bigger picture, considering more aspects of the situation. However, the most important thing is to never forget their vision: to do something good for society. That is why they all hope to make the company a global authority on technology and accessibility.”**

First, they will continue to provide free mobile apps and update them on a long-term basis. Second, they will help businesses conduct accessibility tests and provide test reports to improve accessibility. Lastly, they will find solutions for NGOs to increase the usage rate of people with disabilities, aiming to increase their customers by 10–15%. They believe that the implementation of tools only treats the symptoms but not the root of the problem. To solve the problem once and for all, the general environment must change. “Entrepreneurship can be a kind of publicity, influencing many unrelated people. Small things can help society, not just big things.” They are glad that the activities of Good Seed

are not focused on business, but on building social enterprises and social innovation. Immersing themselves in a series of practical courses for a long time was useful for them as first-time social entrepreneurs.

**“If you decide to start a business, you should know it is not an easy ride, and you have to think it through. Many people will only see the good side of it, but very often only you will know how tough it really is. Expose yourself to information, as 98% of start-ups collapse. You must remember why you started.”**