

**SPEECH BY MR DESMOND LEE, MINISTER FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT & MINISTER-IN-CHARGE OF SOCIAL SERVICES INTEGRATION AT THE ERA Q420 CAREER ADVANCEMENT DAY ON 11 NOVEMBER 2020, 12PM**

1. Thank you for inviting me to join you at ERA's Career Advancement Day on 11.11. I've had the opportunity to speak to our real estate professionals in various firms such as OrangeTee & Tie and PropNex before, about the challenges facing our sector, and I'm glad to be able to talk to the Team at ERA this afternoon, on the impact of COVID-19 and the urgency before us.

**Impact of COVID-19**

2. The public health and economic crisis brought about by COVID-19 has hit many sectors of our economy. Because of the hard work put in by businesses, by Government agencies and by Singaporeans, we've been able to gradually re-open our economy and resume activity in a safe manner. But all of us have had to make a lot of adjustments to adapt to the unfolding situation.

3. And just looking at the built environment and property sector, that you are in and related to, whilst almost all construction projects have now re-started, including all 90 ongoing HDB BTO projects, work is at a slower pace than before, due to the need to put in place safe management measures. This impacts when new residential as well as office and industrial units can be completed and handed over to buyers or lessees.

4. All of us in the real estate agency industry have not been spared. During the Circuit Breaker period, short-term restrictions had to be imposed, affecting your ability to close property transactions. Even with the resumption of physical viewings, you've had to keep to strict safe management measures. Many of these measures have impacted and brought great inconvenience to you, and affected your families and livelihoods. So I'd like to thank you for your patience, forbearance and understanding, for your resilience and adaptability, and for working together with all of us, to keep our families and communities safe and sound.

**Tackling COVID-19 together**

5. While the challenges have been immense and unprecedented, we are now in a position of relative stability here in Singapore – we've had very low or even zero cases of community infections each day; our economy and society has gradually reopened, with some

semblance of a new normalcy. This is because in the past year, we have been working closely together, and you have adapted and adjusted to many rapid twists and turns along the way, especially at the beginning of the crisis, if you can recall the frenzied early days.

6. But compare where we are today, with what's happening in our region, our neighbourhood, and the wider world, and I think we all know that we should not squander this position of relative stability. And I am very encouraged to see our sector responding swiftly to COVID-19. For example, our developers made adjustments to comply with safe management measures at their sales galleries. Where possible, some went even further to minimise in-person interaction, by conducting the balloting and selection of units online.

7. Our property agencies and agents have also adapted by making better use of technology. Like many other real estate firms, ERA has seized the opportunity to work smarter and respond better to changing consumer behaviour, by accelerating your efforts to go digital. So in a way you start from a position of strength – it's not that you are starting from ground-zero. ERA and many other firms have, for some years already, seen the importance of digitalisation and I'm sure that many of you say, "thank goodness!". For building on that, today you're in a stronger position.

8. In fact, since the Circuit Breaker, you've set up good training and education platforms to support your real estate professionals and clients, such as your weekly webinars. In June, ERA also launched the Project Online Sales Gallery – a website that curates information, images, videos and virtual tours of properties marketed by you. I have some friends in real estate agency firms, including ERA, and they shared with me informally how the tools that you and other firms have created have enabled them to adapt to these very changed circumstances, and a number were able to clinch good deals using virtual technology. I understand that the online sales gallery now showcases more than 140 new launch projects.

### **Building resilience for the future**

9. The ongoing uncertainty during this pandemic has underscored the urgency for all of us to go digital. Digitalisation, in fact, is not a new initiative. In 2018, when I joined OrangeTee & Tie at their annual conference, I had shared that the real estate industry should seize the initiative to digitalise so that you can manage the pace and direction of change, and bring your team along with you, and not be disrupted externally by others. If it's the latter, then you will have no control. We have been working together to implement the Industry Transformation Map (ITM) since then.

10. So the Government will continue to support you in your transformation journey, and one way, amongst others, is that we will go through this is enhanced grants. There are two grants that I have in mind and I will speak briefly about. One is the Productivity Solutions Grant (PSG) which can assist you in improving your business processes. The other is the Enterprise Development Grant which helps you grow and transform your business.

11. In April this year, we raised the maximum support level for both these grants from 70% to 80% until the end of this year to help firms impacted by the pandemic. The Enhanced PSG has also been expanded to cover more IT productivity solutions, so you get help with online collaboration tools, with virtual meeting and telephony tools, queue management systems and temperature screening solutions, to support your business continuity amidst COVID-19.

12. We have recently extended these enhancements for another nine months from the end of the year, to September 2021. So please consider making use of them.

13. The Government has also provided a one-off SkillsFuture Credit Top-Up of \$500 to every Singaporean aged 25 years and above as at 31 December this year. This top-up can be used for all SkillsFuture Credit-eligible courses till 2025. As real estate professionals, you can use these top-ups to attend Generic Competency Continuing Professional Development (CPD) courses offered by SkillsFuture Singapore, to fulfil your registration renewal requirements.

14. Property agencies like ERA also have a major part to play. To not just survive but do well in a digital era, you will need to ensure that both your real estate professionals and your technical teams who build and support your digital platforms receive the necessary training on an ongoing basis, because technology does not stand still. Likewise, individual property agents must take charge of your own learning, and be proactive in upskilling yourselves.

15. The Government also cannot stand still with technology. In fact, HDB is working hard to roll out the new HDB Portal. The portal will make the buying and selling of HDB flats more seamless and convenient for Singaporeans. This also makes facilitating property transactions more efficient for real estate professionals. It will free up time from administrative tasks, for you to focus on other value-added services for your clients, such as providing property-related advice, and digital marketing. We will continue to reach out to the industry, including the team at ERA, to seek your views on this effort, which I believe will contribute towards transforming the real estate sector.

## **ERA's transformation efforts**

16. Today, I would like to take the opportunity to highlight and commend some ERA agents who have made commendable efforts to adapt and facilitate property transactions during the Circuit Breaker period.

17. First, we have Mr Patrick Koh. Before COVID-19, Patrick only relied on the property calculators in the iERA app to generate common figures, such as his client's estimated budget, available CPF funds and property tax payable. During the Circuit Breaker period, Patrick attended ERA's in-house virtual training to familiarise himself with all the features available on the app, such as setting up marketing websites for project launches, as well as accessing property market reports and the latest mortgage rates by major banks – making use of the tools to really value add as a professional.

18. Patrick was able to use the app to customise messages to customers, and provide value-added information that he derived from the app, such as personalised financial reports and property options based on his client's profile. This helped him to complete a project sales transaction during the Circuit Breaker period, despite the physical restrictions in place. And because he had attended training by a law firm in partnership with ERA, Patrick was able to facilitate the digital signing of transaction documents. Well done Patrick!

19. Let me also highlight Ms Evonne Tang. At the beginning of the Circuit Breaker, Evonne followed up on potential leads for her client who was trying to sell his HDB flat. Due to safe distancing requirements, Evonne showcased the flat online through video. She was incredibly detailed, even showing the path from the lift to the unit! When she found a buyer, Evonne carefully explained the loan requirements and purchase timelines virtually, and managed to facilitate and complete the sale remotely. I understand that the seller is especially grateful because he had been unable to find a buyer for the past five years!

20. Though she still prefers to meet clients in-person for that human touch as do all of us, Evonne has made it her new SOP to offer virtual meetings to provide her clients a more convenient option. She has also been conducting virtual tours to allow more efficient viewings for all her clients. I hope that these allow Evonne to take on more clients, while also saving her clients' time!

21. Both Patrick and Evonne are two of the many examples of real estate professionals, in ERA and in many other firms, who have risen to the challenge, upskilled and adapted to

serve their clients better. Though we commend both of them, I think it's emblematic of the many real estate professionals who have been able to stand on the shoulders of giants, who have made digitisation possible in the entire sector, and the spirit of self-disrupting rather than be disrupted, and then being able to add value to the process. They also clearly show how important it is for firms like ERA to continue to invest in training and technology, whilst we emphasise very much in value-add, personal touch, and personal qualities and virtues of professionalism.

22. So we must continue to adjust and press on with digitalisation, and not falter in our steps. In a short while, we will be officially marking the start of the transformation of the ERA APAC Centre, which is where we are physically now. Once the renovation work is complete, you and your real estate professionals will be able to serve your clients more effectively through digital technology through a range of digital tools and technologies. Among the many possibilities for the centre are a green room for virtual meetings and training sessions, dedicated workstations for agents, with soundproof booths fitted with cameras and sound systems, and much more.

23. I'm confident that your real estate professionals will be able to take advantage of these infrastructural enhancements, and improve their service delivery to clients.

## **Conclusion**

24. In conclusion, let me take a step back to say that the external environment remains very fluid, and extremely challenging. Given how difficult the economic outlook is because of the winding nature of this virus, I can understand that many of us want to be able to operate more freely, with fewer restrictions. And yet we all know that we must persevere with safeguards in place, because should there be a spike in cases, we need respond swiftly and decisively. We cannot rule out the need to re-impose measures or introduce new measures in order to keep the virus at bay, and under control.

25. At the same time, the Government will continue to support the transformation of our real estate industry, amidst, as well as beyond COVID-19. As part of the spirit of SG Together, we will also broaden and deepen our engagement with you and with the rest of the industries in the built environment sector, the property transactions sector, and others. We want to hear your feedback, and we will do our best to engage you and your colleagues frankly and openly.

26. Congratulations today to all award winners. I hope you will continue to be a beacon and inspire others to uphold high standards of professionalism for the real estate agency industry. I urge everyone to continue to do our part in keeping our community and loved ones COVID-safe during this crisis.

Thank you.