

NEO Soon Keat turns up for the interview looking just like any other 18-year-old you might meet in the busy corridors of technology mall Sim Lim Square.

In his jeans and hoodie top, he doesn't look at all like an entrepreneur who, four years ago, ran a Web hosting business that had more than 300 clients at its peak.

It's a good thing then that he never met most of these clients.

"I put up a face (online) and didn't tell anyone my age," he says. "I didn't spend a single cent on advertising - just relied on word of mouth and talking to people on forums."

"I don't think anyone knew I was a 14-year-old kid operating out of my bedroom," he adds with a cheeky schoolboy smile. "It would have been a lot different if they had known that."

As it turns out, these clients wouldn't have known the difference. He rented server space from a provider in the United States and resold it to make it more affordable for small businesses. He diagnosed and resolved issues and errors, promised quick turnarounds for support requests not exceeding two hours, and even helped clients manage online payments.

For all this, he earned more than US\$2,000 (S\$2,700) a month - a handsome sum that dwarfed the weekly pocket money the Greenridge Secondary School student got from his mother.

Today, he calls what he did "just a hobby", but many Singaporean parents would find it unthinkable of their children, who more likely have their after-school schedules wrapped around tuition and enrichment classes.

In fact, he says he used to be the typical Singaporean kid, having endured tuition for almost all his school subjects as he was growing up. He hated it so much he eventually rebelled by not turning up for some of the lessons.

His mother finally relented and stopped sending him to tuition from Secondary 3 onwards.

"All this extra time you get after that... you would think you end up playing, but you find you can use that to juggle things around," says Mr Neo.

For him, "juggling things around" meant not just studying and running his business, but also adding to a rapidly growing trove of knowledge on IT systems and infrastructure.

Soon after that, he discovered virtual private networks (VPNs), which were only starting to gain prominence as a way for Singapore Internet users to get around geographically-locked online services like Netflix.

He got involved in online forums run by fledgling Internet service provider (ISP) MyRepublic, and that eventually led him to use some of the server space he leased in the US to operate a VPN for MyRepublic's customers for free.

This, in turn, got him through the door at the ISP, where he got to know Mr Lawrence Chan, now the company's head of business development.

Mr Chan put him in contact with MyRepublic's network engineers and unlocked a whole new realm, to put it in gamerspeak.

"I met people who handled enterprise servers and looked at all their monitoring systems," says Mr Neo.

"I learnt a lot not just about the business but about infrastructure and technology.

"You always feel like you know



This week, Ignatius Low speaks to 18-year-old Neo Soon Keat who started a Web hosting business out of his bedroom when he was 14 and finds that, in the new Singapore, the acquisition of knowledge is not a matter of textbooks and tuition

A tech whiz kid who shuns the limelight



As a child, Mr Neo Soon Keat was stifled by years of tuition classes and did poorly in school. It was only after his mother relented when he was in Secondary 3 that he blossomed. A dedicated teacher changed his attitude to studying and his newfound freedom saw him expand his knowledge of IT systems. ST PHOTO: NEO XIAOBIN

a lot already, but suddenly there is this bomb that drops on you when you meet people of a different kind," he gushes.

Picking up something quickly was never a problem for him, I sense.

He is the only child of a mother who works as a sales assistant in hardware chain Home-Fix. He lost his dad at the age of two to cancer.

He says he was a playful boy and this was perhaps why his mum refused to give him Internet access throughout most of his primary school years, fearing he would be distracted from his studies.

He did not do well at the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) and ended up in a neighbourhood school, where he continued to perform badly throughout lower secondary.

"I wasn't really interested in studying," he recalls. "I couldn't

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understand how some of the concepts worked and I didn't bother to find out."

The turning point came in Sec 3 when he started to "study and clarify doubts", a change he

partly attributes to his form teacher at the time, Mr Chock Wee Boon, who taught physics.

"He was very dedicated," says Mr Neo. "His teaching style was very different and he invested a lot of time in us."

He eventually scored an aggregate of 13 for his O levels and got into Ngee Ann Polytechnic, where he is now studying network systems and security.

Somewhat predictably, he has been talent-spotted by the Government and now holds an Infocomm Development Authority (IDA) scholarship that will finance not just his polytechnic education, but his university

degree as well.

As I speak to Mr Neo, it becomes apparent that in the new Singapore, knowledge won't necessarily be defined by what is in textbooks and school projects, or be unlocked in children through the usual enrichment activities.

Mr Neo tells me he finally got access to the Internet in Primary 6 when he badgered an uncle to give him his mobile broadband USB dongle.

The access speed was slow, but it allowed him to go online and play games like Team Fortress 2.

At first, he - like other kids -

became fascinated with game design but he quickly learnt about the technical server infrastructure required to run a big gaming title like that.

When people started to complain online over the inconvenience caused by local Web hosting servers closing, he became interested in how all the pieces fitted together.

He learnt about free hosting on platforms like Sitefrost and when he finally got broadband access at home at the age of 14, promptly started his business and never looked back.

He says his mother never knew what he was doing until almost two years later, when a friend showed her a small article this newspaper ran about him.

"I think she was quite shocked," he says. "She was really quite concerned about my studies then. But my mum has always given me a lot of freedom and I'm grateful to her for that."

He says he refuses to typecast himself as the next tech whiz kid, despite his achievements.

And while he admires people like Apple's Steve Jobs and Creative's Sim Wong Hoo, he doesn't identify with their high-flying personas. Indeed, it took a while for him to agree to this interview.

"I don't really see myself as that sort of person, as someone interested in going into the limelight," he says.

"What I work with is a back-end enterprise, so it feels very awkward when I talk to journalists like you."

To illustrate his point, he tells me that one of his favourite websites is an online forum called Tales From Tech Support.

"I take a look and find it full of funny stories from nameless corporate IT department heroes who troubleshoot everyday problems for seemingly idiotic and unappreciative clients.

"The way I see it, these people should get credit for what they do."

He says he doesn't know yet what he might be doing with his life when he is 30 years old. He has an interest in accounting and business, which he may pursue at university. In any case, the IT industry changes too quickly, he says.

But he is quite sure that whatever he will be doing, it will be here in Singapore.

"When I think of Singapore now, I think it's really a good society. A few years back, I would not be saying this because there was a lot of negative sentiment online against the Government, but slowly you realise it's not really true."

He says once he got away from his online diet of views and opinions and started, for example, to listen to the radio station Kiss92, he found out that there is a lot to appreciate about Singapore.

"I remember one segment in the morning show around National Day last year where people talked about Singapore. One of the stories was about how even if you don't compare with other societies, Singapore is already quite impressive.

"How it's structured, how things come together, and how you don't really have to worry about the nitty-gritty details.

"So I'm optimistic," says the kid with a much keener eye than me for the beauty of good systems architecture.

Who am I to argue with that?

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