

Never too late



Out of the Box

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saying that we want to build a start-up culture, it seems that our policies simply have not caught up.

Obviously, Hong Kong is not the only city to put the brakes on both Uber and Airbnb. Many other countries have also attempted to restrict activities of both companies by saying that they violated local laws, but there are others who are moving to uplift or modify existing regulations in order to accommodate them.

Facing the inevitability of a sharing economy, Singapore, Japan, and even China, are moving fast to make both businesses “legal,” and it seems Hong Kong is falling behind.

Earlier in the year, Singapore introduced a vocational license requirement for Uber and its competitor, Grab, to ensure their drivers are equipped with sufficient knowledge and skills to provide the service safely.

China’s Ministry of Transport has also introduced a similar license requirement last year and, operators in both countries have quickly expressed their willingness to comply.

The Japanese government also passed a law this June allowing house owners to operate their properties as hostels for a maximum of 180 days in a year, which would make many service providers on Airbnb in Japan “legal” soon.

The move is going to give the country a boost in accommodation spaces, as it plays host to the 2019

Rugby World Cup and the 2020 Olympics. And big US cities – such as San Francisco, Los Angeles and New York – have all moved to embrace the benefits brought by Uber and Airbnb, while clearing legal and regulation hurdles along the way.

“All we are focusing on are the things that are going away. We need to focus on what’s coming,” said Brian Chesky, chief executive of Airbnb, in his interview with Friedman.

I cannot agree more.

People who are unwilling to accept new ideas are only concerned about their job security (and they often lose out in the end anyway), but those who are willing to adapt will always find ways to benefit from the new opportunities brought upon by advancement in technology.

As Chesky observes, Airbnb’s “experience” has unleashed the potential of many aspiring entrepreneurs, who are eager to put their talent and passion into use. Why should we view this as a bad thing?

The sharing economy is quickly becoming an irreversible trend in the world we are living in today.

If Hong Kong wants to maintain its competitiveness, the government must take an active role to create an accommodating environment – where businesses are welcome, not deterred, to come to our city with their new ideas, while making sure that new practices are regulated and safe to use.

Or else, we may soon see ourselves falling behind our competitors, and the calls to make innovation a priority will become empty promises.

It is never too late to act.

CAME ACROSS AN article by three-time Pulitzer Prize winner Thomas Friedman on Airbnb, and the author mentions a new “experience” option available recently, where tourists will not only find lodging in their destinations, but also a “one-of-a-kind” experience provided by the host, such as pasta workshops, local concerts, and much more.

Though I have never used Airbnb before, I do sometimes use services provided by Uber, another start-up from California. I had used its services in Los Angeles, New York and London, and I was always surprised by how fast the ride showed up.

I am sure many Uber users would agree that their car quality, driver’s etiquette and payment method are all very satisfying.

The problem is, both Airbnb and Uber are under fire from governments around the world, which have slowed down their development and efforts to popularize their services.

In Hong Kong, safety has become an issue for both. Uber is accused of providing “unlicensed” vehicles, and Airbnb is accused of running a platform where “unlicensed” hotel/hostels thrive (its new “experience” may also violate the current Travel Agents Ordinance). While our city has been