

For entrepreneurs in Taiwan, a community exists to help them each step of the way

This article is third in a four-part series, Taiwan in Transition, about Taiwan's economic evolution from manufacturing to innovation. For access to the entire series, click [here](#).

By Michael Sedwick

TAIPEI, Taiwan---Over 7,000 miles away and many years ago, Taiwanese-American Daniel Lin was conducting vaccine cancer research at Johns Hopkins University when he came up with an idea for creating a sustainable fish tank in which plants would feed off of fish waste. Lin, who was born in Taiwan but grew up in the U.S., decided to return to his birthplace to build his idea.

Lin's fish tank concept has grown beyond his vision. It has morphed into an idea to build a space for other entrepreneurs to connect with resources to start and grow their own businesses.

"I started FutureWard for selfish reasons," Lin said. "I created a space to cluster resources for startup creation so it would be easier to access the tools I would need to build my own business."



A portrait of
FutureWard CEO
Daniel Lin
Photo Credit:
FutureWard

The collection of tools that Lin sought has transformed into [FutureWard](#), a vibrant and global co-working space housing a community of entrepreneurs, freelancers, consultants, lawyers, and accountants.

"You'd be hard-pressed to find a better space. Other co-working spaces feel like shells; they provide space but nothing else. But here, it's a community," said Ricardo Davila, an American tenant of FutureWard.

Despite its location in the sprawling basement of an apartment complex, natural light pours into FutureWard from a side atrium with a transparent ceiling. Beyond the front desk and a swinging entrance gate, a kitchen, fully equipped with stovetop and fridge, stands front and center. A group of members and FutureWard employees dine

together at a high table while sitting on barstools, reflecting the importance of community to this co-working space.

FutureWard's kitchen bisects the community into 18 private offices on one side and open desk spaces on the other. Any member can use the numerous tables and chairs as long as they pack up everything at the end of the day; cubicles are available for members who do not need a private office yet want to have a permanent space to set up shop.

Scanning across the community space while reflecting on the beginning of his entrepreneurial journey, Lin said that it was difficult to find such an organization when he opened FutureWard in 2014.

“There wasn't a very big ecosystem for startups when I returned to Taiwan,” Lin said. “I realized that Taiwan has all the great resources, technology, know-how, and capital, except nobody was really using it or coordinating it to do something interesting and new.”

Walking through FutureWard's offices in late March, Lin circled back towards the kitchen, approached a shelf, and pointed to some recent innovations that grew in FutureWard: a smart pillbox that sends a reminder to patients' phones if they miss a dose, a wedding ring that doubles as a health monitor. Lin then pointed to a poster advertising Taiwan Tech Arena, a government-sponsored incubation center that the Taiwanese government created to encourage entrepreneurship.

Lin said that Taiwan Tech Arena has one major flaw: it is only open to companies that are invited by the government or government-selected accelerators. Accelerators are investment groups that mentor startups in exchange for partial ownership.

“TTA takes in companies that are already well on the path to making money,” Lin said. “The government wants to control everything, which is why it is so closed. It's the antithesis of what it should be.”

Unlike Taiwan Tech Arena, Lin said that FutureWard does not screen or restrict those who desire to join the community, because openness encourages innovation and risk-taking.

“In the startup industry, most ideas fail. It's important that entrepreneurs can find and build new opportunities quickly,” Lin said.

FutureWard's members vary in origin and staff size, but they all have access to the benefits that a community like FutureWard can offer.



Ruhong Yu, a FutureWard tenant for almost two years, has greatly benefited from other members becoming her clients.

Photo Credit: Michael Sedwick

Ruhong Yu, a freelance graphic designer, said she has rented a cubicle at FutureWard since July 2017. Drawings, Post-It Notes, and water bottles are scattered across her corner cubicle. Yu said that FutureWard staff has introduced her to new clients who have a product idea but do not know how to build or promote their ideas and brands.

“The staff knows every member’s speciality and needs. I’ve helped design for small companies, such as logos, business cards, packaging design, as well as printing design,” Yu said. She said, however, that she does not take advantage of FutureWard’s other amenities.

“Every month, an accountant and lawyer come for new companies, but I already had those connections before I came,” Yu said.

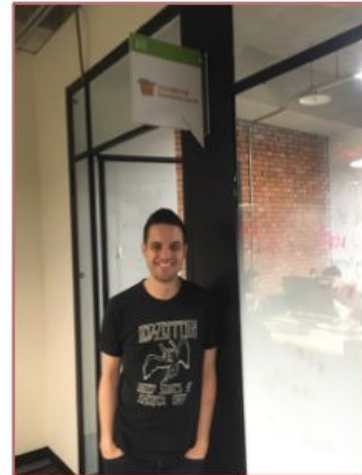
Larger companies have taken advantage of connections in FutureWard to stabilize the growth of their businesses.

Davila, the American tenant who runs the Taiwan office of a startup e-commerce shipping company, said that FutureWard helped make their business setup as smooth as possible.

“FutureWard recommended an accountant, and we used her for the business registration,” Davila said. “And an English-speaking law firm recommended by FutureWard made sure my employment contracts are legal and updated.”

Davila’s office will soon “graduate,” in FutureWard speak, meaning that the office has outgrown its FutureWard space and will move out. Wearing a Led Zeppelin shirt and sitting on a couch outside of his office, Davila reflected for a while before describing his move.

“There are always people coming and going. I am actually very sad to be leaving, because I do like it here. It’s



Ricardo Davila, whose office will soon move out of FutureWard into a bigger independent space, said he will miss FutureWard’s community atmosphere.

**Photo Credit:
Michael Sedwick**

convenient. Their services have internet, coffee, tea, and the location is fantastic,” Davila said.

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Some graduates have received support from FutureWard since the very beginning, as it is one of several entities in Taiwan that may sponsor Entrepreneur [Visas](#). The visa offers a team of three people a one-year residency to formally register a business in Taiwan. A team can extend a visa for an additional two years if they can prove continued eligibility, according to the government’s visa [website](#).

[My Room Abroad](#), a FutureWard graduate that now has its own independent office space, hopes to be the Airbnb of Asia for exchange students and anyone else who needs a place to stay for more than a month.

Vincent Mechele, CEO and founder, is a tall, lanky Belgian who came to Taiwan during the summer of 2017. He said that he was among the first batch of companies to apply for the visa, and the government did not really have a clear application process yet.

“When you apply, you have no clue about what documentation or requirements are. I would have imagined some kind of business plan would be necessary, but they wanted only a brief explanation,” Mechele said. He said that his company will apply to extend their visa this year and that the process is now clearer.

“Requirements now include opening a company and showing some minimum revenue numbers,” Mechele said.

FutureWard Community Manager Nathascha Chen, who helps members with various requests, said that FutureWard is responsible for making sure the applicants who come to Taiwan are actually trying to build a business. A visa applicant must interview with FutureWard and sign a letter of intent before applying for the visa; once the government approves the visa, the applicant must either rent space in FutureWard or work remotely and send FutureWard monthly updates, Chen said.



Pictures and introductions of community members hang on a wall near FutureWard's communal kitchen.

Photo Credit: Michael Sedwick

“The visa has stabilized itself quite well,” Chen said. “It takes at most about 45 days to complete the process, and we’ve had a 100 percent success rate.”

Lin said that he was glad that foreigners were coming to Taiwan to open businesses so that they may positively influence what he called Taiwan’s conservative business culture.

“Silicon Valley is not about its resources. It’s about the people and how they think and how they work. But Taiwan lacks mindset and mentalities. This country relies on what it always has done: manufacturing, increasing efficiency, lowering costs.”

Lin said that the window of opportunity for Taiwan is closing quickly because of more innovative competition from South Korea and mainland China.

“I’m hoping that this mindset change happens faster, because it needs to. That’s something that FutureWard is trying to build in Taiwan.”