HONOR to launch new laptops, smartphone in the Philippines

SMART devices brand HONOR this week announced that it will launch its first laptop product for the year and a new smartphone in the Philippines on Feb. 22.

HONOR Philippines will launch next week two MagicBook X series laptops, the HONOR MagicBook X 14 and X 15, it said in a statement on Monday.

The company said the laptops deliver "superb performance" for both work and play.

"The HONOR MagicBook X 14 and HONOR MagicBook X 15 support multi-screen collaboration allowing users to multi-task between different devices. Users can seamlessly connect their smartphone with the laptop, dragging files across and making edits with one single keyboard," it said.

"A handy fingerprint reading power button enables instant access when starting up the HONOR MagicBook X 14 and HONOR MagicBook X 15 for a more secure and effortless login experience," it added.

Based on HONOR's website, the two laptops have an aluminum alloy body, with the X 14 having a 14-inch display and the X 15 featuring a 15.6-inch screen.

Both have models powered by Intel Core i3 (256GB storage) or i5 (512GB) processors that have 8GB memory.

The laptops also support 65-watt fast charging via USB-C.

The brand will also launch in the Philippines the HONOR X7a smartphone, which it said is the sibling of the X9a 5G and features a longer battery life.

The phone has a 6,000mAh battery and features a 6.74-inch display with a refresh rate of up to 90Hz.

It comes in a 4GB memory + 128GB storage model and a 6GB+128GB version, based on HONOR' website.

The X7a has a quad rear camera setup made up of a 50-megapixel (MP) main camera, a 5MP wide angle lens, a 2MP depth camera, and a 2MP macro lens.

It supports video recording of up to 1080p.

The rear camera has several capture modes, such as portrait, panorama, HDR, time-lapse, super macro and smiley face capture, among others.

The phone also has an 8MP front camera that supports 2D face recognition.

"We are really excited to be introducing our new devices in the market, an affordable smartphone with 3 days of battery life and our line of laptops that will complete the HONOR ecosystem. To our HONOR fans, stay tuned on Feb. 22!" Stephen Cheng, HONOR vice-president for Marketing, was quoted as saying.

Alphabet's Sandbox AQ raises $500 million for cybersecurity, other quantum work

OAKLAND, Calif. — Sandbox AQ, a startup spun off from Alphabet, Inc. last year, said on Tuesday it raised $500 million as it helps customers prepare for a quantum computing future.

Quantum computers, whose processors run based on quantum physics, could one day carry out certain calculations millions of times quicker than today's fastest super computers, yet they remain years away from making a big change, such as breaking encryption.

But as hackers can harvest data today and wait to decrypt them when the quantum computers are ready, the National Institute of Standards and Technology under the US Commerce Department selected new cryptography standards last year that could better withstand quantum computers.

The US government has set quantum computing as one of the key technologies important for national security.

Sandbox AQ's software scans companies' systems to identify which parts use the old cryptography, identifies which need to be replaced urgently, and sets out to fortify the encryption of the enterprise, said Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Jack Hidary.

"Right now you have a lot of banks and pharma companies and governments still using these old protocols," said Hidary. "The average bank takes five to seven years to migrate over... Now, hopefully they'll do their important customer private information first."

Sandbox also has a business selling powerful simulation software to accelerate development of drugs and materials.

The simulation does not currently need quantum computers to work, said Mr. Hidary. He said in the last 18 months chips that do artificial intelligence work have become powerful enough to run some of the math for quantum physics. When quantum computers are ready, that work would speed up even further.

Sandbox AQ is also using existing types of sensors based on quantum physics. These have long been MRI machines, for instance, and Sandbox has created a prototype machine to monitor the heart. It can also be used to monitor slight local changes in the earth's magnetic field, making navigation systems much more precise, he said.

Last month Sandbox AQ said it won a contract with the US Air Force to research these quantum navigation technologies

Former Google CEO Eric Schmidt is the startup's chairman as well as investor. Other investors include Breyer Capital, T. Rowe Price funds and Salesforce.com, Inc. founder Marc Benioff's TIME Ventures.

Schmidt in a statement said Sandbox AQ has already signed up more than 15 enterprise and government customers and is partnering with 30 universities to train PhDs and other talent needed.

Some of the team and inspiration for Sandbox originated at Alphabet in 2016. But the Google parent is not a shareholder as Mr. Hidary said he wanted the company to be independent to work with the other major cloud companies as well. — *Reuters*

ManageEngine's top five predictions for the enterprise IT space for 2023

By Rajesh Ganesanos

SINCE the start of the pandemic, there have been immense changes in how employees interact with information technology (IT) tools and teams. Across the board, enterprises are seeing more collaboration between non-IT employees and IT personnel, and this collaboration can be, at least in part, attributed to IT decentralization and democratization. In the increasingly digital-first, hybrid work environment, we have five predictions that are likely to come to fruition.

"In the current digital-first, hybrid work environment, more employees than ever are deciding for themselves how their technologies will be chosen, deployed, and used, which has led to an increase in the use of low/no-code solutions. Also, AI models will continue to evolve; scalable platforms will be preferable to individual tools, and enterprises will make some tough hiring decisions in 2023," said Rajesh Ganesan, president at ManageEngine.

1. Enterprise-IT will evolve into enterprise-wide IT

We will continue to see the decentralization of IT personnel. Not only will most enterprises have a centralized IT group to handle requirements like systems deployment, cybersecurity, compliance, and threat detection, but these enterprises will also have IT personnel throughout the organizational chart, addressing specialized business-driven needs as they arise. As technological expertise continues to permeate throughout

enterprises, non-IT employees and IT-adjacent service delivery teams will use low/no-code platforms to build and deploy simple applications. According to a recent ManageEngine study — IT at Work: 2022 & Beyond, 42% of global IT decision makers believe that each department will have its own IT team in the next five years.

2. The tool versus platform debate will be laid to rest

Enterprises of varying sizes and maturity have made different choices, especially in regard to the management of their technology infrastructure. Some opted to go with a specialized tool for every problem; others invested in a platform that could expand to solve problems as they arose. The platform option is far more efficient. Having a tool for every problem doesn't help enterprises keep pace with changing demands. More and more enterprises will opt for the holistic, scalable platform approach to managing their technology infrastructure.

3. We will see unified service delivery designed for remote-first employees

Organizations will consolidate enterprise services on a unified service management platform, facilitating remote-first employees with a productive workspace — wherever these employees choose to work. In addition to IT knowledge resources commonly accessed from a single enterprise self-service portal, employees will increasingly be able to access and request services; for example, they'll be able to onboard remote employees, confirm corporate bookings, and submit travel expenses.

4. AI models will continue to evolve

In 2023, we will see AI models with better precision, being built with a limited amount of training data.

Techniques like few shot learning and transfer learning will see increased adoption, and the gap between natural language processing and computer vision will continue to blur. As an example, we're already seeing applications that allow us to search through a recording for a particular topic; then, by conversing with a chatbot, we're brought to the relevant timestamps.

AI regulation is also on the horizon. Like we saw with data privacy legislation, this regulation will come from the European Union. Set to become law in 2023, the EU's AI Act could start being enforced as early as 2024.

5. Finding and reskilling technology talent will continue to be a challenge

The rapid evolution of technology and the changing business landscape has put pressure on businesses to find and retain talent; the question of whether enterprises should find fresh talent or reskill existing employees is one that enterprises will have to make.

In the wake of the Great Resignation, some companies assumed it would be easy to find new talent, but that really hasn't been the case, especially in regard to software-engineering workers. Factors like diversity and inclusion will continue to influence hiring decisions, and at ManageEngine, we personally believe that continuing to train, educate, and foster the careers of existing employees is the best course of action. That said, enterprises will have to choose for themselves how best to proceed.

Rajesh Ganesanos is the president of ManageEngine.

PAL reopens direct flights to Beijing, Shanghai starting this month

FLAG carrier Philippine Airlines (PAL) announced on Wednesday that it will be reopening direct flights to two more cities in mainland China, the second-largest source of tourists for the Philippines.

"We are forging ahead with the restoration of PAL's Greater China flight network, an investment that will strengthen our connections to the economic hubs in the mainland and help boost bilateral relations between the Filipino and Chinese people," PAL President and Chief Operating Officer Stanley K. Ng said in a press release.

"We hope that our relaunch of flights to Beijing and Shanghai will help fuel a rebound in tourist and business travel. Our goal is to once again operate the largest network of flights on multiple routes between mainland China and the Philippines," he added.

Starting Feb. 14, the flagship airline will be reopening its direct flights to Shanghai, while it will be relaunching its Beijing route a week after or on Feb. 21.

PAL's Manila-Shanghai-Manila service will initially have three flights a week and will increase to daily by March 26, while the Manila-Beijing-Manila service will initially have two flights per week that will increase to four times a week beginning March 26.

The airline said that mainland China was one of the country's top sources of tourists before the pandemic with 1.74 million residents visiting the Philippines.

With the additional flights to Shanghai and Beijing, the carrier will now fly to four mainland China destinations together with Xiamen and Guangzhou (Canton).

The company said that it is also looking to resume flights to Quanzhou (Jinjiang) and Macau by March this year.

It is targeting to open two flights to Jinjiang on March 19, 22 and 24, which

will increase to daily starting March 26, while it will restore its twice weekly flights to Macau beginning March 26.

Meanwhile, PAL is also increasing the frequencies of its existing routes to Xiamen and Guangzhou.

The airline will be increasing its flights to Xiamen to twice a week starting Feb. 14 and to thrice a week starting Feb. 25, while flights to Guangzhou will increase to twice weekly on Feb. 16 and to daily by March 26.

"PAL is working closely with Chinese and Philippine health and aviation authorities to ensure the highest level of health safety protections for travelers," the airline said.

Before the pandemic, the flagship carrier served the mainland Chinese cities of Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou, Quanzhou and Xiamen for a total of 34 weekly flights. — *Justine Irish D. Tabile*

MICHAEL VARCAS/PHILIPPINE STAR

Balai Ni Fruitas expands Cebu bakery distribution

LISTED company Balai Ni Fruitas, Inc. is expanding the distribution of Balai Pandesal baked goods through supermarkets and convenience stores in Cebu.

"We reiterate our vision for [Balai Ni Fruitas] to be part of each Filipino household's daily habit. We have further expanded the distribution of our baked goods outside our stores and we see great prospects in this initiative," said Lester C. Yu, its president and chief executive officer.

In a regulatory filing on Wednesday, the company said Ayala Center Cebu, Super Metro Colon, Metro Colon, Super Metro Lapu, and Super Metro Mambaling Metro Gaisano supermarkets are expected to soon carry Balai Pandesal goods.

"This is in line with the company's strategic objective to make its products more accessible to Filipinos across the nation," the company said.

Balai Pandesal products are initially available in Gaisano Country Mall, Gaisano Main Colin, Gaisano Market Square and two branches of 24 Summit Pharmacy.

The company said the expansion of its Balai Pandesal products complements the brand's growing online presence in Cebu.

Currently, Balai Pandesal goods can be purchased through www.balaimart.com and through GrabFood and FoodPanda. These are also available in its Balai Pandesal anchor store and seven community stores within the Fruitas Holdings, Inc. network in Cebu.

Balai Ni Fruitas is a 75%-owned subsidiary of Fruitas Holdings. It has three brands, which are Balai Pandesal, Buko ni Fruitas, and Fruitas House of Desserts spread across its more than 90 active stores.

On the stock market on Wednesday, shares in Balai Ni Fruitas closed six centavos or 9.09% higher to P0.72 apiece. — **Justine Irish D. Tabile**

Smart, fintech startup tie up for 'buy now, pay later' offer

SMART Communications, Inc. signed a partnership deal with a Silicon Valley-based financial technology (fintech) startup company to provide its subscribers with a "buy now, pay later" service.

In a press release on Wednesday, PLDT, Inc.'s wireless unit said the partnership with Plentina will enable Smart subscribers to take out microconsumer loans to pay for their load.

"We welcome Plentina as one of our direct distribution partners. Our tie-up with Plentina provides a financial service that caters to the broader base of prepaid customers," said Alex O. Caeg, senior vice-president and head of the PLDT-Smart consumer sales group.

The company also has plans to extend the "buy now, pay later" services to its retail and device partners to help subscribers in availing gadgets.

"We also hope to extend this service to our retail and device part-

ners so that they can offer more convenient and flexible modes of payment for customers who may want to purchase mobile phones or other gadgets from Smart," said Mr. Caeg.

To be able to avail of the loan for their prepaid load, Smart and Talk 'N Text subscribers will need to download the Plentina application, register and pass the credit scoring.

"They won't get stressed out even when they don't have available cash. You might not have the money now, but then you can load up your Smart mobile phone using credit through Plentina and pay later according to your preferred schedule," said Earl Martin Valencia, chief business officer and co-founder of Plentina.

As of end-2021, Smart services approximately 96% of the country's cities and municipalities with its combined 2G, 3G, 4G LTE, and 5G network. — **Justine Irish D. Tabile**