Filipinos' demand for data science and AI courses grows

FILIPINOS are increasingly seeking courses to adapt to the digital economy, especially those focusing on data science and generative artificial intelligence (AI), according to online training service Coursera.

Coursera's annual study of learner trends showed a fivefold increase in generative AI content searches in the Philippines from 2022, with the top courses being on introductions to and prompt engineering for ChatGPT, it said on Wednesday.

The most popular courses in the country last year were on data literacy foundations, project management foundations, and questions for data-driven decisions, all in partnership with Google.

The majority or eight in ten of the top courses included entry-level professional certificates that do not need a degree or background knowledge on the topic, Coursera noted.

The Coursera study was based on last year's data from over 2.1 million registered learners in the Philippines.

"[Filipinos'] interest in gen-AI, tech, and data skills, not only reflects their thirst for cutting-edge knowledge but also their commitment to staying at the forefront of the digital revolution," Raghav Gupta, APAC managing director at Coursera, said in a statement.

"The renewed focus on lifelong learning, tech and human skills, and blended learning on campuses will be the key to employability in the AI-driven world," he added.

The other most popular courses among Filipinos were on the foundations of digital marketing and e-commerce, technical support, and user experience design.

This was followed by courses on data for exploration, and data processing, which were all also made in partnership with Google.

Courses on personal development also made the list, such as "Learning How to Learn" from neuroscience-focused Deep Teaching Solutions, LLC. and "The Science of Well-being" from Yale University.

"These courses emphasize the importance of lifelong learning and personal well-being, reflecting a balanced approach to self-improvement," Coursera said. — **Miguel Hanz L. Antivola**

PHL smartphone market to rebound this year, IDC says

By Miguel Hanz L. Antivola
Reporter

THE Philippine smartphone market is expected to grow to 16.9 million shipments this year, a rebound from 2023's performance that was affected by economic worries, according to International Data Corp. (IDC).

Data from IDC showed shipments are expected to go up from the 15.7 million forecast last year and 16.3 million in 2022.

"Vendors remained conservative and consumer appetite was cautious [in 2023], resulting to an overall subdued market performance due to economic uncertainties," Angela Jenny V. Medez, IDC senior market analyst, in an e-mail interview with *BusinessWorld*.

"Philippine inflation peaked at the start of 2023 before slowing down towards the end," she added. "[We anticipate] a rebound in 2024 consistent with the global growth outlook and consumption levels to pick up."

Philippine smartphone shipments in the third quarter of 2023 declined by 12.7% from the prior three-month period due to vendors' inventory clearance and preparation for the peak holiday season in the next quarter, Ms. Medez said.

Shipments also declined by 7.1% year on year, she added.

"Some players face fierce competition from Transsion in the <$200 price segment resulting to lower shipments," she said.

From the fourth quarter of 2022 to the third quarter, Transsion was the leading smartphone brand with a 25.5% market share, according to IDC.

This was followed by realme (20.2%), Oppo (14.9%), Samsung (10.5%), and Xiaomi (10%).

Ms. Medez said Filipino consumers can expect a resurgence in foldable or flip phones this year, alongside a potential increase in the availability of prepaid eSIMs.

SEC account hack renews spotlight on security concerns over X

SAN FRANCISCO/WASHINGTON — The hack of the US Securities and Exchange Commission's official account on X on Tuesday renewed concerns about the social media platform's security since its takeover by billionaire Elon Musk in 2022.

The hackers posted false news about a widely anticipated announcement the SEC was expected to make about Bitcoin, leading the cryptocurrency's price to spike and alarming observers. The false post on @SECGov said the securities regulator had approved exchange-traded funds to hold bitcoin. The SEC deleted the post about 30 minutes after it appeared.

X confirmed later on Tuesday, following a preliminary investigation, that the SEC's account was compromised because an unidentified individual gained control over a phone number associated with the account through a third party.

The social media platform also said in a post that the SEC did not have two-factor authentication enabled at the time the account was compromised.

While X said the compromise was not because of a breach of the platform's systems, security analysts called the incident disquieting.

"Something like that, where you can take over the SEC account and potentially affect the value of bitcoin in the market — there's massive opportunity for disinformation," said Austin Berglas, a former cybersecurity official at the FBI's New York office and a senior executive at the security firm BlueVoyant.

Accounts on X, formerly known as Twitter, can be hijacked by stealing passwords or tricking targets into giving up their login credentials, just like on any other social media platform. Accounts can also be taken over by breaching X's security, as happened in 2020, when a teenager masterminded a break-in of Twitter's internal computer network and seized control of dozens of high-profile accounts, including those of former President Barack Obama and Mr. Musk, well before he bought Twitter.

An SEC spokesperson on Tuesday said the "unauthorized access" of its account by an "unknown party" had been revoked and the agency was working with law enforcement and others in the government to investigate the matter.

SECURITY PROBLEMS

Even before it was acquired by Mr. Musk and changed its name to X, however, Twitter was the subject of persistent security problems.

The 2019 arrest of a Saudi agent who had secretly combed the site's backend for personal information about the kingdom's dissidents raised concerns about Twitter's internal safeguards.

The mass hijacking of top accounts the following year by the Florida teen heightened the concerns, with New York state's Department of Financial Services scolding the firm for falling prey to a "simple" hack. In 2022 Twitter's former security chief Peiter Zatko publicly turned on the company, before it was acquired by Mr. Musk, accusing it of a litany of security failings that he said jeopardized national security.

Mr. Musk has touted the company's security since buying Twitter in October 2022, but former staff say it has worsened since then. Mr. Musk ordered a 50% cut in X's physical security budget after buying the social media platform, and wanted to scrap programs aimed at helping it find and fix digital vulnerabilities, according to a lawsuit filed last month by Alan Rosa, former IT security chief at X. Mr. Rosa alleges he was fired when he objected to the measures.

A former Twitter executive, who declined to be named, said the protection of prominent accounts such as those of government officials was a major focus there prior to Mr. Musk's acquisition, and included alerts for suspected hacks with rapid response measures, but staffers who worked on that effort were part of an "election integrity" team that suffered layoffs last year.

Early last year, X limited the ability of non-paying users to implement two-factor authentication, a key security measure. X's website says the firm "proactively" protects and secures the accounts of government officials and political candidates that "may be particularly vulnerable during certain civic processes."

It is unclear if the SEC site had such security in place. If not, hackers could have taken over the account using an old leaked password, said Mr. Berglas.

"Anytime you're reducing a security function in a platform that does what X does, it is incredibly concerning," he added. — ***Reuters***

Makati weighing real property tax cut to draw in more businesses

By John Victor D. Ordoñez
Reporter

MAKATI CITY is considering reductions to its real property tax and other local taxes to attract more businesses to the city.

"To our partners in the business community, your steadfast support has been integral to our city's growth. In recognition of this, I have ordered a comprehensive review on the possibility of lowering the real property tax and other local taxes," Makati Mayor Marlen Abigail Binay-Campos said in her speech during the 8th State of the City Address at Rotary Club of Makati on Wednesday.

She said lowering taxes would make it easier for businesses to operate, in turn boosting the city's economic performance.

Makati City collected P24.8 billion in revenue in December, most of it generated by businesses.

Collections included P12.49 billion in business tax and P8.69 billion in real property tax.

"With our collective effort, Makati will continue its legacy as a dynamic and thriving city, leading the way in economic resilience, technological advancement and sustainable urban living," Ms. Binay said.

On Jan. 5, the city removed the 10 enlisted men's barrios or "Embo" villages from its books after the resolution of a territorial dispute with Taguig City. The loss of population translates to reduced revenue and allocation for national taxes.

Makati also removed subsidies to the Embo villages, which Ms. Binay said would save the city P7.9 billion this year.

Taguig City had claimed the Embo villages as being part of the Fort Bonifacio district.

The Supreme Court had ruled with finality on the case in April last year, upholding Taguig's ownership of the 729-hectare Bonifacio Global City Complex and several adjoining neighborhoods.

In December, Makati suspended the collection of amusement tax for performers in public places to boost tourism and to help fund the creative industry.

Export growth of 40% needed to meet targets set in PEDP

By Justine Irish D. Tabile
Reporter

EXPORTS will need to grow 40% this year to be able to hit the $143.4-billion target set for 2024 in the Philippine Export Development Plan (PEDP) 2023-2028, according to the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI).

"For us to be able to catch up with our PEDP targets, we need to grow by about 40% this year ... because we did not meet the target for 2023," according to Bianca Pearl R. Sykimte, director of the DTI-Export Marketing Bureau.

Ms. Sykimte said that the DTI is only projecting at least 10% export growth this year.

"Based on market projections ... We expect about 10% growth (in 2024). So definitely, we will try to achieve more than 10% for export growth but to be able to catch up with the PEDP target of around $140 billion, we need to grow by 40%," she added.

"It might be hard, but we really need to attract investment to build our domestic capacity. Again, 60% of our exports are electronics, and if you look at that sector it really is investment-driven," she added.

Merchandise and services exports in 2023 under the PEDP were set a target of $126.8 billion. The Development Budget Coordination Committee (DBCC) projected goods exports to decline 4% in 2023.

For 2024, the DBCC projected goods exports to grow 5%, and then by 6% annually between 2025 and 2028.

Preliminary estimates by the Philippine Statistics Authority indicate that merchandise exports in the first 11 months of 2023 amounted to $67.03 billion, down 8.4% from a year earlier.

FULL STORY

Read the full story by scanning the QR code with your smartphone or by typing the link <tinyurl.com/yqe9eltw>

Pag-IBIG gains FFW support as workers' benefits set to increase under new monthly rates in 2024

Pag-IBIG Fund secured the support of the Federation of Free Workers (FFW), one of the country's top labor organizations, in its plan to increase the nearly four-decade old mandatory monthly savings rate for both members and their employers starting January 2024, officials stated Monday (08 January).

The FFW, in its letter to Pag-IBIG Fund, cited the agency's responsible management of the funds entrusted by Filipino workers and its efforts to provide social protection for its members in accordance with its charter.

"We wish to express our support and raise no objections to your plan to increase Pag-IBIG Monthly Contributions by January 2024. With this increase, we recognize that our fellow workers will be entitled to greater savings when their memberships (with Pag-IBIG Fund) mature or upon retirement. We particularly note the equal increase in employers' counterpart contributions, which will result in more substantial savings for our fellow workers," said Atty. Sonny G. Matula, FFW National President.

Matula further emphasized that the FFW's support to Pag-IBIG Fund's planned rate increase is contingent with the agency's commitment to further improve the benefits of its members, and ensure that its growth is directed toward the betterment of workers.

Under Pag-IBIG Fund's new savings rates, the maximum monthly compensation to be used in computing the required two percent (2%) employee savings and two percent (2%) employer share of Pag-IBIG Fund members shall be increased to ten thousand pesos (P10,000), from the current five thousand pesos (P5,000). As a result, the monthly savings of Pag-IBIG Fund members, for both the employee's share and the employer's counterpart, shall increase to two hundred pesos (P200) each from the current one hundred pesos (P100).

Pag-IBIG Fund Chief Executive Officer Marilene C. Acosta, meanwhile, expressed her appreciation for the support of the FFW and gave assurance that Pag-IBIG Fund members shall be entitled to better benefits under the agency's the new rates.

"We thank the Federation of Free Workers for supporting our plan and sharing our efforts in advancing the welfare of Filipino workers. We assure the FFW, our members and our stakeholders that the increase in our monthly savings rates shall redound to the benefit our members. The increase in our monthly savings rates mean that our members shall have higher Pag-IBIG Savings that earn annual dividends, which they shall receive upon membership maturity or retirement. And, because of their higher savings, they shall also be entitled to higher multi-purpose and calamity loan amounts to help them with their financial needs. On an equally important note, our new rates shall allow us to continue providing affordable home loans to our members in the coming years," Acosta said.