I Squared Capital pledges $1B more in PHL infra investment

I SQUARED CAPITAL has committed an additional $1-billion investment in critical infrastructure projects in the Philippines, the Office of the Special Assistant to the President for Investment and Economic Affairs (OSAPIEA) said.

Secretary Frederick D. Go, who heads OSAPIEA, said I Squared's commitment reflects the country's growing appeal to infrastructure investors.

"These investments will improve lives — from powering homes and businesses with renewables to ensuring safer food through modern cold storage and connecting people and enterprises in the digital age," he said in a statement over the weekend.

OSAPIEA said the US private equity firm has committed to advance critical projects across energy transition, transport and logistics, and digital infrastructure.

"I Squared has invested over $1 billion in project enterprise value in the Philippines and shared its plans to invest an additional $1 billion in critical infrastructure projects for the nation," it added.

To date, I Squared is advancing seven strategic investments in the Philippines, including two in the last six months.

These are Aggreko Philippines, HEXA Renewables, Berde Renewables, Royale Cold Storage, Philippine Coastal Storage & Pipeline Corp., HGC, and BDX.

According to OSAPIEA, Aggreko Philippines has so far invested $200 million in modular power and is planning to double this investment, meaning HEXA Renewables is targeting an additional $350-million investment by 2027.

Meanwhile, I Squared is hoping to significantly increase Royale Cold Storage's capacity in the near term.

"We are proud to partner with the Philippines on its infrastructure transformation," I Squared Chairman and Managing Partner Sadek Wahba said.

"Our investments are delivering energy security, food resilience, and digital connectivity — building the foundation for inclusive economic growth and long-term prosperity," he added.

I Squared is among the companies President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr. met with in his recent trip to the US. — **Justine Irish D. Tabile**

PHL trade concessions to US won't 'harm' domestic producers, DA says

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) said it has been assured by Philippine trade negotiators that no concessions will be made to the US that will harm domestic producers of agricultural goods.

Agriculture Secretary Francisco P. Tiu Laurel, Jr. said the reassurance covers rice and sugar, which the Philippines does not import from the US, as well as corn, chicken, fish, and pork.

Left out of his list is wheat, which the Philippines does not produce in commercial quantities, which domestic industries use for food production and animal feed.

The Philippine negotiating team, led by Secretary Frederick D. Go, who heads the Office of the Special Assistant to the President for Investment and Economic Affairs, and Trade Secretary Maria Cristina Aldeguer-Roque, made the reassurances as they negotiate the technical details of the preliminary trade deal with the US, under which Philippine exports pay a US tariff of 19%.

President Donald J. Trump last week said the Philippines has granted duty-free access to some US imports.

The DA, citing Malacañang, said a final trade agreement is still being hammered out by trade negotiators.

"Secretary Go… assured the Philippines has not made any concessions that would harm local producers," it said.

The Philippine negotiating team has said that any trade agreement "must strike a balance between improving market access and safeguarding the livelihoods of Filipino workers and farmers," the DA said. — **Kyle Aristophere T. Atienza**

Davao airport upgrade seen completed by 2026

THE Department of Transportation (DoTr) said it expects to complete the P650-million upgrade of the Davao International Airport by the end of 2026.

The airport project covers the 48% expansion of the passenger terminal to 25,910 square meters by December 2026, the DoTr said, thereby raising seating capacity in the terminal to 1,500 passengers.

The government is currently evaluating an unsolicited proposal for the airport's operations and maintenance.

The Public-Private Partnership (PPP) Center has said that the proposal is still undergoing assessment.

The P12.9-billion proposal was submitted by the Davao International Airport Consortium, according to the PPP Center.

The consortium consists of Asian Infrastructure and Management Corp.; Filinvest Infrastructure Solutions Ventures, Inc.; and JG Summit Infrastructure Holding Corp.

The PPP Center said the proposal will be implemented under a rehabilitate-operate-transfer arrangement with a 30-year concession agreement.

The DoTr said it is looking to tap the private sector for the operation and maintenance of up to 20 airports to help expand and upgrade the Philippines' regional hubs. — **Ashley Erika O. Jose**

PHILIPPINE STAR/NOEL PABALATE

Rural dev't NGO backs law setting palay farmgate floor at P25 per kilo

THE 20th Congress needs to devote significant attention to stabilizing the rice industry, in particular a measure that will set a floor price of P25 per kilogram (kg) for palay, or unmilled rice, the Integrated Rural Development Foundation (IRDF), a non-government organization (NGO) said.

In a statement, the IRDF said the "primary driver" of the current crisis is the Rice Tariffication Law of 2019, which removed restrictions on private-sector rice imports. In exchange, importers were required to pay tariffs on their shipments, set initially at 35% and since reduced to 15%.

The price of palay at the farmgate level has been recorded at P10 per kg in some areas, below the average production cost of P14.52 per kg estimated in 2024 by the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA),

Production costs are also rising because of more expensive fuel and inputs, the IRDF added.

In 2024, the Philippines became the world's largest rice importer, bringing in a record 4.8 million metric tons (MMT) of rice.

House Bill No. 1, or the proposed RICE Act, seeks to restore some regulatory powers to the National Food Authority (NFA), but the IRDF said "farmers remain exposed to price volatility and income uncertainty" if the NFA cannot influence the market with floor prices and grain procurement.

The IRDF called for a comprehensive law that provides integrated production, marketing and post-harvest support to rice farmers.

The 20th Congress should restore and strengthen the power of the NFA to regulate imports and intervene in the market to stabilize prices and buy palay at support levels, it said.

The IRDF supports the repeal of the Rice Tariffication Law, replacing it with a proposed Rice Industry Sustainable Development Act that sets the minimum farmgate price for palay at P25 per kg.

The floor price will help farmers earn at least P50,000 per hectare each harvest, equivalent to about P16,000 per month, thereby incentivizing continued planting and increasing yields.

It also supports legislation enabling the NFA to procure 10%-20% of the palay harvest. — **Kyle Aristophere T. Atienza**

Artificial intelligence upskilling plan expected to be ready by early next year

THE ANALYTICS & Artificial Intelligence Association of the Philippines (AAP) said it expects the completion of the detailed implementation plan for nationwide artificial intelligence (AI) upskilling early next year.

AAP President Michelle Alarcon said the group has co-created the National AI Upskilling Plan, which was proposed by the Private Sector Advisory Council (PSAC) Education and Jobs Pillar to President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr.

"We will work towards having a pilot, but at least the detailed implementation plan will be there in January 2026," she told reporters on the sidelines of AI-CON PH 2025.

"We are tasked to put together the plan and then the associated costs (involved). And then the government will set a realistic amount that can be released, which we have not got around to yet," she added.

The National AI Upskilling Plan is set to have five tiers addressing the needs of beginners to professionals.

"Right now, we are trying to consolidate all the efforts from the private sector because we are the lead, and we are working with the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) and Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA)," she said.

"We kicked off weeks ago, and now we are in the process of putting details to the budget," she added, noting that the upskilling plan is being planned around an initial budget of P1.5 billion.

She said that the PSAC has determined a need to focus on high school students, as those already in the workforce are being taken care of by their employers.

"We will also be careful about which particular segment of the youth we will need to educate on AI," she said.

"But the rest of the sequence, we have not figured out. It also depends on the budget. Because just high school students is already a lot," she added.

At the conference last week, the AAP also launched the Code of Ethics of AI Professionals, which it hopes will lay the groundwork for self-regulation. — **Justine Irish D. Tabile**

OPINION

AI: Placing humans at the center

First of two parts

IN BRIEF:

• Despite the extensive use of artificial intelligence (AI), a gap in adoption remains, highlighting the difference between individuals' willingness to use AI and their actual engagement with it.

• Organizations have the opportunity to bridge this divide by fostering trust in AI, showcasing its benefits, and empowering employees to engage with the technology on their own terms.

• Understanding current attitudes toward AI, including comfort levels and practical applications, is essential for leaders to make informed decisions and demonstrate the value of AI to employees.

SUITS THE C-SUITE
ROSSANA A. FAJARDO

To get employees on board with the vision and the value of AI, it's critical to demonstrate their value, prioritizing progress over perfection and recognizing how the technology affects emotions within an organization.

Artificial intelligence has emerged as a crucial element in contemporary life and work. The AI Sentiment Index Study, conducted by market research firm EY Sweeney, surveying over 15,000 participants globally, found that 82% had actively engaged with AI in the past six months. This trend signifies a significant shift in human capability rather than just a technological advancement. The research utilized a random stratified sampling method to ensure diverse demographic representation across 15 countries, including Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Japan, Saudi Arabia, New Zealand, South Korea, Sweden, the UAE, the UK, and the US.

Despite the extensive use of AI, a gap in adoption remains — this gap highlights the difference between individuals' willingness to use AI and their actual engagement with it. Issues related to trust, privacy, and control contribute to this gap, along with the current availability of AI tools. Organizations have a substantial opportunity to bridge this divide.

Leadership is vital in this context. Organizations that build trust in AI, showcase its benefits, and place humans at center by empowering them to engage with AI on their own terms will be best equipped to implement AI effectively. By utilizing AI in ways that align with human needs and aspirations, organizations can ultimately enhance human potential rather than diminish it, shaping the role of AI in business and society.

AI'S IMPACT ON EVERYDAY LIFE

Understanding present attitudes toward AI provides insights into its future trajectory. People's interactions with AI today reflect a practical approach. Most individuals seek to understand how AI can help them achieve their objectives. Currently, AI is mainly employed for straightforward, efficiency-driven tasks such as managing energy consumption, researching topics, or summarizing information. When AI offers immediate, tangible benefits, individuals are more likely to engage.

However, AI adoption hinges on confidence as much as functionality, with clear boundaries around where individuals feel comfortable using AI. More complex systems or tasks requiring personal data, e.g., AI-powered health diagnostics, credit scoring algorithms, personalized marketing, etc., often evoke hesitation. As AI evolves, these boundaries will shift, necessitating that business leaders make informed decisions based on current and emerging trends.

The AI Sentiment Index quantifies global comfort levels with AI, currently scoring 68 out of 100. This index averages comfort levels based on factors such as the presence of AI in daily life, its personal impact, its national impact, and excitement for its future. A higher score indicates greater comfort with AI, and the index categorizes respondents into three groups: uncomfortable, neutral, and comfortable.

Those most at ease with AI engage significantly more, averaging 15 different AI applications in the past six months, compared to six among neutral respondents and just three among the uncomfortable. This data reveals a reinforcing cycle: comfort with AI encourages exploration of more applications, gradually increasing confidence and usage.

DEMONSTRATING THE VISION AND VALUE OF AI

To get employees on board with the vision and the value of AI, it's critical to demonstrate its value, prioritizing progress over perfection and recognizing how the technology affects emotions within an organization.

These examples illustrate the importance of demonstrating the value of AI to employees, prioritizing progress over perfection, and recognizing the emotional impact of technology within an organization:

1. Training and development programs: Implement AI-driven training tools that personalize learning experiences for employees. By showcasing how AI can enhance their skills and career growth, employees may feel more positive about the technology.

2. Employee feedback systems: Use AI to analyze employee feedback and sentiment in real-time. This can help management understand employee concerns and emotions, fostering a culture of openness and trust.

3. Streamlined workflows: Introduce AI tools that automate repetitive tasks, allowing employees to focus on more meaningful work. Highlighting the time saved and increased job satisfaction can help employees embrace AI.

4. Data-driven decision making: Implement AI analytics to provide insights that support decision-making processes. Demonstrating how AI can lead to better outcomes can help employees see its value in their daily work.

5. Collaborative AI tools: Use AI to enhance collaboration among teams, such as AI-driven project management tools that help track progress and allocate resources effectively. This can foster a sense of teamwork and shared purpose.

6. Recognition programs: Create AI systems that recognize and reward employee achievements based on performance data. This can boost morale and show employees that their contributions are valued.

7. Customer interaction improvements: Showcase AI applications that enhance customer service, such as chatbots that provide quick responses. Employees can see how AI improves customer satisfaction, which can positively impact their roles.

8. Emotional intelligence in AI: Introduce AI tools that analyze employee emotions and well-being, allowing management to respond proactively to issues. This shows a commitment to employee welfare and can foster a supportive environment.

The adoption of AI within an organization can be enhanced by initiating small-scale pilot projects that showcase quick wins and celebrating these successes to build enthusiasm and confidence in the technology among employees. Additionally, leaders should maintain transparent communication by regularly sharing the goals and benefits of AI initiatives, addressing any concerns or misconceptions, and fostering open dialogue to mitigate fear and resistance.

In the second part of this article, we discuss the local AI landscape, how organizations can support human agency through AI, and the leadership imperative in keeping humans at the center.

This article is for general information only and is not a substitute for professional advice where the facts and circumstances warrant. The views and opinions expressed above are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of SGV & Co.

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