

TOGGLE

WEEKEND LIVING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

A publication of *The Daily Star*

THE CASE FOR E-BOOKS

E-BOOK

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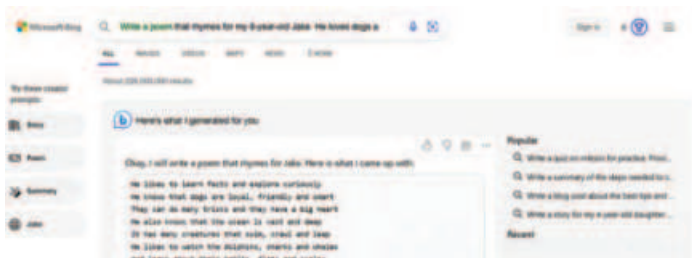
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Alibaba joins global chatbot race

Chinese e-commerce giant Alibaba is joining a plethora of global tech companies rushing to match the popular AI-powered chatbot, as it recently announced that it started working on a rival to ChatGPT. The announcement comes days after Chinese search giant Baidu said it would complete testing of its AI chatbot in March.

ChatGPT has given rise to a boom in artificial intelligence technology, with tech giants Microsoft, Google and China's Baidu all working to develop chatbots that can mimic human speech. Alibaba is now working on a ChatGPT-style conversation bot of its own that is being tested by employees, according to AFP.



Microsoft's Bing search engine is now powered by ChatGPT

The same AI technology that powers the chatbot ChatGPT has been upgraded and added to the latest version of Microsoft's Bing search engine. A new experience for browsing the web and finding information online is promised by the company as it introduces the product alongside new AI-enhanced features for its Edge browser.

'Chat' and 'Compose' are two of the new features of its Edge browser. Edge's sidebar will contain these embedded. While 'Chat' allows users to sum up the website or document they're viewing and ask questions about its contents, 'Compose' serves as a writing assistant, helping to generate text, from emails to social media posts, based on a few initial prompts.

The new Bing now has a chat start button in its toolbar, which takes you to a conversational interface akin to ChatGPT. One important thing to keep in mind is that while Bing's ChatGPT bot is much more current and can handle queries related to far more recent events, OpenAI's ChatGPT bot was trained on data that only covers 2021. The announcement comes on the back of Microsoft recently investing heavily in OpenAI, and Google launching its own rival to ChatGPT called Bard.



Bangladesh has the '4th largest unconnected population' in the world

Over 105 million Bangladeshis remain 'unconnected' from internet access, according to the Digital 2023 Global Overview Report by global data reference library Data Reportal. As of January 2023, Bangladesh has 105,138,000 people (roughly 61.1% of the total population) who do not have access to the internet across the country and ranks 4th in terms of unconnected populations worldwide.

However, at the start of 2022, there were 114.5 million people who did not use the internet (roughly 68.5% of the population). This indicates that more than 9 million new users have used the internet in the past year in the country. According to the report, India has the highest number of people, with more than 730 million people not using the internet at the start of this year. China comes in second with around 375 million remaining away from the internet.



Yahoo to lay off over 20% of their workforce

Yahoo has recently announced that they are going to lay off more than 20% of their entire workforce by the end of 2023. About 1000 of these cuts are to be made by the end of this week, further states the company.

According to reports from CNBC and Reuters, these cuts will affect about 50% of employees from Yahoo for Business division. As per a Yahoo spokesperson, the Yahoo for Business division "struggled

to live up to our high standards across the entire stack". As such, the layoffs are planned to better optimise Yahoo's advertising unit in an effort to restructure the company.

Yahoo is currently owned by the private equity firm Apollo Global Management since the \$5 billion buyout in 2021. According to the US-based news portal Axios, the latest layoffs will eliminate the jobs of over 1,600 Yahoo employees.

Zoom lays off 1,300 employees

Video conferencing platform Zoom will be letting go of 1,300 employees from its organisation, according to a memo by Zoom CEO and Founder Eric Yuan to the staff. This will account for 15% of the global staff that the popular video conferencing app currently has under its wing.

According to the memo, Zoom's laid-off employees in the US will receive up to 16 weeks' salary and healthcare coverage as well as other benefits. The support for 'Zoomies' outside the US will be similar and will take local laws into account.

EDITOR'S NOTE

A real page turner

It goes without saying that mankind wouldn't be where it is now without the existence of books. However, for quite a while now, modern readers have been opting for the electronic versions over the physical page turners. Why is that the case? We explore the ever present argument of books vs ebooks in this week's Cover Story.

Turn this week's pages to find, as always, a variety of topics, from a list of in-demand skills for freelancing jobs in Next Step to an inside look into the new Runner three-wheeler factory in Shift. We also reviewed Samsung Galaxy Flip 4 in Bytes. Be sure to check 'em all out.

Until then. See you next weekend.

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Zoom becomes the latest tech company to let go of its employees, as tech giants Microsoft, Meta, Google, and Amazon have laid off part of their staff in the past couple of months.

HANDS ON REVIEW

Samsung Galaxy Z Flip4 FLEXING WITH THE FLIP

BY SHAHRIAR RAHMAN



Folding smartphones has been in the market to provide a new form factor compared to traditional flat smartphones. The idea behind folding phones is to pack a larger screen size that can be pocketed easily. Samsung has been heavily invested in folding tech in the recent past, and the brand continuously working to improve the design and functionality of folding phones. Samsung's plan with folding phones is relatively straightforward: to continue refining the tech and to bring new models to the market that offer improved performance, durability, and user experience. Meanwhile, it is working on expanding the use cases and applications for folding phones, making them more accessible and affordable to a wider range of consumers.

The Samsung Galaxy Z Flip 4 is the latest iteration of Samsung's foldable



phone line. In the context of Bangladesh, the Z Flip 4 is a device that stands out for its compact form factor, improved ergonomics, and, most notably, a better battery life. In this day and age, this device is a novel product, but it is a glimpse of what the future holds for foldable phones. I used the device as my secondary phone for almost a month, and here is my take:

The foldable form factor is the standout feature of the Z Flip 4. The device opens and closes like a clamshell, which makes it much more compact than traditional smartphones. The Z Flip 4 fits comfortably in the pocket, and its compact size makes it an excellent choice for people who are always on the go. The folding mechanism is solid and smooth, and the hinge feels sturdy, so there's no worrying about the screen breaking when opening or closing the device. Compared to the previous iterations, the folding experience has gotten better.

The phone sports the much-coveted 6.7-inch folding Super AMOLED display on the inner side. The crease on the centre display is less prominent, albeit not completely gone. The display comes with a 1080p resolution and an adaptive 1-120Hz refresh rate. Bright and vivid visuals get rendered quite nicely on the phone. The cover display is a 1.9-inch tiny display that is helpful when taking selfies. Battery life is another area where the

Z Flip 4 shines. The device has a larger battery than its predecessor, so you'll have more power to use it for longer. The device also supports fast charging, so you can quickly top up your battery. The Z Flip 4 also supports wireless charging, making it easy to charge.

While the Z Flip 4 is a novelty device, it is a glimpse of what the future holds for foldable phones. Foldable devices will become increasingly common in the coming years, and Samsung's Z Flip line is at the forefront of this trend. With improved battery life, ergonomics, and a folding form factor, the Z Flip 4 is a device that's designed for the future.

Samsung Galaxy Z Flip 4 is an excellent device for those looking for a compact and innovative phone. With improved battery life, ergonomics, and a folding form factor, the Z Flip 4 is a device that's designed for the future. It's also significantly more affordable than other foldable phones on the market, making it an excellent choice for those who want to try out a foldable device without breaking the bank. However, it's still too early to say if folding phones are the future of the smartphone industry. The technology is still developing, and many challenges, such as durability and cost, must be addressed. But if the folding fashion suits your vibe, then the Samsung Galaxy Z Flip 4 is worth considering.

PHOTOS: SHAHRIAR RAHMAN







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ARFIN KAZI AND ABRAR SHAREQUE KHAN

Local manufacturing company Runner Automobiles PLC has announced a three-wheeler manufacturing plant in association with Bajaj, where these vehicles will be manufactured - being the first of its kind in Bangladesh.

Inside Runner's three-wheeler factory

The plant is situated in Mymensingh and is based on 10 acres of land, where Runner says the company has spent nearly Tk. 300 crores to get it up and running. It is said to make around 30,000 vehicles yearly, and a lot of it will be exported to countries nearby our peninsula, with a partnership with Pakistan already in the works.



Inside the plant, a lot of the manufacturing is automated, and assembly and welding will be mostly assisted by the means of robotic arms. Starting from scratch, the body parts are mainly made by humans with the help of machinery, part by part. From there on, most of the parts are welded together using the assistance of robotic arms, which means welds are flawless. The parts are then coated with a primer and sanded to remove imperfections and then sent to be painted inside a vacuum painting booth. The parts are then hung up on a hanger for drying them. After drying, all the remaining parts are put together and polished. The engine, on the other hand, is completely assembled by humans. After everything is done they are sent to a dyno to check if they're producing enough

power as well as to ensure the engine is up to the quality.

Bajaj RE, also locally just known as a CNG, is a three-wheeler taxi used for intra-city transport with 4-stroke engines, in general, being around 150cc or 200cc. Runner says three-wheeler transports will be more sustainable as now, the vehicles are being able to be produced in the country. Although the prices of the completed vehicles will still be around 5 to 6 lakh, since these vehicles will be locally manufactured, more genuine parts will be available for existing vehicles. Runner also researched how many vehicles are legally registered through BRTA, and the number is quite surprising: out of 15 lakhs, only 1 lakh three-wheelers are officially registered.

Moving forward, Runner is currently working to take action against the illegally imported and unregistered three-wheelers. They plan to launch an app like Uber only for three-wheelers. The three-wheelers are planted with a chip through which every movement will be recorded and the fares will be decided by the app. There won't be any option other than to use the app. The fares will be justified for both the passengers and three-wheeler owners.

Hear us out, e-books are the future

ZARIF FAIAZ

E-readers, or electronic readers, have become increasingly popular in recent years for reading books, magazines, and other forms of literature. They offer a number of benefits over traditional physical books, making them a better choice for many readers.

One of the main advantages of e-readers is their portability. A typical e-reader is about the size of a small tablet and weighs only a few ounces, making it easy to carry around in a purse, backpack, or briefcase. In contrast, physical books can be bulky and heavy, especially if you have a large collection. E-readers allow you to take all your books with you wherever you go, without having to worry about weight or space constraints.

Another benefit of e-readers is the convenience they offer. With an e-reader, you can easily purchase and download new books at any time, without having to physically go to a bookstore or wait for a shipment to arrive. Many e-readers also offer a variety of features, such as adjustable text size and background colour, making it easier to read in different lighting conditions. In addition, e-readers often have a built-in dictionary and other language tools, allowing you to quickly look up definitions or translations as you read.

E-readers are also more environmentally friendly than physical books. According to a study by the International Association of Scientific, Technical, and Medical Publishers, the production of one e-reader has a carbon footprint that is about 75% smaller than the production of just one physical book.

In addition, e-readers use less paper and other resources, as all the books are stored electronically. This can help reduce waste and deforestation, making e-readers a more sustainable choice.

E-readers also offer greater accessibility for people with disabilities. Many e-readers have features such as text-to-speech, which allows users to have the book read aloud to them. This can be especially helpful for people with vision impairments or dyslexia. In addition, e-readers can often be used with assistive technology, such as braille displays or speech recognition software. This can make it easier for people with disabilities to access and enjoy literature.

Despite these advantages, some readers prefer physical books due to their nostalgia or the feeling of holding a tangible object. However, it is worth noting that e-readers have come a long way in recent years and can now mimic the experience of reading a physical book in many ways. Many e-readers now have a paper-like display that reduces glare and feels similar to reading on actual paper. Some e-readers even have the option to add a physical book cover, which can help create a similar tactile experience.

Despite all the arguments, it is true that in Bangladesh, e-readers or e-books are far from being the norm. Although the modern reader is more likely to pick up an e-book rather than a physical book, one of the primary reasons for the lack of an ebook-friendly ecosystem in Bengali literature is the absence of a reliable and accessible digital infrastructure. Unlike other

regions with well-developed technology industries, the digital landscape in the country is relatively underdeveloped, which has made it challenging to create and distribute ebooks seamlessly and efficiently. This lack of infrastructure has resulted in a lack of investment in the development of ebook publishing platforms, digital libraries, and other tools that are necessary for the growth of the digital literary ecosystem.

The lack of a supportive ebook environment in Bengali literature has had far-reaching consequences for authors, publishers, and readers alike. For authors, the absence of a digital infrastructure and cultural support for ebooks has made it challenging to reach a wider audience and monetise their works. This has resulted in a decline in the number of authors choosing to publish their works in digital format and a decline in the quality of digital literature being produced.

For publishers, the lack of investment in the development of the digital literary ecosystem has limited their ability to reach new readers and monetise their works. This has resulted in a decline in the number of publishers willing to invest in the production of ebooks and a decline in the quality of digital literature being produced.

E-books are rapidly changing the way people consume literature. With their ease of access and portability, ebooks have become the preferred choice for many readers. And it is highly likely that the future of the publishing industry will depend heavily on its digitisation.





HOW ARE THEY DOING?

A peek inside SHEBA Platforms

INTERVIEWED BY
SHAHRIAR RAHMAN

TRANSCRIBED BY
TANZID SAMAD CHOUDHURY



Launched in 2016, Sheba is known as the local service provider platform. Currently, the startup is now collectively known as Sheba Platform, consisting of sheba.xyz, sManager and digiGO. In 2017, Sheba Platform Limited received The Daily Star ICT Awards in the 'ICT Startup' category. Fast forward 6 years, we talk to Sheba's co-founders Adnan Imtiaz Halim, CEO and Co-Founder; and Ilmul Haque Sajib, COO and Co-Founder, regarding Sheba's current progress and plans for the future.

In 2017, Sheba Platform Limited received The Daily Star ICT Awards in the 'ICT Startup' category. How did the recognition help your business's reach?

The Daily Star ICT Awards was a truly prestigious recognition and it truly boosted us. Afterwards, we won the country's first National ICT Award in 2018. In 2019, when the government started finding startups through Startup Bangladesh, Sheba was the first startup that was selected for funding.

How has Sheba grown as a company in the five years since receiving the award?

Sheba's journey has been quite interesting since its inception. When we received The Daily Star ICT Award in 2017, we were working in a small office in Mirpur DOHS and our team size was below 50. From 2017 to 2022, we grew from a team of 50 to an organisation of 500+. Right now, we are empowering over 1,500,000 small businesses.

What is the financial situation of Sheba right now?

Our total transaction in 2017 was Tk. 2 crores, and it has grown to over Tk. 400 crores in 2022. Our current revenue is around Tk 20 crores now. Despite Covid-19, our annual run rate was 93%. 98% of our investment has been from Bangladeshi angels, venture capitalists and entrepreneurs.

How did Sheba perform during Covid-19?

Before the pandemic, our investments

were through walk-in investors. However, during Covid, we had to reduce our business as our services involve going into people's houses, unlike e-commerce companies who deliver products outside the door. As a result, we had to shut down our business during the initial wave.

We restarted our business after ensuring proper training and precautionary measures for our staff. While Sheba.xyz had a difficult time, sManager did a splendid job during that period.

What is Sheba's stance on bringing in foreign investments?

At the end of 2021, our board decided that we would raise foreign investment. By that time, Sheba.xyz was back in business. sManager was doing great. digiGo has paid licences from 100+ organisations. In 2022, when we went for investments, we received a great response. We didn't realise that we are doing good business. Previously, we had local investors only. Sheba helped create the

angel network ecosystem in Bangladesh.

From 2015 to 2018, we took various investments from local angels. Top auditors approved of our methods from the beginning. It was our responsibility to create a benchmark for the market, so that other startups could flourish in the ecosystem. For us, the foreign investment meetings were not only a fundraising exercise, rather it was an international grooming exercise. We have received a lot of mentors through this process who have helped build and shape our business in a better way.

What is Sheba's plan regarding its different business units?

Sheba currently has 3 business units: Sheba.xyz, sManager, sBusiness (digiGo). We have created a niche market for each of our business units. Sheba.xyz is still the largest service market in the country. sManager is the only app that helps microbusinesses. digiGo is the first HR mobile manager. All three products have shined in the market.

Do you think Sheba's services came ahead of time for a nascent market like Bangladesh?

We feel that as a service organisation, we came to the Bangladesh market 10 years ahead of time. But we do have the first movers advantage. Sheba.xyz became profitable in 2018 and we have remained consistent with our customers. We did not waste any money but ensured that we maintained quality service for our customers. Sheba is now widely recognised and we try to hold on to that positive reputation with our service.

What is your stance on SMEs?

Nowadays, you will hear a lot about fintech and SMEs. However, we started working with SMEs a long time ago. By the time the consumer market was ready, we were already preparing small

shops to become digitised. Instead of experimenting much, we ensured that we kept the quality of our service in a top-notch state. Service is a two-way program. So we started working with our suppliers later in 2018-2019. We observed that the suppliers are not organised in their paperwork and had a poor financial reporting system. After engaging with our suppliers, we decided to pilot a project to ensure that we brought the suppliers up to speed with our system. Thus, we launched sManager, which solved many of the problems of our suppliers.

Our country is roughly 50 years old, and right now, SME contribution is around 25%, whereas developed countries have a 60% contribution through SMEs. We want to play an instrumental role in ensuring the SME contribution towards the economy as Bangladesh is projected to become a trillion-dollar GDP.

The market size is circular and if SME transactions are considered, then we can easily build a sustainable economy. If you can empower SMEs and simplify transactions for them, then the economy can grow faster. We noticed that 1% of businessmen are privileged and know how to figure out everything. For 99%, it's a lack of knowledge and a difficult process for them. We tried to simplify the system for them and tried to solve their problems. We predict that Sheba will touch 2 crore consumers by 2025. Currently, we touch around 60 lakh people every year through our business units to end users.

How is the company culture at Sheba?

We practise a very transparent culture. We share annual financial reports every year with our shareholders. So when there are rumours in the market, the shareholders don't get nervous and remain committed to supporting us, even during a crisis.

What are some challenges Sheba has faced recently?

Last year, we faced our biggest challenge. No one could foresee the investment issue. We did not get any reaction time. It was as if a tornado tore everything apart. We took 3 months to recover. In May 2022, we informed our employees regarding the crisis in a town hall meeting. We mentioned that we will figure out our next course of action and solve the crisis together, despite the major setback. We also helped people who were looking for jobs through various forums and none of them had to sit back for another job.

However, it was during this period that we realised that we have team members who took ownership of Sheba in the same manner that we did. The way they own their work and have grown the company in recent times to greater heights is truly remarkable.

What are some things that you'd like to share with fellow startup founders?

I believe that people need to learn from their struggles and see the challenges that are prevalent when they try to start a startup. We talk about startups when they are successful, but we often leave out the discussion about the struggles that startups face over their lifetime. I feel that the struggles and how they ever overcome should be highlighted in more discussions. Having these discussions help build a thriving environment for founders in their pursuit towards creating a healthy startup ecosystem. In 2015, we were aspiring entrepreneurs who wanted to build something that solved societal problems. We only graduated last year and are still learning new things every day.

This is an abbreviated version. For the full interview, check out our online version.



Seven in-demand skills for FREELANCING JOBS

With the rise of post-Covid remote work and the constant demand for job security and career flexibility, many modern employees have opted for freelancing jobs over traditional ones. Not only can freelancing help one find flexible revenue based on their interests, but it can also serve as a stepping stone for turning entrepreneurial dreams into reality. If you're considering shifting to permanent freelancing jobs, here are the top 7 skills you should keep in your repertoire.

Web development

Web development skills have become increasingly in high demand in the current job market. Whether you're working as a remote IT professional or leading your own firm, you need web development skills to back you up. This includes being knowledgeable in web development frameworks such as JavaScript, HTML, CSS, Node.js, React, etc. Consider taking online courses to better learn these frameworks if you haven't already. Also, with e-commerce taking over both the local and global market, you need to arm yourself with the skill to maintain an online presence for your brands, which includes upgrading company websites, reaching customers via social media accounts, selling products online, etc. If you have prior experience in building or working with e-commerce platforms, adding that to your resume/portfolio will pay dividends in getting a high-paying freelancing job. Like other freelancing roles, freelance web development comes with a lot of flexibility in both time and location; so you can always choose your own hours and even take the time to further build your skills between projects.

Graphic design

If you consider yourself a creative individual and have notable experience in graphic design, you should have an easy time landing well-paying freelancing jobs. Due to brands and products constantly requiring visual content to engage with their target audience, being able to produce advertisements, packaging or marketing materials that cater to the customers' needs will help you a lot when freelancing. Graphic designing in freelancing jobs can also include creating logos and marketing campaigns, which is

a role you can often offer flexible rates for. Unlike other professions, freelance graphic design jobs are dependent on your creative expression. So, you can also consider this skill as an outlet to introduce unique perspectives and styles to your clients' projects.

Video making

Similar to graphic designing, having extensive knowledge and experience in video editing can be beneficial for your professional freelancing career. Companies trying to push a new product or repackaging an older release will often rely on video-based advertisements to reach target customers. As such, having a portfolio of high-quality, pro-level video-making skills can help you land jobs with clients looking for long-term video projects. Even short-term projects, particularly those with social media advertising, are lucrative job offers because they often require you to make a few short videos to increase reach on platforms like Facebook, Instagram and TikTok. As such, if you have experience making and editing videos for social media sites as well, don't hesitate to show them off in your portfolio.

Content writing

Businesses of all sizes need high-quality written content for their websites, blogs, social media platforms, advertisements and other marketing materials. As such, if you have notable experience in content writing - including being able to write professional reviews, articles, pamphlets and press releases - your skillset will be highly valued in the competitive freelancing market. Content marketing is also an important part of modern digital marketing, which is dependent on using the right keywords and optimising

SEO to garner more clicks and visitors to a company's website. Freelance clients who will value your content writing can offer you a myriad of roles, from writing about tech, lifestyle and hard news topics to product-based blogs and guidelines on how to use that brand's product. As the field of content writing is constantly evolving, landing a few freelance projects and setting your own pace will also give you the time to develop your writing skills further and eventually land better, high-paying jobs in the future.

Customer service

Whether it be online or physical business, retaining a good long-term relationship with customers is always considered an excellent practice. If you have the skills to provide top-notch customer service, clients offering freelance work will depend on you to ensure repeat business and maintain their brand's positive reputation. Especially in a competitive marketplace with the ever-present demand for attracting new customers, being proficient in customer service will invoke loyalty from new customers and set you aside as an important employee for any freelance work. Customer service skills are also a big aspect of professionalism and commitment to your profession: much-needed soft skills that employers of all kinds look for in potential employees.

Data entry

While often regarded as an entry-level role, being skilled in data entry can help you land flexible jobs in the world of freelancing. Data entry is often considered by young professionals as an accessible starting point to dive into bigger businesses, but even as a full-time data entry specialist, you can find clients who will require you to store and efficiently process large amounts of information for their company's databases. Data entry also comes with maintaining 100% accuracy and key to details, which are critical soft skills valued by any employer. If you're considering freelancing in the long run, data entry can give you the scope to develop other skills such as website development or SEO analysis in between projects.

SEO

With the advent of online businesses, comes the need to rely on search engines like Google to gain a competitive advantage over rival companies. As such, companies require SEO (Search Engine Optimisation) experts to not only get their online content rank higher on search engines but also increase reach and therefore sales from potential customers. If you have experience handling SEO on professional websites, you can help your client attain online visibility and improve their business by increasing website traffic and generating more leads from clicks and visits. More and more businesses nowadays are opting to hire SEO experts, owing to it being a cost-effective marketing strategy with visible long-term results. However, this also means that as a freelance SEO analyst, you get the option to choose premium rates for your services by offering sustainable online traffic to your clients.

