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EVIE.AI: THE RISE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE, AND THE FUTURE OF WORK

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"The era of humans learning to communicate with machines is at an end. Evie, essentially a digital AI employee who speaks and understands humans, is the future. With nothing to learn or download, everyone can now harness the power of Artificial Intelligence (AI) to get the job done."

Lee Jin Hian, co-founder of Evie.ai

Evie, the virtual personal assistant (PA), was so professional and personable when scheduling meetings that many users never doubted "she" was not a real human being. People thanked "her" personally and asked to see "her" in person at meetings.² Once, a conference organiser even prepared an access pass for "her", believing "she" would be attending the event.³ One popular technology publication considered Evie such an affordable service that it was touted as "a personal assistant for the 99 percent."⁴ Its creator, Evie.ai, a Singapore-based AI company, was ranked as one of the top startups to watch in 2017.⁵

THE GENESIS OF EVIE

Evie was borne out of founder Lee Jin Hian's professional experience. The nature of his work at Yahoo was global: his boss was based in the US, the engineering team was based in Singapore, and his stakeholders spanned across cities, national boundaries, and time zones, from New York to Bangalore to Sydney. As a result, scheduling meetings that could accommodate everyone was a perennial pain for him.

¹ Infocomm Media Development Authority of Singapore. (2017, November 3). *Meet your new virtual assistant – Evie*. Retrieved from <https://www.imda.gov.sg/infocomm-and-media-news/sg-spotlight/2017/1/meet-your-new-virtual-assistant—evie>

² Hio, L. (2016, December 28). Creating a scheduling assistant called Evie powered by artificial intelligence. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.straitstimes.com/tech/scheduling-meetings-minus-the-fuss>

³ Infocomm Media Development Authority of Singapore. (2017, November 3). *Meet your new virtual assistant – Evie*. Retrieved from <https://www.imda.gov.sg/infocomm-and-media-news/sg-spotlight/2017/1/meet-your-new-virtual-assistant—evie>

⁴ Sefi, M. (2017, January 12). Because we're bad at managing our schedules, 2 ex-Yahoo dudes created an AI assistant to help us. *Vulcan Post*. Retrieved from <https://vulcanpost.com/599851/evie-ai-singapore/>

⁵ 10 Singapore tech startups to watch in 2017. (2017, January 30). *Tech Seen*. Retrieved from <https://techseen.com/2017/01/30/10-singapore-tech-startups-watch-2017/>

Associate Professor Damien Joseph, Senior Research Fellow Wee-Kiat Lim and Chong Tack Chun prepared this case based on interviews with Evie.ai. This case is intended for class discussion and learning, and not intended as source research material, or as illustration of effective or ineffective management.

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According to his own account, he had spent as much as 25% of his time chasing schedules, leaving less time for his actual work. Unsurprisingly, this administrative burden dampened his morale, too. He also realised that the increasingly global and collaborative nature of work meant that many other executives were, or would be, plagued by this same pain point of organising multi-time zone meetings. Jin Hian anticipated that in the next five to 10 years, AI PAs or even AI employees would not be a rare sight in the workplace. Fascinated by science fiction since he was a child, especially the idea of a personal AI assistant, he harboured a desire to be a part of this movement and realise this sci-fi dream.

Finally, in 2013, Jin Hian decided that he was "tired of PowerPoint and wanted to write some code".⁶ The original name of the startup was Evie.ai, the namesake of the virtual PA. "Evie" was a name that was simple and easy to remember yet uncommon, so it was less likely that it would be confused with human employees in an organisation. For a while, the startup was renamed Mimetic. Jin Hian reckoned that it was an interesting name that reflected the state of AI at that point, which was really about mimicking human behaviour. In 2017, the company name was changed back to Evie.ai. That decision was made following an observation that people were more aware of Evie than Mimetic, and remembered the former better. "Mimetic" was also harder to pronounce.

One of Evie.ai's first sources of funding was an iJam.Reload grant that was administered by the Media Development Agency (MDA) in 2014. The MDA was a Singapore government agency responsible for overseeing developments in the media industry in the country.⁷ In October 2016, the MDA and another agency, the Infocomm Development Authority of Singapore, were restructured into a single statutory board, the Info-communications Media Development Authority of Singapore (IMDA).⁸

The iJam.Reload grant was supported by the Singapore National Research Foundation (NRF), a department under the Prime Minister's Office that developed policies and funded strategic initiatives pertaining to research and development in the nation, and served to finance early-stage startups focusing on technical innovation in the field of interactive digital media.⁹

Evie.ai was also a beneficiary of the Productivity and Innovation Credit (PIC) Scheme, a Singapore government initiative to encourage innovation and productivity improvements in Singapore-based companies. Jin Hian recounted that applying for the grant was challenging because the bulk of his costs went towards employee salary, which was not a qualifying expenditure component stipulated by the PIC Scheme.¹⁰ However, he could make a case for it as research and development expenditure. His predicament was exacerbated by the fact that at that point, his startup had not yet created a product nor established a revenue stream. Fortunately, the PIC support came through, giving Jin Hian and his fledgling team time to continue their operations and apply for other funds.

In 2016, Evie.ai successfully clinched seed funding from SeedPlus,¹¹ a Singapore-based venture capital (VC) firm that focused on investing in local early-stage startups, particularly those involved in financial

⁶ Interview with Lee Jin Hian, April 2018.

⁷ Quek, C. (2015, July 15). How to get a government grant to kickstart your tech idea in Singapore. *Tech in Asia*. Retrieved from <https://www.techinasia.com/talk/ijam-government-grant-kickstart-tech-idea-singapore>

⁸ Kwang, K. (2016, January 18). IDA, MDA to be restructured to capitalise on converging media and ICT landscape. *Channel News Asia*. Retrieved from <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/ida-mda-to-be-restructured-to-capitalise-on-converging-media-and-ict-197024>

⁹ National Research Foundation. (N.D.). *Corporate profile*. Retrieved from <https://www.nrf.gov.sg/about-nrf/national-research-foundation-singapore/corporate-profile>

¹⁰ The six qualifying activities for PIC funding are: acquisition and leasing of approved IT and automation equipment; training of employees; acquisition and licensing of intellectual property rights; registration of patents, trademarks, designs and plant varieties; research and development activities; and design projects approved by the Singapore Design Council. Source: Inland Revenue Authority of Singapore. (N.D.). *Six qualifying activities under PIC*. Retrieved from <https://www.iras.gov.sg/IRASHome/Schemes/Businesses/Productivity-and-Innovation-Credit-Scheme/Six-Qualifying-Activities-under-PIC/>

¹¹ SeedPlus was launched in May 2016 and established by investment firms Jungle Ventures, SGInnovate, Accel Partners, and Ratan Tata's RNT Associates.

technology (or fintech), AI, and cyber security.^{12,13} At that point, Evie.ai had commenced closed beta testing with several thousand users.¹⁴ In 2018, the fledgling startup received another injection of funds from a Japanese investor, University of Tokyo Edge Capital, as well as from SGInnovate, a Singapore government-owned firm that developed tech startups in the country. (See **Exhibit 1** for Evie.ai's milestones and key events.)

"HELLO EVIE": AN ANATOMY OF THE AI ASSISTANT

"Based on our data, one meeting requires an average of 4.2 email exchanges to set up. If you take 10 meetings a week, that's 42 emails. If each email takes five minutes to write (including [the time it takes to check one's] calendar), that's 3.5 hours a week... Another (and more nefarious) cost we don't account for is the cost of cognitive switching. If I'm engaged in work that requires focus, being pulled away to respond to an email about a meeting or some other administrative task takes me out of focus and I lose time trying to regain that state of focus after dealing with the distraction. All of these add up to make the workday longer yet less productive."¹⁵

Praveen Velu, co-founder of Evie.ai

Evie was essentially a working collection of rules and principles, all intricately designed and woven together with software tools that enabled the virtual scheduling assistant to understand and respond to natural human speech. Evie's framework was implemented largely with Ruby and a little bit of Python,¹⁶ both of which are open source computing languages, and a natural language processing (NLP) library for tokenisation and part-of-speech tagging. According to Jin Hian, using Ruby as a primary coding language allowed his team to iterate Evie's development quickly.¹⁷

Users did not have to master a new language, learn code, or launch a separate software to work with Evie. All they had to do was to treat Evie like another human being and copy "her" in their email correspondences. (See **Exhibit 2** for how Evie worked in an email correspondence.) Jin Hian and his team used NLP, with a mix of algorithms as well as logical reasoning and decision-making to process user data and enable Evie to respond appropriately to different work scenarios.

"When you ask to schedule a meeting 'next week', a very literal machine might interpret this as 'midnight on Monday'. There are a lot of implicit rules that we don't say but that computers need to understand."¹⁸

Lee Jin Hian, co-founder of Evie.ai

The art of arranging meetings can be much more complicated than we might think. In selecting and agreeing upon a time to meet, there could be as many as 30 factors at play. For example, if today were Friday, and a user were to ask Evie to schedule a meeting for "next week", which day should Evie pick? Would a

¹² Yon, H. T. (2017, April 25). Singapore VC SeedPlus reaches US\$18M target for first fund, says round is oversubscribed. *E27*. Retrieved from <https://e27.co/singapore-vc-seedplus-closes-u18m-first-fund-previous-investors-include-world-bank-unit-sginnovate-20170424/>

¹³ Abudheem, S. K. (2017, March 16). SeedPlus gets US\$2M from World Bank unit to support up to 20 early-stage startups in Asia. *E27*. Retrieved from <https://e27.co/ifc-invests-us2m-early-stage-vc-fund-seedplus-20170316/>

¹⁴ Hio, L. (2016, December 28). Creating a scheduling assistant called Evie powered by artificial intelligence. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.straitstimes.com/tech/scheduling-meetings-minus-the-fuss>

¹⁵ Infocomm Media Development Authority of Singapore. (2017, November 3). *Meet your new virtual assistant – Evie*. Retrieved from <https://www.india.gov.sg/infocomm-and-media-news/sg-spotlight/2017/11/meet-your-new-virtual-assistant-evie>

¹⁶ Engineers.SG. (2017, March 7). *Introducing Evie, an A.I. assistant built using Ruby - Singapore Ruby Group* [Video]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9uDbjJLdmIY>. Similar information can be gleaned from looking through Evie.ai's software engineer recruitment ads.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Lee, T. (2016, August 5). Evie is an AI personal assistant that's as affordable as Netflix. *Tech in Asia*. Retrieved from <https://www.techinasia.com/evie-mimetic-ai-personal-assistant>

meeting on Monday leave too little preparation time? How should Evie navigate meetings involving participants in multiple time zones?

Evie also needed to be able to distinguish between meeting requests to attend to and meeting requests to ignore. As a result, building this AI assistant was not a simple matter. The team had to take into account implicit social norms that came naturally to us as culturally-aware human beings, but not to logic-bound machines and software, and to express them as logic-based rules and workflows for Evie.

Jin Hian and his team were also constantly surprised by the widely varying communication styles of people, which arose from personality traits as well as regional and national cultural norms. These factors made understanding natural language a richly nuanced and complex programming problem.

*"When people talk about AI in general, it sets up these expectations around Hollywood AI like you see in the movies, so a lot of the challenge is to build something that meets those expectations in a reasonable way for an AI scheduling assistant."*¹⁹

Lee Jin Hian, co-founder of Evie.ai

Jin Hian was trained as an electrical engineer but had not received any formal education in AI. He approached the challenge of building Evie holistically, refusing to see its development as a "pure" AI issue. When working with his team to build and improve Evie, he deployed well-worn, classic AI systems along with a mix of data analytics tools and algorithms to address specific bottlenecks. To Jin Hian, choosing the right tools was paramount in resolving development issues and growing the startup's customer base. While AI was a more powerful "screwdriver", it came with a hefty price tag. According to him, it was not surprising that a startup in New York developing similar services burnt through US\$45 million in a short period of time when it jumped straight to deploying AI.

EVIE.AI'S TARGET MARKETS AND BUSINESS MODEL

Evie was designed to improve productivity by reducing the time and effort spent on coordinating multi-party meetings in medium- to large-sized enterprises: employees of these organisations were more likely to coordinate several individuals across multiple time zones than employees in smaller outfits. Apart from helping clients arrange meeting times, Evie.ai was also able to find available meeting rooms and book them for the meeting. According to Jin Hian, people spent as much as time searching for suitable meeting rooms as scheduling meetings.

Evie was offered as a service (SaaS or "software as a service"), like the business model used by companies like Salesforce and Box. Implementation costs were kept minimal and straightforward. This was viable because many existing applications that Evie needed to integrate with, such as Microsoft 365 and Google Calendar, were already hosted on the cloud.²⁰ It was even easier to integrate Evie into existing enterprise systems and more convenient to use when access permissions to these applications had already been granted by users, and when meeting room schedules were also already on the cloud. That said, some critical issues and processes were to be resolved before companies could accept Evie more readily. For example, some organisations were concerned over network security and encryption, as well as what Evie.ai planned to do with their enterprise data.

There were several subscription models for using Evie.²¹ The simplest of these was the free package. This enabled users to schedule up to five meetings a month by including evie@evie.ai in an email thread, and

¹⁹ Soo, Z. (2016, December 12). Singapore start-up creates virtual assistant to schedule meetings. *South China Morning Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.scmp.com/tech/start-ups/article/2053852/singapore-start-creates-virtual-assistant-schedule-meetings>

²⁰ The "cloud" refers to software and services that run on the Internet, instead of being locally hosted on servers and computers.

²¹ Evie.ai. (N.D.). *Pricing*. Retrieved from <https://www.evie.ai/pricing>

offered support for Google, Outlook, and Office 365 calendars. Alternatively, one could opt for an annual package, which was priced at US\$120 a year for each user (effectively US\$10 a month for each user). This package included unlimited scheduling of meetings, a dedicated Evie email address on the organisation's domain (e.g., evie@mycompany.com), and priority customer support. Evie.ai also offered an enterprise package designed for organisations with at least 10 users, starting at US\$99 a month. This package included support for multiple office locations, on-boarding training for employees, and analytics and custom reporting. In Singapore, a company with 10 employees is considered a small to medium enterprise (SME). (Note: all packages and prices are current as of December 2018.)

Recruiters and headhunters, in particular, took to Evie because much of their job involved scheduling interviews and meetings between job candidates and clients.²² (See **Exhibit 3** for how Evie could be useful for salespersons and HR professionals.) Most of Evie.ai's client were expats based in Singapore, and a significant share of its customers were based in the US, Australia, and Hong Kong. At the time of writing, sales were picking up in Europe, especially in Scandinavia.²³ Evie was also popular with other startups, which were typically run by tech-savvy people who had their ears on the ground for new products and services – such as Evie – that could aid them in their operations. Evie.ai's clientele included prominent mobile marketplace Carousell, live-chat software provider Zopim, and online recruitment firm Hackertrail.

CHALLENGES

Jin Hian and his team aimed to address several issues that stood in the way of Evie's widespread adoption. Firstly, from a technological perspective, not every sector was ready for virtual assistants like Evie. For example, most companies in the banking and insurance sectors were not using cloud services extensively and, as such, were not optimally prepared for Evie. Enterprise security issues such as firewalls in traditional enterprise systems were projected to take long cycle times to address.

Secondly, Evie's team needed to consider the impact of culture, most prominent of which was the concept of time. Different cultures valued time differently. As such, some users were more accommodating of delays and less specific about meeting durations compared to others. Another cultural difference related to work attitudes. For example, in Asia, many users seemed to be less concerned with productivity, and prioritised hours clocked in the office instead. In other words, it was more important to these users to be present in office even beyond work hours, rather than to be effective within their stipulated work hours.

Another issue pertained to the social implications of having a personal assistant, virtual or otherwise. Some users felt that using Evie projected a certain image. Specifically, they were concerned that using a computer programme – as much as Evie appeared human – to schedule meetings with peers or even their bosses would have social and/or professional repercussions. Some felt that interactions and correspondence involved in making appointments were beneficial for building rapport, and were worried that using Evie could portray them as being distant and transactional. On the other hand, some felt that using Evie might project a positive image of the user as someone who was tech-savvy, professional, and fastidious about respecting time and punctuality.

Yet another challenge that Jin Hian and his team faced was in finding suitable talent and resources to grow the team and continually improve Evie. According to Jin Hian, recruiting someone who was proficient in user experience (UX) was "like finding a rare Pokemon".²⁴ In addition, the funding environment in Singapore was not as vibrant as compared to that in other countries. (See **Industry Note** for the AI startup landscape

²² Soo, Z. (2016, December 12). Singapore start-up creates virtual assistant to schedule meetings. *South China Morning Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.scmp.com/tech/start-ups/article/2053852/singapore-start-creates-virtual-assistant-schedule-meetings>

²³ Deon, P. (2017, October 30). CEO interview Evie.ai. *HR Digital Today*. Retrieved from <https://www.hrdigitaltoday.com/blog/2017/10/ceo-interview-mimetic-ai-evie>

²⁴ Lee, T. (2016, August 5). Evie is an AI personal assistant that's as affordable as Netflix. *Tech in Asia*. Retrieved from <https://www.techinasia.com/evie-mimetic-ai-personal-assistant>

in Singapore.) In the US, for example, a startup offering a service similar to Evie was able to raise US\$44 million, while Evie.ai received less than US\$5 million. From a capital perspective, Evie.ai and other Singapore-based startups were at a significant disadvantage. (See **Industry Note** for a sample of AI startups based outside Singapore.) To grow and scale past a certain point, Jin Hian and his team sought to raise a large amount of capital and improve the startup's valuation. In other words, Evie.ai would need to consider raising funds from markets outside Singapore if it was unable to obtain the capital it desired in the city-state.

ROAD AHEAD: FUTURE PLANS

"A lot of times, people end up becoming like zombie workers because they spend most of their time doing administrative grunt work... If you take it away from them, and you let them do the parts of the job they actually enjoy, then work becomes meaningful again."²⁵

Praveen Velu, co-founder of Evie.ai

Evie completed beta testing and was launched worldwide in late 2016. It signed up over 3,000 users in 48 countries.²⁶ Jin Hian and his team had also ramped up their operations. While Evie.ai had grown from a three-person startup in 2014 to a small outfit with about 10 employees in 2018, it remained understaffed. Jin Hian planned to hire at least three more engineers and two more salespersons to further its development, and hoped to grow its staff strength to about 15 to 18 people by the end of 2018.

According to Jin Hian, the team had rebuilt Evie's architecture several times. Even so, Evie still relied on natural language tokenisation and part-of-speech tagging features that were "pre-baked" from commercially available solutions. The team sought to build more indigenous capabilities in Evie's offerings, so as to depend less on off-the-shelf solutions. The nature of their work would be different moving forward; in earlier years, they were preoccupied with raising Evie's capabilities from 0% to 80%. Now, their work involved focusing on that incremental 10% and getting Evie from 80% to 90% and beyond.

Another task to work on was expanding Evie's functions and scenarios to enable it to perform other corporate functions, such as finance and human resources administration. This may involve tasks such as applying for leave or booking a flight. Jin Hian and his team considered building a platform akin to Microsoft's core product suite and working with partners to make this a reality.

Jin Hian and his team also considered extending Evie to work with messaging apps, such as WhatsApp. Evie was already able to perform tasks that complemented its main function as a scheduling assistant, such as setting reminders and to-dos. To-dos could be used in tandem with follow-ups after meetings. Users could simply email Evie with post-meeting notes that detailed people to follow up with and actionable items. Evie would automatically check in with users and follow up with other members of the meeting. Adding message app integration would make Evie more accessible for users who preferred this as a mode of communication over email.

Entering the Japanese market was an option that Evie.ai was open to, in part because of its Japanese investor. It had already planned to focus more on markets that had high GDP and high labour costs, where Evie's value proposition would be more apparent and attractive. There was also a cultural affinity due to the strong respect for time and punctuality in the Japanese workplace. Another reason why Jin Hian felt that the Japanese market looked promising was that the Japanese were relatively comfortable with and

²⁵ Lee, T. (2016, August 5). Evie is an AI personal assistant that's as affordable as Netflix. *Tech in Asia*. Retrieved from <https://www.techinasia.com/evie-mimetic-ai-personal-assistant>

²⁶ SingTel myBusiness. (N.D.). *Can AI really revolutionise SME business? Evie.ai thinks so*. Retrieved from <https://mybusiness.singtel.com/techblog/can-ai-really-revolutionise-sme-business-evieai-thinks-so>

accepting of robots. For example, Sony's robot pet dog, Aibo, which was first launched in 1999, was very popular in Japan, especially among the elderly. Aibo was relaunched in 2017.²⁷

Right from the start, Jin Hian and his team had emphasised that Evie was not here to take away jobs, but to augment human capabilities and improve workplace productivity, so that *"we can focus on the things that matter most"*.²⁸ As AI continued to evolve, how would humanity come to think and feel about automation and robots? Would Jin Hian's view resonate with the prevailing sentiment? How would Evie.ai grow in the short, medium, and long term? What would Evie and other AI applications – and AI itself – be capable of in the near and distant future? And, as more and more technologies and tools arose to take on tasks previously handled by humans, how would the employment landscape change?

²⁷ Hardawar, D. (2018, August 23). Sony Aibo hands-on: An adorable robo-pup that needs training. *Engadget*. Retrieved from <https://www.engadget.com/2018/08/23/sony-aibo-hands-on/>

²⁸ Safi, M. (2017, January 12). Because we're bad at managing our schedules, 2 ex-Yahoo dudes created an AI assistant to help us. *Vulcan Post*. Retrieved from <https://vulcanpost.com/599851/evie-ai-singapore/>

EXHIBIT 1: TIMELINE AND MILESTONES OF EVIE.AI

2010	Jin Hian worked as a Product Lead at Yahoo!
2013	Jin Hian wrote the first lines of code that would become Evie
2014	- Jin Hian and Praveen Velu founded Evie.ai - Evie.ai received iJam.Reload grant and PIC funding
2015	Year-long closed public beta testing of Evie; the company was renamed as "Mimetic"
2016	- The startup obtained seed funding from SeedPlus - Evie was officially launched in November
2017	The company name was changed back to Evie.ai
2018	- Evie was integrated with Slack, a popular cloud-based service that provides team collaboration tools - Evie.ai received funding from University of Tokyo Edge Capital and SGInnovate

Source: Compiled by authors.

EXHIBIT 2: HOW EVIE WORKS

Hi Bryan,

good to be acquainted.

would you be available for a call today or tomorrow, say around 5pm?

Evie here will coordinate.

Cheers,

Terence

...

Evie to [REDACTED] : Jul 4

Hi Bryan,

Are you free for a call with Terence on:

- Today (Monday), 4 July at 5pm SGT or
- Tomorrow (Tuesday), 5 July at 5pm SGT
- Location: call

Please let me know if either of these times work for you, or if you'd like to suggest a different time.

Terence - I'll move you to bcc and update you once I can confirm the call.

Thank you,

Evie

Hi Mr. Lee,

Thank you for contacting me, I think I could be available tomorrow Tuesday at 5pm, but I must inform you that I'm currently on a business trip in Tibet and I haven't received a proper itinerary from the producers for some reason. I hope that there won't be any problem talking to you over the phone, and thank you for your interest in me.

Please feel free to contact me at [REDACTED]

Best regards,

Bryan [REDACTED]

...

Evie to [REDACTED], me : Jul 4

Hello,

Thank you! The call is confirmed for tomorrow (Tuesday), 5 July at 5pm SGT at [REDACTED]

I have sent out a calendar invite for your convenience.

Please let me know if your plans change.

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Source: Lee, T. (2016, August 5). Evie is an AI personal assistant that's as affordable as Netflix. *Tech in Asia*. Retrieved from <https://www.techinasia.com/evie-mimetic-ai-personal-assistant>

EXHIBIT 3: USE CASES FOR EVIE

1. Sales: Automated prospecting and follow-up

Salespersons spent a lot of time sending requests for meetings and follow-up emails to their sales prospects. Evie was able to take care of this aspect of a salesperson's work by asking him/her whether he/she would like to try to schedule a meeting with a prospect, creating and sending meeting invitations to potential customers, and sending follow-up emails. The issue of working around time zones was mitigated, since the virtual AI assistant computed time zones automatically. When a sales prospect did not reply, Evie could send a specified number of chaser emails.

2. HR: Easing the hiring workflow

Human resources executives often met with a large number of interview candidates in the hiring process, and spent a lot of time and effort scheduling meetings with candidates to do so. Evie would take on the administrative burden of this task by corresponding with candidates, enabling HR executives to focus on more pertinent and higher-level responsibilities.

Source: Evie.ai