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TikTok Searches for Global Headquarters Outside of China

Singapore, London and Dublin are among cities being considered; no U.S. city made shortlist



TikTok currently doesn't have a headquarters, although its main office, which runs U.S. operations, is in Los Angeles.

PHOTO: LIONEL BONAVENTURE/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

By [Shan Li](#) and [Liza Lin](#)

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Bytedance Inc. is considering setting up a global headquarters for its hit video-sharing app TikTok outside of China, part of continuing efforts to shake off its Chinese image, people familiar with the company said.

Singapore is one city being considered, the people said. Other possible locations include London and Dublin, with no American cities on the shortlist, one person said. TikTok currently doesn't have a headquarters, although its most-senior executive is based in Shanghai and its main office, which runs U.S. operations, is in Los Angeles.

Senior executives at Beijing-based Bytedance—a startup valued at \$75 billion, which owns numerous apps including TikTok—have been brainstorming [ideas to rebrand TikTok](#) as it comes under mounting scrutiny from U.S. lawmakers over national-security

concerns. A headquarters outside of China would also bring TikTok closer to growing markets either in Southeast Asia or Europe and the U.S.

Known for its viral short videos of lip-syncing teenagers and funny pet antics, TikTok rose from obscurity to the top of U.S. app-store download charts in early 2019, and has also caught fire elsewhere including India and Japan. Global downloads for TikTok outstripped Facebook Inc.'s Instagram and Snap Inc.'s Snapchat in 2019, according to mobile-data aggregator App Annie. It had 665 million smartphone monthly active users world-wide in October, up 80% from a year earlier, App Annie said, with about 20 million of those users in the U.S.

The app's spectacular rise has attracted attention from American senators, concerned that its Chinese roots could lead to it censoring content to appease Beijing. Bytedance's 2017 acquisition of the startup Musical.ly, a move key to TikTok's rapid success because of Musical.ly's popularity in the U.S., is under review by the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States for potential national-security risks.

The move to establish a global headquarters outside China has been discussed internally for months, one person said. However, the effort is "only accelerating because of the things happening in the U.S.," the person added, referring to the recent scrutiny of TikTok there.

In response to questions, a TikTok spokeswoman didn't directly address the search for a global headquarters, but said its teams around the world have increasingly been given more control over local operations.

"We have been very clear that the best way to compete in markets around the globe is to empower local teams," she said. "TikTok has steadily built out its management in the countries where it operates."

Locating TikTok's headquarters outside China is unlikely to relieve pressures on Bytedance in the short term, said Peter Fuhrman, the Shenzhen-based chairman and founder of investment advisory firm China First Capital.

"That's like dressing a panda in a business suit. It's unlikely to fool anyone," said Mr. Fuhrman, who described the firm as a victim of increased U.S.-China political tensions. "They'll still be in congressional crosshairs and still subject to the same stringent content

rules within China itself.” Bytedance has also faced pressures inside China from authorities seeking to restrict content deemed objectionable to the government.



A TikTok Creator's Lab event hosted by Bytedance was held in Tokyo on Feb. 16. TikTok rose to the top of U.S. app-store download charts in early 2019.

PHOTO: SHIHO FUKADA/BLOOMBERG NEWS

In Singapore, the company has taken up two floors of prime office space in the city state's central business district, according to real estate consultancy Savills Singapore. The 64,000-square foot space is in the same development housing investment advisory firm Rothschild & Co., and global banks such as UBS and Deutsche Bank. It first started operations in a WeWork office in downtown Singapore in December 2018.

Singapore is popular among foreign technology companies seeking a base in the region, with its large multilingual tech workforce and strong government support. It is the Asia-Pacific home to Alphabet Inc.'s Google and Facebook, and Chinese technology giant Alibaba Group Holding Ltd. has a large presence there.

Southeast Asia is a top choice for Chinese companies looking to expand globally because of its cultural similarities, said Patrick Cheung, a founding partner at ZWC Partners and investor in Chinese tech startups.

A search on Bytedance's hiring website on Dec. 23 showed 68 jobs posted for both Bytedance and TikTok in Singapore, the largest number of open positions for any city outside China. A fifth of those roles involved artificial-intelligence research as TikTok seeks to hire scientists in big data and natural-language processing. Bytedance uses AI to

power some of TikTok's recommendation algorithms. Other positions revolve around hiring staff to set content-moderation rules.

The global headquarters for another Bytedance product, a Slack-like corporate messenger app called Lark, is also in Singapore.

In London, where Bytedance was hiring for 38 positions including investment professionals and business-development staff, the company has made moves to poach talent. In October, TikTok hired Ole Obermann, a music industry veteran and former executive vice president at Warner Music Group, to head up its global music division.

Dublin stands out for pairing a favorable tax environment with a deep talent pool. Ireland's capital is already the site of Facebook's largest office outside of Menlo Park, and the European base for companies including Google and Twitter.

Bytedance acquired London-based AI music-composition startup Jukedeck this year. The startup's founder and chief executive, Ed Newton-Rex, currently heads Bytedance's new AI lab in Europe and wrote on LinkedIn last week that the team is hiring.

Bytedance launched TikTok in international markets in August 2017, modeling the service after its hit Chinese short-video app Douyin. Three months later, the company purchased Musical.ly, which started in China but grew popular in the U.S. It later merged the two apps.

—Yoko Kubota and Georgia Wells contributed to this article.

Write to Shan Li at shan.li@wsj.com and Liza Lin at Liza.Lin@wsj.com

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