

THE ECONOMIC MIRACLE

THE BUSINESS TIMES

CEO CONVERSATIONS

2015 GOLDEN JUBILEE EDITION

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As Singapore marks its Golden Jubilee and celebrates its many successes, CEOs of companies that grew with Singapore share their stories in the first of a five-part series

by LEE U-WEN

THE Singapore story has captivated the world in these last five decades since independence: a “little red dot” that evolved at express speed from a third world country into the economic miracle that it is today. In the eyes of the international community, the country has more than punched above its weight and many hail it as one of the best places in the world to work, live and play in, citing, among other advantages, its world-class infrastructure, strong governance and rule of law.

But 50 years ago, it was a very different story. Post-independence Singapore was a third world country with poor infrastructure and limited capital. Figures from the World Bank show that Singapore’s gross domestic product (GDP) per capita then was just US\$516.

Few thought the country had a realistic chance of surviving, let alone eclipsing all expectations and transforming itself into an economic powerhouse.

Today, with its first world status, GDP growth has increased over a hundred-fold since 1965, with GDP per capita in 2013 recorded at US\$55,182, surpassing even that of the United States. Singapore enjoys the third-highest per-capita GDP in the world in terms of Purchasing Power Parity.

Singapore also tops many other indices. The Republic has been ranked the second-most competitive economy and the second-freest economy in the world, according to the World Economic Forum and the Heritage Foundation respectively.

Along with this progress, many companies here have grown by leaps and bounds over the years. These firms cut across all sectors

of the economy from financial to property to manufacturing.

And it’s not just the multinationals that are thriving. So too are our small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which form the backbone of the economy. Ninety-nine per cent of Singapore’s 180,000 businesses are SMEs that contribute to nearly half the country’s GDP and provide about 70 per cent of its jobs.

In this special CEO Conversations Golden Jubilee supplement to celebrate Singapore’s 50th birthday, we speak to key business leaders about how their companies have evolved over the years and what role they played in Singapore’s development.

Over the next few days, we will feature interviews with the chief executives of 50 companies which represent a broad spectrum of the Singapore economy.

They include the likes of OCBC, one of the first to start the banking business in Singapore back in 1912 and later went on to prosper along with the economy.

While the local bank has expanded its footprint in Malaysia, Indonesia and Greater China, its group chief executive officer Samuel Tsien maintains that OCBC will “always be tied” to Singapore, a country it calls home. As he notes: “As we continue to expand we will never forget our roots.”

The stories presented over the next few pages are just a snapshot of the many success stories in Corporate Singapore today. As Singapore marks its Golden Jubilee with a stable economy and low unemployment rates, these firms, together with the rest of the nation, will look towards making greater strides over the next 50 years and beyond.



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— E&E managing director Ronald Goh

THE SWEET SOUND OF SUCCESS

E&E has been responsible for installing sound systems at some of Singapore's most iconic infrastructure developments

FROM the thumping beats of nightclub Attica and the raucous cheers at the new National Stadium to the classical strains flowing from the Esplanade Concert Hall – homegrown E&E has been responsible for the clarity of some of the sweetest sounds emanating from around Singapore. E&E stands for Electronics & Engineering, a leading provider of professional audio and visual solutions with clients in more than 20 Asian countries, since 1951.

“In the next five to 10 years, we see South-east Asian markets poised for potential growth. Our ‘pull factor’ is still very strong in the region. Many of our clients have voiced their plans for expansion in the region,” says the company’s managing director Ronald Goh. “We are expecting that each of the markets will provide us with as much opportunity as Singapore.”

The story of E&E is closely intertwined with that of Singapore. Set up by Mr Goh’s father in 1951 in pre-independence Singapore, the family-run business has been involved in several of the country’s iconic infrastructure projects through the decades.

Its projects over the last 60 years have appeared in every imaginable space – from concert arenas, museums and hotels to places of worship, military academies, a cruise ship and even an offshore drilling platform.

When the company first started, it was known as a specialist in cinema projection systems due to Mr Goh senior’s experience in the cinema industry – first as a projectionist at Shaw Brothers and later, as a technical manager at a film production house. He once even helped produce a Hokkien-language film on Singapore. It became the main supplier for the local cinema industry, with customers such as Cathay Organisation.

Ronald, who was just seven when his father started the company, has been involved in the business since his teenage years and joined full-time after he graduated from Singapore Polytechnic in 1968.

Ronald was being groomed to take over the business from a young age. His father sent him to a technical school for his secondary education even though he was already enrolled at the prestigious Raffles Institution. He continued his technical education at the polytechnic. But the young man found the cinema projects – with its cookie-cutter type installations – uninspiring. Instead, he chose to go into professional sound reinforcement systems, an area that he found more challenging.

In the 1960s, Ronald installed the sound system for Singapore’s National Theatre, as well as its first discotheque, Gino’s-a-go-go along Tanglin Road. Jobs at other trendy night spots soon followed, including Barbarella at the then-Ming Court Hotel and the Lost Horizon at Shangri-La Hotel. These establishments have since closed.

But it was only in 1972 that the father-son team got their big break when the company won the tender to install the outdoor and

indoor sound reinforcement systems for the old Singapore National Stadium.

The system was designed by renowned acoustic consultant Jacek Figwer of BB&N from Boston in the US. It was the first time that E&E had the chance to work with an international consultant and it proved to be an enriching experience. From then on, it went on to win many more contracts to install larger sound systems for stadiums and indoor arenas in the region.

It provided sound engineering services and rental systems for many of the major international concerts that were held in Singapore, such as sell-out concerts by music legends David Bowie, Air Supply, as well as the New York Philharmonic Orchestra.

So when the company was awarded the Singapore Sports Hub contract last year, it was, in a way, a fitting homecoming. It was in charge of outfitting the sound system and giant video displays for the entire facility, including the main stadium, the OCBC Multi Purpose Indoor Arena and OCBC Aquatic Centre.

E&E also enjoyed success abroad early on. In the 1970s, the region was experiencing a huge boom in its movie industry due to the introduction of the Dolby 5.1 cinema surround sound system. At the height of this trend, E&E was installing its systems in one or two cinemas every month around South-east Asia, and especially in Indonesia.

HITTING ALL THE RIGHT NOTES

With its proven track record, it was no surprise when E&E continued to land high-profile jobs in the new millennium. It was responsible for the audio systems at the Esplanade Theatres, the two performing arts theatres at Marina Bay Sands integrated resort and the newly opened Victoria Theatre & Victoria Concert Hall. E&E was also chosen to install audio at various premises for the Formula One races in Singapore.

The family business has now moved into its third generation, when Ronald’s son, Gary, joined the company in 2000. Today, the company has 150 employees and operations in Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, India and Vietnam. Last year, it registered revenue of S\$53 million.

For his role in transforming E&E into an industry leader, Ronald has received many accolades and numerous international recognitions. In 2004, he received a Fellowship Award from the Internationally renowned Audio Engineering Society, Inc for his contributions to professional sound system engineering. He won the Asia Pacific Outstanding Entrepreneurship Award in 2012, and received the Pioneer Enterprise Award from United Overseas Bank this year. The company was also named in a list of 50 local companies that have contributed to Singapore’s 50 years of nation building.

Says Ronald: “My wish for Singapore is that we continue to make stellar growth in the coming years as we have since our independence. It is with growth of our nation that we as citizens will see more opportunities.”