

Home-grown firm partners global giant on research and development work

MAKING STRIDES

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GWIA'S DIRECTOR LEE KWAI SENG, on the benefits of working with global giant Procter & Gamble.

SITUATIONAL AWARENESS

On teaming up with an overseas partner:

- Match right profile of worker to the job
- Look to constantly improve and innovate
- Have the right mindset to make it work



GWIA's Mr Lee (left) and P&G's Mr Kaw. The partnership between the SME and global giant was shortlisted for the Most Transformational Collaboration prize at last year's SICC Awards. ST PHOTO: JAMIE KOH

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When global giant Procter & Gamble (P&G) set up its Singapore Innovation Centre in 2011, it knew it needed a solid and trustworthy partner to help with its top-secret research and development work.

It turned to home-grown firm GWIA.

While GWIA had been manufacturing P&G products for decades, this new collaboration took the relationship to the next level.

GWIA has 32 employees who are permanently stationed at the P&G innovation centre in Biopolis. They support P&G in making small batches of products that are still in the

R&D and testing phase.

The GWIA team also works with P&G's research staff to plan their raw material requirements, manage their warehouse and provide administrative concierge services.

As GWIA's director Lee Kwai Seng notes, there were teething problems at first.

"In the early days, we had to learn how to match the right profile of worker to this job. We thought of transferring people from our existing plant over to the innovation centre, but we soon found that was not feasible."

GWIA ended up hiring a fresh group of workers to match the more dynamic and innovative working environment.

"In a plant, you don't collaborate so much; you take instructions from your plant manager and you execute. Here, you have to collaborate with the researchers so you

would need communication skills and you have to be comfortable using higher-end technology," Mr Lee notes.

But the steep learning curve has benefited GWIA; it has learnt how to better manage quality control in its processes, lessons which it has applied across its four plants – one in Singapore and three in Malaysia.

"This has also driven us to look for constant improvement and innovations to continue to be a good partner to P&G. We have also started to explore technologies to better track our performance so that both P&G and GWIA are able to identify opportunities for future improvements," Mr Lee says.

"For example, we manufacture Ambi Pur air freshener for P&G and, thanks to what we've learnt at the innovation centre, we've been able to have discussions with P&G's

other business units about making a better type of packaging for the Ambi Pur car kits that we manufacture in Malaysia."

The firm has also learnt how to manufacture smaller batches with greater cost efficiency.

"In manufacturing, it's more cost-efficient to make millions of units than just one or two batch runs. But from our work at the innovation centre, we've learnt how to make smaller batches at lower cost," Mr Lee adds.

This makes it easier when GWIA's other clients want to push out a seasonal or promotional product.

P&G's director of corporate research and development, Mr James Kaw, says the company had wanted to partner a small or medium-sized enterprise for this work.

"Flexibility, agility and the willingness to partner are some key traits that SMEs generally have, which

counterbalances what a big multinational like P&G doesn't," he says.

"And especially in an innovation centre, we need more flexibility and agility because things change, batches fail, ideas don't work, so you need a partner with the right mindset to make it work."

Their partnership was shortlisted for the Most Transformational Collaboration prize at the Singapore International Chamber of Commerce (SICC) Awards last year.

"Collaboration is often the fastest way to innovate. This is just as true for large companies as it is for small ones," an SICC spokesman said.

"The SICC Awards celebrate and recognise collaborative innovations between large and small companies to increase collective learning and to encourage other companies to collaborate and innovate."

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