

# The SME route to a high-flying career

Contrary to the common perception, SMEs too can be rewarding employers

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LOW pay, no training, poor job prospects with a “family-run” business environment that other employees may not find conducive.

These common myths about working with a small and medium-enterprise (SME) were debunked within minutes of talking to Mr David Ong, managing director of Excel Marco.

The well-spoken Mr Ong, who founded the company five years ago, admitted to being hard on his father, who used to drop in frequently during the company’s initial stages.

“He was full of fatherly pride and liked visiting me, but I put a stop to that because it may not have set the right tone for the other employees,” Mr Ong explained.

While it was obvious from the break in his voice that he had not enjoyed telling his father of his decision, it also indicated his determination to ensure that his company’s image was not compromised.

“My partners and I came from multinational corporations (MNCs), and we

## SMALL WONDERS

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— Mr David Ong, managing director, Excel Marco



wanted to ensure that we each brought in the right element to our new work environment,” said Mr Ong.

Excel Marco appears to have put in place the appropriate measures to groom its staff, sending them for regular training courses and giving financial rewards in addition to the usual annual wage supplement and bonus.

Mr Ong, along with his partners, made it a point to build rapport with the staff through informal chats.

The company has done well, boasting an annual growth rate of 98 per cent and revenue close to \$7 million this year.

Yet like most SMEs in Singapore, Mr Ong finds it hard to attract and retain

staff, of whom about 80 per cent are electronics and electrical engineers servicing the oil and gas industry (O&G).

“When we started out, it wasn’t so hard to get engineers because the economy was not that hot. But right now, with the tight employment market and the robust growth in the O&G industry, we feel the strain — even more so because we are in a niche industry,” said Mr Ong.

Mr Ong is not alone, as results from a study last August showed manpower shortage as the top business concern among SMEs, after financing and technology innovation.

SMEs lost out because of the perception that MNCs and Government-

linked companies offer better training programmes and career prospects.

The reality is that SMEs appear to pay proper attention to their staff’s careers, along with ensuring that financial remuneration is on par or close to market rates.

For instance, employees of coffee supplier Boncafe International have a career development path spanning from brand executive to brand management, according to managing director Christian Huber.

“Regular appraisals for staff are held and incentives and trips given to motivate staff to better their craft,” he added.

Training is another avenue that SMEs appear to be investing heavily in. Boncafe baristas pick up the fine art of making the perfect cup of coffee at a training academy in Thailand, which cost close to US\$200,000 (\$306,000), to set up, while Excel is in discussions with Spring Singapore to build a centre of excellence here, with the aim of training up a constant supply of future engineers.

Summarising the efforts of some of the more successful SMEs, Mr Ong said: “Many SMEs are beneficiaries of the numerous MNCs here and have good human resource practices in place.

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