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Design, innovation and internationalisation key to success

Furniture companies looking to gain a competitive advantage in the long term should incorporate design thinking in their strategies and look beyond Singapore for opportunities to grow their productivity and expand their business. Speaking at the opening of the International Furniture Fair Singapore and the 31st ASEAN Furniture Show on 13 March 2014, Mr Lim Hng Kiang, Minister for Trade and Industry, also mentioned that 86 companies have tapped the Furniture Productivity Plan since its launch in 2011 and this has helped to improve the sector’s productivity and increase its value-add per worker.

90 students matched to 45 SMEs

The inaugural batch of 90 awardees under the SME Talent Programme (STP) will be joining 45 local SMEs across various sectors. An initiative by SPRING Singapore, the STP matches students and recent graduates with SMEs, providing co-funding support for the students’ studies in return for a bond of up to two years with the sponsoring company. At the award ceremony on 14 February 2014, Mr Teo Ser Luck, Minister of State for Trade and Industry, also revealed that the STP will be streamlined to include a full range of initiatives, such as collaborative study projects and internships, for SMEs to attract fresh talent at all levels.

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013 was a challenging year for SMEs because of the uncertain economic situation and the restructuring of Singapore’s economy to ensure sustainable and quality-driven growth. Rising business costs and a tight labour market contributed to this challenging environment. However, there were new growth opportunities, and businesses which have managed to seize these opportunities have done well, contributing to the 3.7% growth in GDP.

As the enterprise development agency, SPRING Singapore focused its efforts last year in three key areas:

1. Supporting SMEs to restructure through productivity, innovation and capability upgrading
2. Helping SMEs capture growth opportunities through the use of technology, commercialising ideas, and accessing overseas markets
3. Enhancing its outreach and accessibility to SMEs
In 2014, SPRING will focus on helping SMEs to build up their capabilities, hone their competitive edge, and continue to innovate, so that they can be in a strong position to capture the future opportunities for growth.

Mr Tan Kai Hoe
Chief Executive, SPRING Singapore

SPRING supported growth through its network of partners. Three Private Sector Translators were appointed to help companies in the medical and clean technology sectors bring their ideas to market.

SPRING also supported growth through its network of partners. This included some 350 technology projects through seven Centres of Innovation set up within polytechnics and research institutes. In addition, SPRING appointed three Private Sector Translators to help companies in the medical and clean technology sectors bring their ideas to market.

SPRING also encouraged entrepreneurship and supported the development of innovative start-ups. It assisted 100 start-ups in 2013 through 10 incubator partners. In addition, 30 ideas were commercialised through the Technology Enterprise Commercialisation Scheme (TECS).
An innovative start-up which benefitted from the TECS was Water Optics Technology, which has developed a ‘parasitometer’ to detect contaminants in treated water, such as bacteria, in real time. This can potentially lower the cost of testing drinking water by 85% and reduce the time needed to detect parasites from several days to just 24 hours. Water Optics’ novel technology provides up to 90% accuracy and will help water agencies worldwide, especially in countries fighting water-borne diseases.

SPRING has simplified the structure of its grants and streamlined the application process. All grants are now grouped under the Capability Development Grant (CDG). More than 1,000 SMEs have successfully tapped CDG since its introduction in April 2013.

Enhancing accessibility
Throughout the year, SPRING worked to enhance its outreach and accessibility to SMEs. 2013 saw the roll-out of five new SME Centres and five satellite centres, which together assisted more than 20,000 SMEs. This expanded network ensures that SMEs can more easily access resources and support provided by SPRING and other government agencies.

Traditional bakery Jackson Bakery & Confectionary is one such SME that received help from the SME Centre@SCCCI (Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry) when applying for assistance to automate part of its bread making process. This has allowed Jackson Bakery to reduce manpower requirements by 30%.

SPRING also simplified the structure of its grants and streamlined the application process in an effort to make the grants more understandable and accessible for SMEs. All grants are now grouped under the Capability Development Grant (CDG), which offers funding support for projects in areas such as human capital development, technology innovation and productivity improvement. Since its introduction in April 2013, more than 1,000 SMEs have successfully tapped CDG.

In addition to productivity improvements, another area that many SMEs focused their efforts on last year was human capital development. A Budget 2013 initiative, the SME Talent Programme (STP) helps to match students and fresh graduates with SMEs and provides funding support for a student’s studies in return for a bond of up to two years. ABR Holdings is an example of a local SME that believes in the importance of building a pipeline of young talent and turned to STP to reach out to students and fresh graduates.

The Innovation & Capability Voucher (ICV) scheme is another important aspect of SPRING’s support to help SMEs take the first step towards capability upgrading. More than 1,700 vouchers were awarded in 2013, each in support of consultancy projects to upgrade SMEs in the areas of innovation, productivity, human resources and financial management. The ICV has since been enhanced to support SMEs in the adoption and implementation of solutions to improve business efficiency and productivity.

SPRING’s online self-help toolkits on productivity, marketing, human resources, financial management and customer service have also proven popular with more than 29,000 downloads in 2013, a 76% increase from the previous year.

The year ahead
In 2014, SPRING will focus on helping SMEs build up their capabilities, hone their competitive edge, and continue to innovate so that they can be in a strong position to capture future opportunities for growth. SPRING will continue to support SMEs in their restructuring journey by strengthening the productivity infrastructure and encouraging more SMEs to adopt sectoral initiatives and new innovative business models.

Read on to find out how SMEs like Architects Project Group LLP, Fong Shen Mould & Precision Engineering, Super Pak Manufacturing, Mega Plus Technology, Technigroup Far East and ABR Holdings have benefitted from SPRING’s programmes and assistance.
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SPRING’s Key Achievements in 2013

- Reached out to 103,000 SMEs
- Supported 3,400 SMEs through 3,270 projects
- Generating $6.16 billion in Value-Add
- Creating 21,000 jobs
- More than 4,300 loans worth $1.25 billion approved

MARCH 2014
Since it was founded in 1982 and subsequently incorporated as a limited liability partnership, Architects Project Group LLP has been a trusted partner in Singapore’s building and construction industry, working on projects ranging from houses and hotels to schools and community centres. Over the past three decades, its business has grown and its designs have evolved to embrace new building techniques, materials and technologies. However, its document and knowledge management processes were not keeping up with the progress seen in the rest of the firm. This led the group to tap SPRING Singapore’s Innovation & Capability Voucher (ICV) to help fund a consultant to improve its administrative processes.

“We were spending too much time on administrative work because our file management processes weren’t well developed,” explains Mr Eddie Yeo (above right), one of Architects Project Group LLP’s partners. “We had no central server for storing files, backup was done on an external hard drive, and a lot of our documents were also stored in hard copy format. As a result, knowledge sharing was limited and information retrieval became very time consuming, which was affecting our ability to respond quickly to requests for proposal and to address client needs efficiently.”

An opportunity arose to address these issues in the middle of 2013, when a consultant who was assisting Architects Project Group LLP with the adoption of a new ISO standard suggested that they apply for the ICV to improve their file management processes.

**Designing new processes**

“We had some idea of what we wanted to achieve, but didn’t really know how to go about doing it,” Mr Yeo explains.
“That’s where the consultant came in, to provide us with greater details on how to develop and implement the new system and work processes.”

To fully understand the issues Architects Project Group LLP faced, the consultant held a number of sessions with staff to discuss the existing processes and the requirements for a new system. This led to a number of changes to its document and knowledge management processes, including the digitisation and centralisation of project documents and drawings on a shared server and the introduction of standardised file-naming conventions.

In addition to the ICV, Architects Project Group LLP used the Productivity and Innovation Credit (PIC) to offset some of the cost of purchasing a server.

“There was some resistance to the new system initially, which was to be expected as people were so used to doing things their own way. Eventually, they understood the value of the changes we were making and now everyone is happy with the results,” says Mr Steven Chen Zhi-Huang, (facing page, left) another partner at Architects Project Group LLP.

Reaping the benefits

The new work processes have resulted in a 50% reduction in the man-hours needed to process archived documents, and also shortened retrieval time from 20 minutes to just three minutes. The introduction of digital archiving has greatly improved organisation of Architects Project Group LLP’s archived project documents and also reduced paper usage and loss of information.

“It is now much easier to retrieve project files such as photographs, drawings and proposal submissions,” notes Mr Yeo. “Rather than chasing down the person who might have a file on their computer, we can now look on the server and easily navigate the standardised file names to find what we’re looking for. This reduces the potential for errors, improves our response time to clients, and helps to avoid project delays.”

“Working with SPRING and the consultant to bring about these changes was very easy,” Mr Yeo adds. “The ICV is a great opportunity for companies like ours to carry out process improvement projects. It is essentially free consultancy to help us become more efficient and productive. Even though we don’t have an IT manager, we were able to install a server and implement better processes to improve our business.”

key takeaways

- Even small changes to work processes can have a big impact on productivity and efficiency.
- To find out how the ICV can help your company with consultancy and implementing solutions, please visit www.spring.gov.sg/icv.
MOULDING A STRONGER BUSINESS

Automation has helped Fong Shen strengthen its business while addressing skilled labour constraints.

For Fong Shen Mould & Precision Engineering, seeing opportunity in adversity enabled this Singapore-based precision engineering company, which designs and produces moulds and moulded plastic products such as electronic hand-held devices and EZ-link card scanners, to translate challenges in attracting skilled workers into an opportunity to boost productivity through automation.

Mr P. L. Leow, Managing Director of Fong Shen, and his team turned to the idea of automating the tool room – the heart of the business where engineers produce the moulds used in the manufacturing process – in order to minimise manpower and maximise output while maintaining the accuracy and quality of its products.

Planning is critical
Manufacturing moulded products requires careful planning and design, and Mr Leow recognised that successfully introducing automation would require the same. While the setup of the automated tool room began in November 2012, in the three years prior to this, Mr Leow and his team were busy researching the available technology and defining system and equipment specifications.

“During the planning phase, our senior team of tool room engineers had to work together with engineers from...
When potential customers learn that we have an automated tool room, they are very impressed with our capabilities. It boosts their confidence in us.

Mr P. L. Leow
Managing Director
Fong Shen Mould & Precision Engineering

"The automated equipment has resulted in a 20% to 30% reduction in manpower needed to operate the tool room while maintaining the same level of output as before. In fact, our new equipment is operating at only around 60% of its capacity," says Mr Leow.

By greatly reducing the need for human handling, automation has resulted in a 30% to 40% reduction in errors.

Aside from making Fong Shen better at its existing work, the tool room automation has opened doors to new opportunities with clients in industries that require very high levels of precision, such as aerospace and medical technology. "When potential customers learn that we have an automated tool room, they are very impressed with our capabilities. It boosts their confidence in us," notes Mr Leow.

While Fong Shen is now reaping the rewards of its tool room automation, Mr Leow cautions that there are no shortcuts to success in this area. "I would advise other industry players interested in automation to conduct their background research and undertake proper planning. Many people fail because they jump in too quickly."

key takeaways
- Automation is a complex process, but it can greatly boost productivity when well planned and executed.
- To find out how SPRING can support the adoption of technology in your business, visit www.spring.gov.sg/cdg.
Challenging business problems are rarely solved in silos. Instead, they are often tackled by different parties that bring their unique expertise to the table and work together as a team. This is the kind of strategic collaboration that enabled HP Indigo – part of multinational IT company Hewlett-Packard – to improve its manufacturing process by introducing new product packaging that is both eco-friendly and business-smart.

HP Indigo’s business objective was to replace the bulky expanded polystyrene (EPS) foam trays used to pack its ink canisters with new trays made of 100% biodegradable moulded paper pulp. However, the new trays would need to be carefully engineered to provide the same level of protection as the existing packaging. At the same time, this would also mean that the automation line used to pack the ink canisters would require modification to accommodate the new trays.

HP Indigo approached two of its Singapore-based vendors to tackle this problem: Super Pak Manufacturing, a specialist in designing and manufacturing packaging solutions, and Mega Plus Technology, a specialist in factory automation and robotics. It was quickly apparent that for this project to succeed, all three parties would need to work hand in hand.

“In terms of working with the moulded paper pulp material, both Mega Plus and Super Pak had certain technical limitations involving our automation and manufacturing processes, respectively, so we had to come together to achieve HP Indigo’s desired outcome,” says Mr Long Tin Ping, Group General Manager at Super Pak.
Overcoming obstacles
For both Mega Plus and Super Pak, the project posed complex challenges. Mr Louis Lee (facing page, left), Director at Mega Plus, explains, “We failed many times during the initial design phase and had to modify our tooling. Along the way, we also provided suggestions on how to make the moulded pulp trays better suited to the automation line.”

Mr Long adds, “Our packaging must be able to protect HP Indigo’s ink canisters. This means that if a box is dropped, the packaging – our moulded trays – must be able to protect the canisters inside by dispersing the impact of the fall. We had to develop the entire failure analysis process to understand how the canisters could possibly be damaged and how to prevent this from happening.”

In total, the three parties spent about six months on planning and development, including lots of trial and error as they gradually overcame technical challenges. This R&D phase was resource intensive for both Super Pak and Mega Plus, which had to invest time and money as their engineers worked to develop viable solutions.

Benefits for all
To support their efforts, the project team received support from SPRING Singapore under the Partnerships for Capability Transformation (PACT) programme. Intended to promote strategic linkages between SMEs and large enterprises, PACT supports collaboration involving knowledge transfer, capability upgrading, and developing and test-bedding innovative solutions.

Mr Long notes that the collaborative nature of the project, supported by PACT, was crucial in driving a successful outcome. “We can develop a tray that meets our objectives, but if it doesn’t work with the automation, then the project will not succeed. If the tray we develop works with the automation but doesn’t meet HP Indigo’s requirements, the project will also fail. At the end of the day, all three parties must come together to minimise the potential for failure.”

Fortunately, this collaboration paid off. The new moulded paper pulp trays developed by Super Pak are more eco-friendly than the previous EPS trays, weigh 50% less and require 75% less storage space. The reduction in weight and space requirements translates into more efficient shipping of trays as a much higher quantity can be packed each time. And with the automation expertise of Mega Plus, HP Indigo’s production line is running smoothly as it packs ink cartridges into the new trays.

Beyond the positive outcomes specific to this project, both Mega Plus and Super Pak have learnt from the experience and built valuable new knowledge in their respective fields. Super Pak has since expanded to other product lines and manufacturing sites overseas while Mr Lee is also certain that this experience will prepare Mega Plus for more complex projects in future.

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keytakeaways
• Synergies arise when SMEs and large enterprises collaborate to share knowledge and develop innovative solutions.
• To find out how SPRING can support your strategic collaboration with business partners, visit www.spring.gov.sg/pact.
As environmental awareness grows among people, governments and businesses around the world, so too does the demand for eco-friendly products and related industry standards. The furniture industry is no exception. One example of this is the GREENGUARD certification, an industry standard for identifying interior products and materials with low chemical emissions.

Technigroup Far East, a Singapore-based manufacturer of office furniture and related products with clients predominantly in Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and India, saw GREENGUARD certification as an opportunity to highlight the eco-friendliness of its products while meeting a growing area of demand among customers in the furniture industry.

“A key motivation for us to pursue the GREENGUARD certification was market demand and awareness of this certification. Our customers were asking for it,” says Ms Susiana Tjiu, Design Manager at Technigroup.

Just as Technigroup started to encounter this demand, Underwriters Laboratories (UL) – the certification body behind GREENGUARD – and SPRING Singapore delivered a joint presentation to local industry players explaining GREENGUARD certification and the assistance available to them to subsidise the certification process.
This piqued the interest of Technigroup staff attending the presentation and put the wheels in motion for the company to pursue certification.

**Raising the green bar**

To become GREENGUARD certified, product samples are tested to measure the level of chemical emissions given off by things like glue, paint or other materials. For health purposes, these emissions should not exceed certain levels.

Technigroup liaised closely with UL throughout the certification process, with the latter providing instructions on what was required at different stages, such as submitting documentation and product samples. While Technigroup had to send its product samples to a UL laboratory in the United States, the recent opening of a new UL lab in Guangzhou means that this step has since become more efficient.

“After about four months of internal planning and liaising with SPRING, we started the GREENGUARD certification process in January 2013 and were awarded the certification in July 2013. It was quite an easy and efficient process,” notes Ms Angela Chng, Product Designer at Technigroup.

Technigroup received support from SPRING Singapore’s Capability Development Grant (CDG), which covered part of the costs related to the initial certification. However, the certification needs to be renewed on an annual basis and products need to be sent to UL for compliance testing on a quarterly basis, all of which costs time and money. Nonetheless, Technigroup is optimistic that this will prove to be a worthwhile investment.

“We are hopeful that our increase in sales will justify the cost of the GREENGUARD renewal,” says Ms Chng.

**A valuable marketing tool**

Notwithstanding the GREENGUARD certification, Technigroup must still rely on the quality of its products and business reputation to drive business. However, Ms Chng notes that being certified is helpful for getting a foot in the door with prospective clients. “We can now enter meetings to pitch for new work with greater confidence.”

“Since becoming GREENGUARD certified, we have had more opportunities to catch the attention of potential customers and bid on tenders, so it has certainly helped. We are actively pursuing sales opportunities in new overseas markets while continuing to build up our business with existing customers,” says Ms Tjiu.

While it is still early days from a business perspective, Technigroup projects that being GREENGUARD certified will translate into a 50% increase in sales while also helping it to further penetrate new markets like Africa, Dubai and the United States. The market demand is certainly there, so now it is up to Technigroup to seize the opportunity for growth.

**key takeaways**

- Industry standards and certification can help companies tap valuable business opportunities.
- To find out how SPRING can support your efforts in standards adoption, visit www.spring.gov.sg/cdg.

MARCH 2014  17
Attracting young talent can be challenging in Singapore’s F&B industry, which is why ABR Holdings turned to SPRING Singapore’s SME Talent Programme (STP) to reach out to students and fresh graduates. With more than 30 outlets and 1,000 staff, ABR Holdings is one of the leading F&B groups in Singapore, boasting a portfolio of brands that includes established names such as Swensen’s, Yogen Fruz and Gloria Jean’s Coffees. The company believes that it is important to have a pipeline of young talent to inject fresh ideas and perspectives into the business, and sees the STP as a valuable means of achieving this.

SCOOPING UP FRESH TALENT

The STP attracts students and fresh graduates to SMEs by offering study awards and job opportunities. SPRINGnews recently caught up with Mr Andrew Khoo, ABR Holdings’ Director of Business Development and Operations for its F&B Division, as well as Mr Clarence Seow, a student at Republic Polytechnic and STP awardee, to get their thoughts on the need for new talent in the industry and the value of the STP to both businesses and students.
Why is it important to bring in fresh talent?
Mr Andrew Khoo (below): While you need a good core of experienced, long-serving staff in the company, you also need to always have an injection of new blood. That’s why it’s important to attract new talent to come on board. At ABR Holdings, the mix of youth and experience allows us to run our operations efficiently while also generating new and innovative ideas for our existing brands and new concepts.

How are you addressing the need for young talent, particularly in today’s challenging labour market?
The labour market is certainly challenging at the moment. That’s why we’re participating in the STP, to gain access to a ready pool of fresh new talent. I think you have to be open-minded about some of the recent policy changes and try to find solutions. Rather than just complaining, why not go out and do something about it?

What makes ABR Holdings attractive for young talent?
I think we are an attractive company to work for because we are a dynamic company with a strong portfolio of brands. We have the right balance between size and growth potential. We’re not too small, but still have significant potential to scale and grow further. This also means there is a lot of opportunity and potential for young talent to come into the company and make a difference.

We’re looking at strengthening our position in Singapore but we also want to develop new concepts and expand into new markets in the region – and this is where fresh ideas and new people are important. This is also where we need to strike that fine balance between experience and new blood, and where the real opportunity lies for young people to shine in our company.

What are you currently studying?
Mr Clarence Seow (above): I’m currently pursuing a Diploma in Restaurant and Culinary Operations at Republic Polytechnic. My main interest is the service side of F&B operations. I am graduating in 2015 and will join ABR Holdings after completing two years of National Service.

How did you find out about the STP?
I heard about the STP during a field trip for one of my modules. It was organised by the Restaurant Association of Singapore, a partner in the STP, and at the end of the trip they gave us an introduction to the programme.

Why did you decide to join the STP?
I was impressed by the amount of support offered and the opportunity to gain valuable experience early in my career. However, it was a tough decision because it is a relatively long-term commitment, and I had to consider things like whether my interests would still be the same in three or four years’ time, or whether a better opportunity might come up. Eventually, I decided to sign up for the programme. The financial support for my studies is certainly a big plus, but more importantly, the training and experience gained will prepare me for the future.

What kind of training will you be providing to the STP participants?
Investing in our staff to develop their skills and talents is very important to us. We offer a very structured and comprehensive training programme that includes rotation to different functions, such as front line and operational roles, and to different outlets. This rotation exposes new recruits to the different businesses of ABR, and builds a better understanding of our company’s operations.

What makes a successful match in the STP?
It’s important for both the company and the student to have a clear understanding of each other’s expectations. Such mutual understanding will heighten the success of finding a good match between the company and the student. In addition, if you give the students a clear understanding of the work they will be doing and the type of training they will receive, it will certainly steer them towards making a choice they will be happy with.
To grow your business, start grooming young talents now.

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As the backbone of our economy, SMEs are crucial to Singapore’s continued economic success. Here are 5 ways you can upgrade your capabilities, boost your productivity and grow your business.

1. **TOOLKIT**
   SPRING Singapore offers a suite of self-help guides to help companies get started. If you are seeking to improve your Customer Service, Financial Management, Human Resource Capability, Marketing or Productivity, you will find an easy-to-use guide to get you on your way.

2. **VOUCHER**
   You can now do more with SPRING’s Innovation & Capability Voucher (ICV). Valued at $5,000, the voucher is easy to apply and it is your first step towards capability development. Embark on a consultancy project in the areas of innovation, productivity, human resources and financial management or implement simple solutions to improve your business efficiency and productivity.

3. **TAX INCENTIVE**
   The popular Productivity & Innovation Tax Credit (PIC) administered by the Inland Revenue Authority of Singapore needs little introduction. It gives your business up to a 400% tax deduction amounting to $400,000 and a 60% cash grant of up to $100,000 for expenses made towards productivity improvements and innovation.

4. **GRANT**
   Venture onwards and upwards with SPRING’s Capability Development Grant (CDG). The CDG supports a wide range of capability upgrading initiatives to help your business grow and develop its competitive edge. Choose from 10 supportable areas and the CDG can defray up to 70% of your qualifying project costs relating to consultancy, manpower, certification, process and business capability upgrading, and more.

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Satellite SME Centres are located at the Community Development Councils (CDCs)

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