

NTU alumna, Annie Yap, is CEO of human resource company, The GMP Group.



Creating opportunities out of obstacles

Conquering obstacles, alumna Annie Yap, a prominent figure in Singapore's human resource sector, relates how she became CEO of The GMP Group whilst in her 20s.

Annie has steered The GMP Group, a Singapore born-and-bred company, from a mere player to a regional leader in staffing and HR consultancy services. Providing comprehensive and innovative solutions to human resources, she is instrumental in escalating GMP's growth over the last 12 years, and in making the SME a force to be reckoned with, in Asia and beyond. Annie won the Leading CEO award, bestowed on her, at the Singapore Human Resources Institute's HR Award 2007.

"Actually, I came to GMP and HR by chance," she reveals. Annie had after all majored in Financial Analysis when she graduated from NTU with a Business degree in 1993. "Although good with figures, I realised I was not cut out for the banking or fund management industry," she explains.

After graduation, she started out as a Recruitment Consultant. By 1998, Annie was promoted to General Manager and managing GMP's then 50-staff strong outfit. Owing to her performance, keen business sense and loyalty to GMP, she was handpicked to be trained under the wings of the company's late founder, Dr Giam Cheng Lan, to succeed the latter as CEO. Annie's illustrious career in HR took off.

She recalls: "In fact, I knew nothing about recruitment in the beginning. But, Dr Giam guided me conscientiously and gradually I became a top consultant."

Annie encountered a major challenge when tasked to assist Dr Giam on GMP's International Recruitment initiative. She worked extra hard to make sure the company sealed their first international deal. "The experience was both challenging and different, especially since GMP was new to International Recruitment then. The overseas exposure was also memorable, as I got to experience my first winter in China!" she affirms. Since the first international venture, GMP had prevailed.

Annie was further tested when GMP lost Dr Giam to cancer by early 2001. Only 29, she had to shoulder the heavy responsibility of not just sustaining, but also developing the young and growing organisation. At that age, Annie would easily have been one of the youngest CEOs of a high-profile and fast-growing SME.

"It was an especially tough period for me when Dr Giam passed away. To make matter worse, retrenchments were everywhere. It was also a period when Singapore was hit by SARS and the whole world was in a frenzy following the 9/11 attacks. Some of our clients were losing confidence, as they felt that I was too young to lead GMP. Even some of my staff left the company because they found it tough to report to someone young," she says.

So, how did Annie pull through amid all the challenges as CEO at just 29? Sharing her tough experiences, she says: "For me,

an obstacle is not an obstacle; it's a challenge. And the one and only way to overcome an obstacle is to face it. I told myself I must be strong to face any challenges and take them one step at a time. Once overcome, you will be stronger. You must also think positive. Positive thinking leads to positive action, which in turn brings about positive outcomes."

Sharing from experience: What's hot, what's not



For new graduates starting out on a career and aspiring to be like her, Annie's advice is to never forget to look out for opportunities. Elaborating, she says: "It is important to define your success. For me, success is a journey, not a destination. And being successful means being happy and being able to enjoy life and impact the lives of others, positively. This is my motto in life."

"While there are many factors to determine success, it is not just about IQ. Equally important is EQ. Building good relationships is critical especially in the Asian context. One also needs to be a good team player and acquire leadership skills," advises Annie. She also stresses on the importance of communication and presentation skills, both of which she picked up during her studies at NTU.

For new graduates looking out for hiring trends in today's industry, Annie shares her views on how the various industries are doing, and where the 'goldmines' are. She observes: "Singapore is still very much focused on high value-added industries. Many of our high end manufacturing industries are robust. Wafer fabrication, pharmaceutical, research and development are still very good industries. Banking is also important for Singapore, as we turn the country into a regional banking and finance hub. Another up and coming industry is services."



Not one to be afraid to take on life's challenges, Annie is a sports-loving lady, who has a number of triathlon conquests under her belt.



Of balancing and letting go



For a successful CEO like Annie, does she have work-life balance? Running one of the biggest HR firms in Singapore, she says she does. She makes time for family and interest. "Weekends are reserved for time with my two sons, aged six and four, and my 6-year-old goddaughter. I'm also into triathlons. The recent one I participated in was at Bintan," she says. Annie started running three years ago before picking up cycling and swimming. She also enjoys cooking, which she finds 'therapeutic'.

"It is advisable to practise good time management," she says, adding that "While there isn't a perfect balance, you must know how to prioritise. Find time to enjoy your family and friends and mostly, be happy. Life is more than material and status."

Having come so far in life, what does the future hold for Annie? "Hopefully, I will be able to find someone who can succeed me within the next 10 years. After which I would play a more advisory role. I think it's only right that the younger ones get the chance to lead," she says.

