

How Annie earned her stripes

Human resource bigwig Annie Yap tells IVY ONG-WOOD how at 35, she became a nominee for Singapore's Entrepreneur of the Year – and the only woman to do so this year.

By the time Annie Yap was 18, she had flown to Malaysia and Hong Kong many times over. These are not the beginnings of a career traveller, but rewards from her mother for doing well at school. Therein lies the early signs of how a young businesswoman became an overnight success story in Singapore.

In her quiet business suit with schoolgirl-straight hair, Annie looks like she couldn't hurt a mouse. But make no mistake, this sweet-faced woman takes no hostages. "I'm very *garang* (Malay for "fierce")," admits the managing director of GMP Recruit. "I set high standards for my staff and expect them to be met. If anyone doesn't meet my standards, he'll find out soon enough."

This is hardly surprising considering that, at 35, she already heads a recruitment firm with 12 offices in Singapore and four branches overseas. And that's just for starters. She also has picked up scores of awards for her company. Last year alone, it was given Regional Headquarters status by the Economic Development Board and got into the annual prestigious Enterprise 50 list – which names the top 50 privately-held local companies – organised by Accenture and *The Business Times*.

In September, she was the only woman among the 15 in the running to be named Entrepreneur of the Year by the Association of Small and Medium Enterprises. Though she didn't win the big one, she took the Enterprise Award, which recognises those who have proved their ability to create a successful enterprise.

There's no way someone can come this far without cracking the whip. Amazingly though, Annie's never had to sack someone for poor performance, only for disciplinary problems. "I don't cut them any slack but I don't have to fire them either because eventually, they realise they're getting nowhere and quit on their own accord," she says. If that sounds scary, you soon find out that this hard-headed woman has a soft heart. She tells her employees: "You're not alone. I'm in this with you. Your targets are my targets too and we'll achieve them together."

An entrepreneur by any name

Nowhere is this loyalty and compassion more obvious than in her dealings with GMP's founder, Dr Giam Cheng Lan, whom Annie fondly calls "my mentor". When Annie joined as a fresh finance graduate from the Nanyang Technological University in 1994, the firm was just three years old with 15 recruitment consultants. In just one year, she became its top producer and Cheng Lan's second-in-command.

A few years later, the company started looking for clients in Russia and Eastern Europe. The two women travelled together, sharing hotel rooms. "She was like a godmother to me. She taught me everything she knew about the business – even small stuff like how to do the payroll," Annie recalls. The sharing process stepped up in intensity in 1998, when Cheng Lan learnt that she had cervical cancer. She started grooming Annie to take over so when she died three years later, the younger woman was ready to step into her shoes.

"She gave me shares to the company in her will. I gave her my word that I would look after her company and her two young kids," Annie says, adding with emphasis: "And I have kept my word. What I am today is due to her love and support." Because of her close ties with the founder, she's always felt a part of the company, even if she didn't start it. So she has no problems with being called an entrepreneur. "Being one is not just about starting your own company. It's also about building up a company – moving it forward and creating a corporate culture within the organisation – and that's what I've done." She says she cannot see herself leaving the company because of that promise to Cheng Lan but "if the company grows bigger and I see I'm not the most suitable person, I will step down and let someone else more suitable run it".

Only No.1 will do

A general manager by 27, a managing director by 30... it sounds like quantum leaps but the woman in the centre of it all is unfazed. "I've always been competitive, always →



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wanting to challenge myself." In school, she was always in the top three positions in her class – first at Kong Hwa Primary, then Chung Cheng High and eventually, Nanyang Junior College. "My mum instilled this competitive spirit in me. She had a reward system: If I got third, I'd get a bus holiday to Malaysia; second would be a Malaysian holiday but by flight and first would be a trip to Hong Kong. I had to be in the top three or I would have to stay at home for the holidays."

Studies wasn't the only area where she pitted herself against others. She played table tennis, representing her school up to JC level. "I also signed up for every contest I could find – dancing, singing, story-telling... I knew I might not win but I liked the process of preparing, perfecting my piece, then seeing how I stood against the others."

There was one exception, though: swimming. Thrown into a 1.7m-deep pool at age seven by an overzealous swimming coach, she developed a phobia for water, which lasted till she was 19. Then, she went for a snorkeling trip and her buddy threw away her float. "It was sink or swim," she recalls. No prizes for guessing which one she chose.

Her gung-ho attitude stood her in good stead when she took over the running of the company at 27. Unhappy with the decision to promote her, three out of the 40-something staff members left. They were all very senior and it was a huge vote of no-confidence against her. A lesser woman would have been daunted by the amount of ill-will against her but she took it in her stride. "I told myself to focus on the positive. I still had 30-odd staff members left for me to build on and they were my priority." She slowly built their trust by taking the company from strength to strength.

No mountain too high

With so much on her plate, you'd think that this is one woman who'd sleep less than four hours a day and work 14-hour days. But no, Annie is home by 6pm to spend time with her husband, who's in the financial line, and two sons, aged two and four.

And yes, her hubby is proud of her. He's very private (she doesn't even want to name him). But she says: "I'm a people person; I can't be alone. So I'm the public face in the family." Weekends are strictly

for family, when they go to church, swimming and the occasional farm visits. She somehow manages to squeeze in monthly dinners and pub outings with her girlfriends on weeknights too. "Women always think: 'Family comes first. I can't have a family and still run a company.' But that's not true. You have to learn to manage your time well," she says.

A firm believer in work-life balance, she encourages her staff to go home early and doesn't call them after office hours. "You can finish your work in eight hours; it boils down to discipline."

She herself is so disciplined that she's even got time to indulge in her favourite past-time: hiking. Not surprisingly, the woman who "loves being challenged", likes climbing mountains. She's been scaling progressively higher peaks in China, from the 1,684m-high Lotus Flower peak in the Huangshan mountains to the 2200m-high Mount Huashan in Shan Xi province. So what has she set her sights on next? "Mount Everest," she shoots back. She may be half-joking but somehow, you have no doubt that Annie will get her goal. **HW**

Top 3 staffing trends that will affect you...

Annie, who's also the president of the Singapore Staffing Association, predicts these will be big in the next few years:

- **Firms will fight hard to keep staff.** "The trend is towards managing talent. There are so many firms out there, all vying for the best people so, if you're good, your company will be giving you more bonuses and charting a career path for you to keep you."
- **Human resource will play a bigger role.** "They're not just going to be doing the hiring, firing and paperwork in between. They will work closer with you and the company to ensure the best fit."
- **Flexi-hours will be the norm.** "There's a big push towards letting people decide on their own office hours or allowing them to work from home. So you'll see more and more companies encouraging this."