

Harnessing talent

Graham Stirling, audit manager at Grant Thornton in Singapore, talks about how attracting and developing the right people has been key to the rapid growth of the firm

In just 18 months, Grant Thornton Singapore has grown from a one-man outfit into an office of more than 60 people. This is the story of the company's journey.

Often, when a global professional services firm opens up in a new market, it acquires and rebrands an existing office. Departing from convention, Grant Thornton decided to 'start on a fresh piece of paper' and 'design an office which it felt would be very successful in Singapore', says Graham Stirling, audit manager at Grant Thornton Singapore. In this way, the company was able to replicate its open-office model in which senior management work closely alongside associates and seniors, in line with the company's global values of Collaboration, Leadership, Excellence, Agility, Responsibility and Respect (CLEARR), which Stirling believes is what makes Grant Thornton a much sought-after employer globally.

Global best practices

In the initial months, experienced personnel from overseas offices were brought in to help start the new firm. This helped ensure that global best practices were effectively indoctrinated into the new setup. 'It was very important that the leadership of the new business was very familiar with Grant Thornton culture and methodology,' Stirling says.

The company was clear, however, that it was ultimately a Singaporean business and that having a majority expat staffing should be only a temporary

measure. 'Initially, our ratio of expats to Singaporeans was 75:25. Within a year, we managed to flip that ratio in the opposite direction. We are recruiting the best and brightest talent to help grow and develop Grant Thornton Singapore,' says Stirling.

Stirling says there was no shortage of talent hailing from the local Singaporean universities. However, even as a globally recognised name, as a new player in the lion city the company had to convince local talents of why they should consider a mid-tier firm rather than a Big Four firm – which many were initially attracted to. Grant Thornton adopted the slogan 'Stand out from the crowd' to spearhead the graduate recruitment programme.

The strategy was to target a specific portion of the graduate market, those 'who wanted to be part of a firm that they were able to develop with, grow with and become a future leader with', explains Stirling.

Having personally benefited from his own decision to cut his teeth at Grant Thornton seven years ago, Stirling is a strong advocate for the mid-tier firm.

Recalling his decision, he says: 'I wanted to work for an organisation that was small enough for me to make a difference. At the same time, I also wanted to work for an organisation large enough for me to have opportunities to work with big brand-name clients, as well as to travel and work globally.

'I've never regretted my decision. I wouldn't be in the position that I am today

if it wasn't for the support that I've received from Grant Thornton. I want to give the staff of Grant Thornton Singapore the same opportunities that I've had,' he adds.

Development opportunities

As a global organisation with 800 offices in over 130 countries, Grant Thornton's talent development programmes span global, regional and local levels.

At the global level, top-performing senior staff from offices around the world are identified for an Advanced Managers' Programme which prepares them for senior leadership positions. The two-year programme includes three collaborative sessions where participants meet up with each other for a week to work on projects ranging from client servicing to innovation. Outside these meet-ups, participants continue to collaborate remotely on other projects to enhance their senior leadership skills.

Within the Asia-Pacific region, there is a separate Emerging Leaders Programme, where candidates are selected to represent the various offices at a regional academy and then at Grant Thornton conferences. At these events, attendees have the opportunity to collaborate and network with their regional colleagues. Stirling, who attended the 2015 programme in Bangkok, says the basis of the programme is to ensure that future leaders are equipped with the necessary skills and experience to lead the firm in the coming years.

At the local level, staff benefit from cross-learning opportunities across the various functions. Stirling cites this example: 'Within the Singapore office, we had some personnel in the audit department who expressed an interest in corporate finance and forensic work, so we sent them on temporary assignment with the corporate finance team to develop in an area which they otherwise might not have an opportunity to experience.'

Staff can also apply to work in other Grant Thornton offices around the world to experience working with different

- * Grant Thornton is now one of the major global accounting networks and has member firms across more than 130 countries, employing more than 40,000 professionals.
- * Grant Thornton Singapore was incorporated in February 2015. It currently has a staff strength of more than 60 professionals, providing audit, tax and advisory services to over 400 national and multinational clients.
- * Harnessing learning and experience from across its global network, Grant Thornton provides professional services in a seamless manner at multiple locations across diverse industries.



Basics



personnel and clients from a different sector and culture. Stirling, a secondee from the UK office, believes he gained the most in terms of development when he left his comfort zone working in the Glasgow office to come and work in Singapore. He says that while secondment opportunities are not uncommon in other firms, it is something that is particularly encouraged at Grant Thornton.

'The skills secondees are able to develop are so fundamentally beneficial. The idea is that the person will be able to bring back the skills and experience that they've had in that new environment. In my situation, I work very closely with the UK business and they've certainly benefited from having me as a touch point here in Singapore,' he explains.

Stirling adds that while opportunities for secondment are possible because of Grant Thornton's extensive international network, he recognises the role that

globally recognised certifications such as ACCA play in allowing staff to transfer seamlessly across different offices.

'We know that someone with the ACCA Qualification is going to have an array of quality skills, be it technical knowledge, communication skills, or the ability to collaborate and work with others, and that's very appealing for an international organisation like ourselves,' he says.

As an ACCA Accredited Employer, Grant Thornton regularly supports employees who pursue professional studies. Support comes in the form of sponsorships, study leave and even study aid from other accounting professionals within the firm.

Happy employees, happy clients
Grant Thornton's global strategy, titled *Vision 2020*, focuses on improving the people experience across its global

business. The idea is that by creating an environment where employees are happy to come work, they are going to be happier and more productive, and this will ultimately result in happier clients.

A key area of focus for the Singapore office is building an inclusive environment. As part of the office expansion plans, all staff are encouraged to give their input on what they would want their office to be like. 'In a lot of organisations, this might have been something solely handled by the senior management team, but we wanted this to be an inclusive project,' says Stirling.

Related specifically to the Singapore office, Grant Thornton has further identified four key areas which rank highly among local staff. Stirling shares his thoughts on these four areas:

Work-life balance: 'We all have lives outside the office and it's important that people are having that balance. »



No one is going to be able to work to the best of their abilities in the office if they are not getting any time to rest, to socialise, to spend time with their families and enjoy other pursuits.'

Financial remuneration: 'We wanted our people to feel valued for their hard work. We made sure that when we were setting salaries they were of the highest levels in Singapore. We pay our graduates more than our competitors in the market.'

Training and development: 'We wanted the training to be tailored specifically to the day-to-day responsibilities of our people. We wanted them to get meaningful training in relevant areas and ensure that that they weren't just undertaking training for the sake of fulfilling their CPD (continuing professional development) hours.'

Global opportunities: 'As an international firm, we are able to offer our people global opportunities. The idea is that if someone has an interest in, for example, the Australian markets, they get the chance to work with our Australian

clients, or with our Australian office, or in the Singapore component of a large Australian client.'

Extracurricular activity

On a lighter note, the company looks at social events as a way of reinforcing its open culture. The Singapore office is actively involved in a number of sports and has its own football, netball and bowling team, as well as a running club. Outside of sports, regular inter-departmental social functions provide an opportunity for staff to build team cohesiveness.

'We feel that it's important for all the departments to socialise and catch up. Getting to know our colleagues better ultimately helps us grow and develop the business.' ■

Rufus Tan, journalist

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