

# DHL REMAINS BEST OF THE BEST DESPITE TRANSITION

BY OLIVER CHRISTOPHER GOMEZ

A major change in leadership earlier this year did not prevent DHL Express (Malaysia) Sdn Bhd from winning the Best of the Best award for the second year running at the Kincentric Best Employers — Malaysia 2019.

Former managing director for Malaysia and Brunei Christopher Ong, who left to helm DHL Singapore, handed the reins to Julian Neo this year.

“We are very pleased to receive the highest honour again and Chris [Ong] was a big part of that. He headed the Malaysian office for more than four years and left a great operation and talent pool in place for me,” Neo tells *The Edge*.

A Malaysian, Neo had been out of the country for more than a decade, working for DHL Express Singapore. A few years ago, he put himself up for the managing director track. In February, his appointment was made official.

“Like many at DHL Express, I started in the rank and file when I joined. I was with the Malaysian operation for about eight years and then moved overseas. But really, it feels amazing to be home. I am nearer to my family and I am already familiar with at least a third of the people here at the Malaysian office,” says Neo.

But managing such a transition, especially for a significant market like Malaysia, is a daunting task. His appointment may only have been made official early this year, but the legwork for the transition started long before.

It is not uncommon in businesses for a major change of the guard to be followed by a significant shake-up in the operation, often to the detriment of the entire company. Neo was determined to not let that happen. Key to the handover, he says, is ensuring that there is a measure of stability and continuity in the business and that employers and customers alike are not unnecessarily affected by the transition.

Prior to Neo’s appointment, he and Ong began a very intense and active transition process between themselves. They discussed and exchanged ideas on a slew of workplace, operational and broader strategic issues so that he would be fully caught up by the time he took over the Malaysian operation.

But sometimes, these transitions can go awry, says Neo. “With these transitions, ego comes into play and a new boss may sometimes feel the need to undo what the previous leader had put in place, just to prove a point.

“But there was none of that with our handover. We agreed that there were many great systems already in place here. Ong and his team have done great work with DHL Express. For me, it is all about picking up where he left off and pushing key business strategies and objectives down their logical paths.”

As comprehensive as the two leaders were with their handover process, the transition also required Neo to become quickly acquainted with his new team. “At DHL Express, there is a major emphasis on being ready for the top job as soon as possible. Sure, we could have tried to do the usual practice of spending the first six or so months getting to know one another. But that would have entailed a lot of trial and error, along with the risk that my transitioning into the team may upset otherwise smooth-flowing protocols,” he says.

In essence, Neo and his new team had to condense six months’ worth of familiarisation into no more than a month, and ideally, even

less. “To drastically accelerate this process, we sought professional support from an external consultant that we have a long-standing relationship with. They came into our offices and administered what is known as the Hermann Brain Dominance Instrument (HBDI) on the management team and myself,” he says.

HBDI is a system to measure and map out thinking preferences in people. It is analogous to another more popular form of cognitive and psychological assessment, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. The format is that of a comprehensive series of questions, which the user must answer to identify his prevailing thinking style, out of four possible styles.

In fact, every time there is a major role transition in the team, the company resorts to the test, says Neo. “The process was quite tiring and mentally draining but ultimately, it helps to know each other’s thinking styles so we can more quickly adjust to each other’s work and engagement styles.”

For him, two key traits stand out when it comes to being able to effectively manage and engage with his team — trust and empowerment. He has lived by these two principles throughout his professional life. “When it comes to trust, I am always guided by an old saying: Never hire somebody you doubt, and never doubt somebody you hire,” says Neo.

He also believes that trust, much like respect, must be earned. “You do not earn trust and respect simply by walking into the office as the leader. It cannot be demanded, only earned. It must be established and demonstrated in the things we say and the way we behave,” he says.

It is easy enough to talk about, but as the new leader of a 1,300-strong Malaysian workforce, Neo takes this seriously. And nowhere is this more apparent than on social media.

“The fact is that on social media, I am known to our workforce as well as throughout our extensive network as the managing director of DHL Express in Malaysia. So, I must be responsible and measured in the things I say and do online. People need to be able to trust my good judgement and sense of proportion. That needs to be reflected in my interactions online,” he says.

“Back in the pre-social media days, your ability as a leader was judged strictly on how you managed your office and delivered on your key performance indicators (KPIs). In this day and age, however, social media has significantly widened access and more people than ever see the things I say and do.”

Far from shrinking away from social media, Neo admits he enjoys being able to interact with his people online. A self-confessed extrovert, he says he feels energised when he is able to engage with people via his social media accounts. “To be perfectly honest, I suppose the only time I really get to switch off from those interactions is when I go to sleep at night,” he quips.

## GROWING THE BUSINESS

Neo is also a firm believer in empowerment. In fact, it is in the spirit of empowering the company that he recently formed a specialist team to take its operation to the next level.

“We have put together a core team of 60 managers. The objective is to brainstorm and implement strategies that can significantly increase the revenue of our Malaysian business. Broadly, DHL Express categorises the countries in which it operates by revenue size. We are currently categorised as ‘large’. Our aspiration over the next three to five years is to become



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'very large,' he says.

It will be a herculean effort, which is why Neo wanted the core team to comprise people from across the organisation and not just senior managers. The team is unique in that it has leaders of varying levels of seniority, with highly diverse functions, genders and age groups.

"This core team does not necessarily have just senior management personnel. In fact, we have members who are multiple levels down from the senior management team. Our youngest member is 26 while the most experienced is 58," he says.

To effect the big increase in revenue, the team of 60 has identified a number of key work streams to improve on, says Neo. The first, and perhaps most obvious starting point, is the talent work stream.

"Talent lies at the heart of everything we do. It is how we are able to engage with our customers effectively. To this end, we want to continue hiring, developing and retaining the right talent," he says.

"Having said that, while we have been one of the country's best employers over the last few years, we believe there are opportunities to improve our hiring practices. One key example that the core team in charge of talent identified was our lack of presence on LinkedIn.

"Sure, people can look up DHL Express Malaysia on LinkedIn and they will probably come across my profile and that of our other employees. But to date, we lack a strong and unified brand presence on LinkedIn."

The second strategy that the company is exploring is to improve its visibility among graduate students. "We want to be a top-of-mind brand among the best talent, which is why we have organised events such as hackathons and innovation workshops and regularly engage student bodies," says Neo.

In fact, DHL Express is indirectly advancing its talent work stream via one of its flagship corporate social responsibility (CSR) programmes. But instead of reaching out to

university students, the company goes back to school, literally.

Dubbed Go-Teach, it was set up in 2015 in collaboration with Teach for Malaysia. "It is an initiative that we are especially proud of. We have touched the lives of at least 2,000 students in one way or another since. We have been helping schools by providing computers for their laboratories and laptops for their libraries, and even repainting the facilities," says Neo.

"In fact, we periodically run Microsoft Excel and PowerPoint training programmes for the students. We are very lucky to have our DHL Asia-Pacific Shared Services offices right here in Selangor. Our shared services teams come with a wealth of IT and professional services experience and they invite students to sit in on certain training courses."

#### ENGAGING MICRO-SMEs

Another very important work stream, perhaps unsurprisingly, has to do with DHL Express' customer base. Quite simply, it is one of the biggest companies in the world and it wants to significantly improve its overall engagement with micro-businesses, says Neo.

"We do a lot of one-time business with micro-SMEs in the economy. By this, I am referring to customers who have intermittent or irregular shipment requirements. Micro-SMEs tend to make up a big chunk of our business in this regard. This is a key challenge that we have identified: How do we increase engagement with customers who, for all intents and purposes, do not have regular logistics requirements?"

The first strategy was to understand this particular demographic, which DHL Express did by way of customer feedback. "Our findings indicated that this group of micro-SMEs perceive us as being far too 'corporate'. Unfortunately, they are put off by our size, believing that we tend to service only much larger customers. So, we concluded that for this particular work stream, our objective is

to become a friendlier and more approachable proposition for micro-SMEs," he says.

To this end, the core team in charge of this particular work stream has proposed a few strategies, although Neo acknowledges that this is still a work in progress. "One potential solution is to create a self-service platform that customers can visit and conduct all of their logistics business — from enquiries and payment to shipment — without ever having to be contacted by a human operator.

"We have found that for the most part, micro-SMEs do not want to be bothered by account managers, they are quite happy to have a self-service option. If they have a problem, they just want to deal with an online query bot."

This could be a highly lucrative business stream for DHL Express. "This class of customer (micro-SMEs and general single-use customers) make up roughly 20% of our overall business. This is a significant number, particularly when you consider that about 90% of the Malaysian economy consists of small businesses. That is a very high ceiling for us to aim for," he says.

Naturally, the KPIs for increasing the company's micro-SME business have been set. According to Neo, it has been tasked to increase its micro-SME business by up to 20% by next year. However, he is not the one who sets the target.

"This target was set by the core team members in charge of advancing the second work stream. I did not force the KPIs on them at all. They conducted their own series of studies and found that a 15% to 20% target was realistic," he says.

"At the end of the day, that is the kind of employee empowerment that we want to drive in the company. Sure, I can throw them a target and force them to hit it, and they may actually be successful. But they voluntarily took up the challenge after conducting the research and found a clear market opportunity there, and I think that showed great initiative." ■