



FROM ASIA TO THE WORLD

Leaving the security of a 9-to-5 job and striking out on his own proved to be the right decision for **WONG SING LAM**, Managing Director, Kewill-IPACS. He tells his story to Bob Gill.

It was 25 years ago when Wong Sing Lam spotted an opportunity to supply IT solutions to the manually-driven world of freight forwarding. From Singapore, he successfully took the company, IPACS e-Solutions, across Asia. In 2007, IPACS e-Solutions became a wholly owned subsidiary of supply chain software specialists Kewill, creating a company with global reach. Of Kewill's 600 employees, some 100 are based in Asia, and the company has close to 800 customers in the region.

Q: How did you get started in this business?

A: Back in the early 1980s, I was working for Singapore Airlines' (SIA) management services division where I was involved in developing software applications to link cargo agents to the airline reservation system. Talking to the cargo agents, I realized that there was a big opportunity in automating the various information processes like shipment booking, billing, etc, which were all being done manually, and that spurred me leave the security of SIA and set up my own company – IPACS.

The first solutions were developed and deployed for Singapore freight

and logistics customers in 1985, and our installed base has increased significantly in tandem with greater IT sophistication and awareness on the part of the users. But I also knew quite early on that the Singapore market would be limited in size and that's why by the end of the '80s I had already expanded overseas – to Greater China.

Q: Why the Kewill acquisition?

A: In 2006, Kewill approached me with a proposal to acquire IPACS e-Solutions. We saw a complementary fit between Kewill's logistics software offerings like TMS WMS, and our IPACS freight management system. Partnering would give Kewill immediate access to the Asia market, where it was not previously present, and IPACS the opportunity to leverage on the financial muscle and US and European strength of Kewill.

The acquisition was completed in 2007, with IPACS essentially becoming the Asia division of Kewill. We have around 100 people in the region, with offices in Singapore, Hong Kong and Shanghai. The freight management product is now rebranded as Kewill Forwarding and is now a module of the Kewill Global Trade Management and Logistics solution.

Although we are still using the Kewill-IPACS name in Asia for brand recognition reasons, the plan is revert to "Kewill" early next year. Note that there are other (non-logistics-related) businesses that continue under the IPACS brand and do not form part of the acquisition.

Q: How have things changed in the industry over the years?

A: There have been tremendous changes. For example, you have so many parties involved now – beyond just shipper, carrier, consignee – multiple shippers, multiple handling agents, plus different modes of transportation and products with different lead times.

More recently, there have been the trends of globalization, outsourcing to the 3PLs, plus increasing merger and acquisition (M&A) activity within the industry,

The available technology has of course gone through a revolution; when I started, there were not even any PCs! We have seen major IT developments, like local area networks, relational databases, service oriented architecture, and, of course, the internet, which greatly lowers the access cost for users of our applications which are all web-enabled.

Q: What about customers' expectations?

A: Companies expect their freight and logistics providers to not only



[Kewill software aims to facilitate global trade processes.]

provide them with entire visibility of their supply chain but also help them with forecasting, so that they can plan raw materials purchases for feeding the production line and then transport the finished product at the right time, right place, and at minimum cost.

So that means that our customers – the forwarders and the 3PLs – expect us to develop solutions that can provide the visibility as shipments move between locations and are handled by multiple parties. And because our customers increasingly operate globally, we must design systems that not only cater for the HQ requirement but for all branches worldwide.

Q: How would you define your competitive edge in the market?

A: We build our solutions using the latest state-of-the-art technology and our application functionality has evolved to meet customers' needs – given the deep domain knowledge we have built up over the years and the feedback from customers, which we incorporate into future product releases.

Q: So could you give some details of such beneficial features in the Kewill Forwarding product?

A: Well, for one, we have developed a very powerful workflow engine that makes it easy for companies to configure to meet their needs, especially in the multinational, non-homogeneous environment of Asia where you can have different workflows in Singapore, Malaysia, China, etc. So instead of asking Kewill to make modifications, which could involve many man-months and thousands of dollars, the user can configure and deploy himself for

the different country operations and languages.

Event management is another key feature, especially given the complexity of today's shipment cycles. If goods are stuck somewhere and you only know about it three hours later then that is really too late. So with event management, we can build in the expected sequence of events and trigger alerts upon discrepancies. It also allows for setting up of service levels to measure the performance of the 3PL provider.

Q: You made a foray into China very early on, and you have been successful there. Any tips you can share?

A: What is very important is to really make an effort to understand the local culture, the way of doing business, and to learn and then fulfill their expectations. When you do get that contract in your hand, your ability to deliver comes down to how you manage your people in China.

I was able to train local professionals to believe in the company vision, in the way of doing things, and educate them on "integrity", which is the most important element we need to pay attention to in order to grow and excel; if we compromise in this area, anything can happen.

We now have a strong management team in China that believe in that philosophy. Many of them have been with me for a long time and we work very closely. I am quite happy with what we have achieved in China.

Q: What qualities do you look for when hiring staff?

A: It can vary depending on the

nature of the job role. For a sales position you should be outspoken, aggressive, hungry for business. For product development you should have the passion and dedication to build a product that we can all be proud of. But irrespective of function, teamwork and working attitude is very important. You may be smart and intelligent but if you are not a team player with good working attitude then that is going to be problem.

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Q: What keeps you motivated and excited in this job?

A: I love it! I had a pretty secure job when I was with SIA, but just serving one internal customer was just not challenging enough; I thought I could do more if I did something on my own. It was a risk of course, but with a strong technical background and the ability to formulate business models, I thought I could succeed.

When you run a business it's never ending; you may be successful today but what about if the economy turns bad? How do you stop the storm from hitting your organization? A strong company should do well and expand when times are good, and be able to sustain through a downturn.

Q: Your thoughts about the future?

A: The outlook is promising. Through the new company we have a much wider market, able to sell products to the US and Europe in a way that we could not before. And the product integration with Kewill allows us to offer a wider range of solutions, such as warehouse and transportation management, to customers in Asia.

We are currently discussing some large projects with some big potential clients. Winning this business – and I believe we have a good chance – will allow us to enhance the Kewill brand name even further in Asia. ■