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Grand designs

Ashvinkumar Kantilal, Group CEO of ONG&ONG Pte Ltd, has the future mapped out for one of Singapore's leading design companies.

IMAGES YEW KWANG

“**Y**ou have to be very clear in the way you want your company to advance, and this vision has to be forward gazing — 10 to 15 years down the road. Rather than ask yourself what do you want to do this year and then, come end of the year, what do you want to do to the following year, you need to have a bigger game plan, a long-term game plan, one that changes along with the way the market dynamics shift.”

Such foresight from the Group CEO of Singapore-based design firm ONG&ONG should come as no surprise. In the role for less than a year, Ashvinkumar Kantilal has already identified his possible successors, in line with the company's strict five-year executive tenure that he had significant influence in implementing. “At ONG&ONG, we have a leadership renewal process,” he says. “If we didn't have that in place, the old boys would keep on changing chairs and the young leaders would never have the chance to come to the fore.”

The handover has already started. “I need to groom them now, not when I step down. I need to introduce them to my clients, introduce them to new ideas and our corporate values.”

Ashvinkumar has had his own future sketched out from an early age. His career in architecture was shaped by early mornings spent tagging along with his >>



Name Ashvinkumar Kantilal
Company ONG&ONG Pte Ltd
Position Group CEO
HQ Singapore, Singapore

father on his Saturday commute to work along the Singapore River. "This was in the late 60s and I was about 7 years old," he says. "I asked my father one day, 'What do you call the people who build buildings?' because I was quite fascinated by the riverscape. He told me it was architects. I remember thinking it would be nice if I could be an architect when I grew up. That is how it started."

Fortunately, architecture came naturally to him. "I didn't spend time reading up on architecture or going and visiting buildings," he admits. After studying the discipline at the National University of Singapore, he worked in the industry for more than 20 years before joining ONG&ONG in 2010 as Group COO.

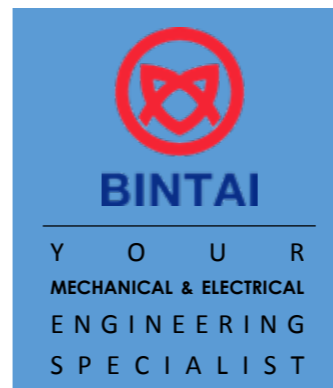
"It has been a great journey so far, although I think, going forward, it is going to be an even greater journey," he enthuses.

He came onboard with a mandate to grow the company, a task he undertook with the Chairman and Group Managing Director. "That is exactly what we did. From a company with a staff of about 400 and three offices outside Singapore, today we have a staff of nearly 800 and representation in 13 cities, both in Singapore and across the region."

A design company with impeccable pedigree, ONG&ONG was established in 1972 by Ong Teng Cheong and his wife, Ong Siew May. Childhood sweethearts, both studied architecture in Australia at the University of Adelaide. After founding their eponymous firm, Ong Teng Cheong turned to the political arena. In 1993, he was elected President of Singapore, an office he held for one term until 1999. His son, Ong Tze Boon, a trained architect, found himself elevated >>



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Compass One
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Resorts World Sentosa
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into a leadership role at the age of 28, and today he is ONG&ONG's Group Executive Chairman.

From its beginnings as a traditional architectural firm, the company has diversified over the past two decades and today markets itself as a multidisciplinary practice capable of undertaking a variety of design projects.

"I think ONG&ONG was one of the pioneers of this multidisciplinary approach," says Ashvinkumar. "Now there are a lot of multidisciplinary practitioners in Singapore, but back in the early 2000s, ONG&ONG was the first to take a leap of faith to diversify the business."

The results are tangible. By offering integrated solutions across the

"If you don't have the right people to help you along on the journey, it is going to be an unsuccessful venture." – Ashvinkumar Kantilal

spectrum of design, engineering and management, the company is witnessing year-on-year growth. "We have just set up an office in Manila, and last year we opened up our first Bangkok office," he says.

He sees Singapore as a "mere stepping stone for us to spread our wings", and growing the business outside of the republic's borders is one of his primary directives. Although the bulk of the firm's clients still come from within Singapore, the company is striving to adjust this balance. "By 2018, we plan to be at least 50 per cent overseas in terms of business volume."

Ashvinkumar knows that achieving this objective will not be easy. "The whole world is in a state of flux, with China slowing down, India not moving as fast as everybody had hoped, and Europe currently in the midst of a refugee crisis. I think the next couple of years are going to be very challenging." Yet he firmly believes that "those who come out of the next two to three years will be stronger than they were before".

He is acutely aware of the importance of placing the right people in the right positions to ensure ONG&ONG remains structurally sound during his tenure and beyond. His leadership philosophy >>

BUILDING A DYNAMIC FUTURE WITH PROVEN CAPABILITIES



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reflects this. "I am very people-oriented, because I believe that you need to invest in people first before you even consider embarking on any other major game plan. If you don't have the right people to help you along on the journey, it is going to be an unsuccessful venture," he says.

Believing that success is 1 per cent inspiration and 99 per cent alignment, he says, "You can have a great idea, but you need everybody to buy into the idea and help contribute towards it to make it work."

It is a philosophy that sits well with the company's thinking. "The culture within ONG&ONG is to grow and harness the best out of the employees that we have," Ashvinkumar explains. "In a Singaporean context, we don't have any resources other than the human capital, and if you don't put emphasis on the people, then you are as good as gone." Understandably, mentoring is one of his priorities as a leader.

In today's competitive market, Ashvinkumar faces constant pressure to ensure the company remains at the forefront of its field. "We have to make sure we are ahead of the pack. If you are part of the pack, then the competition gets tougher, but if you are one or two steps ahead of the pack, then it's easier to differentiate yourself from the competition."

Empowering his employees to play to their strengths is part of his strategy. "When you empower people, it actually levels out the dynamics within the company. It urges us to learn more because, when you promote a situation of leaders and followers, people will only do what they are told to do, and after a while it doesn't work that well."

Rather unusually for a business in the region, ONG&ONG operates as a



meritocracy. "We have got some very talented young people who are coming to the forefront, taking the lead and becoming more prominent within the industry."

While he acknowledges the value in seniority, he is also a firm believer in incubating young talent. "If you see somebody who is young and uncomfortable, it is important to encourage them and make them feel that they are doing a great job, rather than being intimidated by their more senior colleagues."

As Group CEO, Ashvinkumar considers it his responsibility to showcase the company's talent pool. ONG&ONG's innovative leadership renewal process is the most visible embodiment of this.

The company's mission statement is to be 'Designers of Our Age', and Ashvinkumar attributes the firm's continuing success to its proven capacity to adapt to a changing market. "Our clients have welcomed our multidisciplinary philosophy and approach," he says.

In the years since he graduated from university, Ashvinkumar has witnessed his industry transform, especially in terms of how technology has revolutionised the field. "Within the last 28 years, the industry has moved so fast and so furious. When I started out, we were using our sketching pens and drafting pencils," he recalls. "Today, if you are not design-attuned and technology-savvy, there is a very high chance that you will be out of a position or out of a job. Dare I say it, you will probably become quite a museum piece."

Along with his talented and creative team, Ashvinkumar places much value on his supplier network. Preferring to refer to them as "strategic partners", he considers each contractor or consultant to hold equal value in the overall production chain. "Often we forget that the last worker at the construction site helped you lay the bricks or put up the finishes on the walls."

He makes a point of walking around the firm's construction sites to acknowledge each individual's important role.

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"I think it changes the way you work with people and how to get the best out of them. When you work with people, you also have to make sure that you appreciate the contribution that they bring to the table," he says.

Returning to his grand designs for the future, Ashvinkumar lets on that ONG&ONG is drawing up the blueprint for its most ambitious project to date.

"We have a bigger game plan," he acknowledges. "We want to prepare ourselves for a public listing." Admittedly that a public float demands a change of mindset, he has started to guide

ONG&ONG away from its more traditional, familial mentality. The company is already conducting business as if it were listed. "In the way we manage the company, the people, our clients and business associates, we are very transparent and open with them."

It is a rare person who is able to turn his passion into a career, let alone discover what it is at such a tender age. "What I love most about my job is that it is actually my passion," says Ashvinkumar. His involvement with a number of committees outside of the office enables him to share his industry

insights and experiences with others. "I don't want to go down in history as being nobody, nor do I want to brag about it." Instead, he would prefer to be remembered for the good he has done, "For bringing a positive experience to somebody's life at one time or another".

No doubt he hopes this includes the next generation of architects and designers, boys and girls who are now being inspired as they contemplate the bustling skyline of Singapore. ■

"ONG&ONG works well with all its partners at every level and provides ample growth opportunities. The team, led by the CEO, Ashvinkumar Kantilal, continually motivates us to achieve construction excellence." – AC Tan, Director, LCE Engineering Pte Ltd

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