

UOB-SMU

Asian Enterprise Institute



Consistent High Standards: [Smiling Star International Pte Ltd](#)

Smiling Star International Pte Ltd is a leading player in the early childhood education industry. Founded in 2001 as a neighbourhood playgroup by Jimmy New, *PBM*, it has since carved a niche for itself as a one-stop education service provider catering to children aged 18 months to 12 years. Within its portfolio are childcare centres, playgroups, kindergartens, student care centres, and tuition and enrichment centres, numbering around 30 in total.

Smiling Star International's plethora of services spans enrichment and education courses, as well as skills development including interpersonal and communication skills, and good behavior. Phonics, Hanyu Pinyin, Speedy Chinese Character Recognition, and Chinese tuition also form part of its diverse service offerings.

Playing "catch up"

For business owners, seeing their business flourish is a dream come true. But for some companies, particularly family-owned businesses and SMEs, the quick pace of growth can take them by surprise, and they find themselves unable to cope with the sudden surge in demand. Floundering in the face of diverse aspects of operations all of which seem to require their personal and immediate attention, resources become stretched. Despite their best efforts, oftentimes, the chasm between the requisite capabilities to manage a business and a larger, multi-faceted corporation is just too big.

While some companies hire more and qualified people to fill the gaps, others turn to consultants to review their internal processes to enhance workflow efficiency, and pave the way for further expansion, or do both.

Globally, the International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO), the world's largest developer of voluntary International Standards, is probably the most well-known provider of specifications for products, services and good practice. With the aim to promote efficiency and effectiveness through best practices, it requires companies to develop, implement and document their ISO-certified processes. Although it is internationally-recognised, getting certified – and remaining certified – may be deemed too tedious and expensive for some SMEs. As an alternative, some SMEs turn to business process management (BPM) consultants to help them review their internal procedures, tighten the processes and smoothen the workflow with the aim to boost efficiency, sustainability and profitability.

In reality all companies already possess some form of BPM, which is a systematic approach to doing things. For example, when a staff member applies for leave, there is a process which guides him on the who, what, when, where and how to complete the leave application. He may need to fill in a specific form, get his supervisor's endorsement and then send it to a specified person in the human resource department. In some organisations, all leave applications must be submitted before a specified cut-off date. This established process is an example of a systematic or BPM approach.

BPM makes an organisation's workflow more effective and efficient. A key advantage is that it provides guidance on a process so that a staff member can concentrate on his tasks, and knows exactly what to do under different circumstances. This removes the need for guesswork, minimises delays, and reduces human error and miscommunication. BPM also ensures delivery consistency, which is important as a company grows.

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Large and effective organisations tend to be stronger in BPM than smaller firms. Their horizontal BPM framework promotes consistency across the whole infrastructure of the organisation, while the vertical framework provides the standard operating procedures (SOP) for specific job functions. Imagine a three-dimensional spider web of interconnected lines – there is precision and order, and all the lines converge; this is how a BPM framework would look.

It's the same... everywhere

An avid supporter of home-grown women's shoes, bags and accessories brand Charles & Keith was overheard saying, "Blindfold me, and I can still find my way to a Charles & Keith store in any country" – because the distinctive Charles & Keith scent will guide her. Remove her blindfold, and she can discern the store from its lighting, layout and decor. Clearly, brands which have a strong identity appeal to customers' different senses including sight and smell, and garner immediate customer recognition even in the absence of a tell-tale logo.

Hotel brands are renowned for their delivery of consistent brand experiences. A guest staying at a St Regis hotel anywhere in the world, for example, can always expect bespoke, uncompromising service and the finest amenities from exquisite linens to delicate, beautifully-crafted china teacups. A strong brand that is synonymous with consistent standards helps to retain customer loyalty, and enjoys benefits throughout the value chain. Customers know what they are paying for, and suppliers are happy to be associated with the brand.

The term "military precision" calls to mind stringent processes which work without a glitch. SMEs which have yet to put in proper SOPs may want to draw inspiration from Singapore's annual National Day Parade (NDP). Every NDP is a "massive exercise involving extensive coordination and cooperation among numerous organisations and people, who put in a great amount of time, effort and sacrifice, including many burnt weekends to prepare for the parade," acknowledged Singapore President Tony Tan Keng Yam at the tea reception for NDP 2013 organisers and participants last August. Using SOPs that have undergone many rounds of reviews and refinements, the NDP is an extravaganza that thrills citizens and non-citizens alike. And yes, the event proceeds with military precision – in large part due to the rigorous SOPs.

There is no need for SMEs to start on a grand scale to put in place horizontal and vertical BPM frameworks. Instead, start with a few vertical frameworks in "silo" format such that new staff, or someone stepping into a project or task midway, knows immediately what to do as the process is "standardised" across similar functions, and has clear and proper documentation. From a company's perspective, BPM simplifies the training of new staff; for existing staff, it provides guidance as they go about their tasks or encounter new experiences, thus empowering them. Arguably, it is also easier to replicate a tried-and-tested framework in a new start-up, with modification to suit the environment where necessary, than to initiate a new framework from scratch. Established frameworks would prove invaluable during business expansion.

Merit in military precision

When Mr New approached the UOB-SMU Asian Enterprise Institute (AEI) to explore its flagship Consulting Programme, his aim was to "develop an SOP manual and review some of our work processes. All our expectations were met," he said. Calling the recommendations "useful", he thanked the consulting team for providing a "system that our teachers can follow".

For the three student-consultants, the project gave them the opportunity to apply some of their textbook knowledge to a real-life situation. Although there were initial challenges as the project was operations-focused and operations was not a major course component, the team overcame the hurdle through additional research, a lot of brainstorming and guidance from Project Advisor Terence Tan. The short project timeline, due in part to their examinations, also caused a minor glitch. "We worked doubly hard to churn out the documents required, with speed and quality," explained a student-consultant.

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The team acknowledged the role played by their Advisor. Not only did he help them keep to the deadlines, he “kept our work up to standard by running through every document before it was presented to the SME... He never pushed (his ideas) and the team was allowed space to consider and adapt his ideas or suggestions,” said another student-consultant. They agreed that Mr Tan has done a “wonderful job in making this project a great learning experience”.

On his part, Mr Tan found the team to be “very good and very professional!” Despite the tight 12-week timeline, “the team worked very hard, and demonstrated great determination with high resilience”. They also collaborated effectively among themselves, with “very effective time management”.

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