

UOB-SMU Entrepreneurship Alliance Centre



iwa Design: Good design starts from within

Quarterly job rotations. Orientation for new hires that lasts from a day to weeks or even months. A 30-minute briefing by your immediate supervisor.

A company handbook given by the HR department with the instruction, “Read it before you start work.” From welcoming new staff to defining their job scopes and responsibilities, there are as many different approaches as there are organisations. And even within organisations, some structures are more flexible than they should be, sometimes varying according to the whim of the incumbent supervisors. But conventional wisdom dictates that a sustainable organisation should have a proper organisational chart with well-defined roles and responsibilities if it is to stay true to its vision and mission, and achieve sustainable growth.

Established in 1986, Singapore-based company iwa Design has since also extended its footprint beyond Singapore’s shores to include Australia, China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mauritius, New Zealand, Philippines, South Africa, Thailand, and Vietnam. The company’s suite of professional interior services includes feasibility studies, space planning, design concepts, technical renderings, project management and turnkey solutions.

Its sterling track record involves work for corporate offices, retail boutiques, mega stores, showrooms, and luxury brands for clients across diverse industries spanning automotive, audio & electronics, banking, beauty & spa, cosmetics & fragrances, fashion, furniture & home furnishings, health & lifestyle, jewellery & timepieces, and luxury lifestyle.

Supported by dedicated teams comprising multi-disciplinary professionals, iwa Design has earned reputation, trust and confidence from existing clients even as it services a growing clientele across the region. The company is committed to raising the bar on its professional services delivery, which is why it is looking at optimising its work flow through an examination of its existing organisational structure.

But that’s not my job!

Due to the lean human resource (HR) structure among the smaller SMEs, it is not uncommon for staff to wear multiple hats. This is especially apparent among family-run organisations where the balance of power is convergent on the founder and his/her immediate family members, although other SMEs may also face similar issues.

A market research done by the UOB-SMU Entrepreneurship Alliance Centre surfaced a host of problems arising from having a cluttered organisational structure. Productivity and staff retention rates are compromised, which directly impact a company’s growth plans. For example, a critical task may remain undone thus causing a delay in overall project delivery because no one knows whose job it is; or the person responsible for it may be bogged down by too many other duties to ensure timely completion of this task.

A flat hierarchy, a feature of many SMEs, is often characterised by multiple reporting lines comprising direct and indirect reports to various bosses. These “solid” or “dotted” lines may span division, department, function or other categories, and where there is no clear job description, staff members can be confused by their specific responsibilities, or worse, be exploited with job overload. It is impossible to

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work towards fulfilling their key performance indicators (KPIs) if staff do not know what these KPIs are, or what their weightage in the overall assessment scheme is. Also, without clear job descriptions, who is responsible when things go wrong? All these uncertainties can lead to confusion, low staff morale and high turnover, which ultimately result in less-than-optimal productivity.

Re-designing the organisation

A company may have a beautifully-created organisational chart... but only on paper. SMEs often have an informal hierarchy or social networks that over-ride the “official” arrangement. Ideally, the formal and informal company structure should coincide so there is no confusion in role, responsibility and accountability. This was one of the recommendations from the student-consultants who worked with iwa Design under the SME Consulting Programme managed by UOB-SMU Entrepreneurship Alliance.

The company had engaged the SMU team “to check out some industry HR practices” to see if its current system is “appropriate” in supporting its long-term expansion plans. Citing the perennial problem of talent retention, the project “helped us to see some clear directions and systems which were used and implemented by other companies,” said Ms Dorothy Lim, Director, Account Servicing, iwa Design. “The team also did a lot of research and highlighted our strong and weak points.” Calling the recommendations “useful”, Ms Lim confirmed that the company was able to adopt the proposed induction programme “immediately”.

Other recommendations, such as a revamped organisational chart, will be reviewed and customised if they are to be implemented in future. The 12-week project timeline was a constraint as the student consultants did not have sufficient time to better research and understand the company culture. The time constraint and the team’s lack of practical experience showed, as the recommendations were deemed to be less practical than what the client had hoped for. Still, Ms Lim said that the programme “did meet some of our expectations”.

The magic of the pyramid

The student-consultants were happy for the opportunity to “translate our academic knowledge into real-world actionable plans” and add value to the client’s organisation through their research, review and recommendations. For example, the proposed organisational chart for iwa Design was designed to improve role clarity and efficiency, while supporting the organisation’s strategic expansion plans. Taking into account the wide-ranging specialty offerings provided by the client and the need for efficient work flow to deliver high standards and boost the bottomline, the SMU team built the chart from the individual through to the functional and divisional levels.

There were some challenges, such as “changing demands as well as conflicting information from the SME”, but the SMU team was able to overcome the hurdles. The information culled from the interviews and team research provided useful feedback not only for the SMU team in making its recommendations, but also to the client as they could hear from the staff, albeit anonymously and indirectly.

Project Adviser Ms Koh Mui Cheng complimented the student-consultants on their “great sense of responsibility and commitment to the project”. Using coaching as the primary approach in her role as adviser, she guided them through questioning, research methodologies, exploration of new possibilities, feedback and reality check, critical analysis and solution-based thinking to produce the set of outcomes which would benefit the SME. She found the team to be very receptive to ideas; they also worked well with each other and managed to leverage on each other’s strengths to “achieve the common goal”.

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