

Glenda Chang looks at the world differently from many others. For the 40-year-old, problems and challenges are opportunities to find solutions, and it was with this thinking and attitude that she embarked on two new ventures over the last two years.

Capitalising on technology and her experience as an engineer, she launched a fully automated laundromat and a portable disinfection machine. These are not just novel ideas but are also relevant given the heightened health and safety awareness today.

“Entrepreneurs have a different mindset in that, where others may sit on a problem, get depressed and struggle to find a solution, entrepreneurs think outside the box for that solution. They have an appetite for risk and the courage, along with determination and passion, to make it work,” she says.

“I’ve had this entrepreneurial mindset since I was a girl because I’ve always wanted to do something to improve the way things are done. I like solving complex problems and developing products that can help or cater to the needs of users.”

Although she nurtured that spirit from a young age, it was not until much later that Chang got to flex those entrepreneurial muscles.

A Petroliam Nasional Bhd (Petronas) scholar, she was one of only six women in her petroleum engineering course at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. Her first job was as a reservoir engineer at Schlumberger,

Thriving on challenges

It is tough to sustain a business during a global pandemic, much less start one. Serial entrepreneur Glenda Chang launched two.

where she was involved in reservoir measurement and interpretation for exploration and drilling wells in Malaysia, Brunei and the Philippines. In 2006, she was promoted to senior reservoir engineer and was posted to Oman on a three-year assignment. She found the time then to also study for a Master of Science in Petroleum Engineering from Heriot-Watt University in the UK.

Upon her return to Malaysia in 2009, she joined Carigali-Hess as a reservoir engineer before moving to Roc Oil Malaysia in 2012. In 2014, she joined Vestigo Petroleum, a subsidiary of Petronas that focused on marginal fields, as an independent consultant. She left a couple of years later to pursue a global Master of Business Administration course, during which she spent short stints in Australia, Mumbai, Dubai and Singapore. “The idea was to get a feel of what it’s like to do business in these different places,” says Chang.

In 2016, she finally realised her childhood ambition of having her own business. The Strallex Group — the name is coined from the words strategic, alliance and excellence — was formed to venture into strategic, niche areas, through partnerships and with a long-term view to excel and grow. Her first venture was in oil and gas (O&G) consulting. “It was basically for subsurface consulting. I got the idea of bringing in cost-effective technology because, in order to develop a new field, we need technology and cost-effective equipment to bring the oil out of the ground,” she explains.

Chang looked to the east, China in particular, for these solutions. The venture secured some contracts, but it was tough going.

Undeterred, and not wanting to put all of her eggs in one basket, she ventured into property development when the opportunity arose to develop a small parcel of land on Jalan Datuk Keramat in the Kuala Lumpur city centre. The land posed a challenge as it was only 15,000 sq ft and oddly shaped. Where others might

PATRICK GOH/THE EDGE



have thrown in the towel, Chang and her team faced the project head on.

“In the city centre, it’s impossible to get a big parcel of land, and there is demand for properties in city centre locations. So, for us, it was a question of how to make a pocket development work. It’s the kind of problem I used to face when I was a reservoir engineer, grappling with how to make small fields work,” she says.

“As is the case in the O&G sector, the solutions lie with technology. It means having to think outside the box because you cannot rely on the conventional mindset here. You cannot copy and paste a development that sits on a two- to three-acre parcel on this piece of land.”

The architects too were pushed to be innovative. “We needed fit-for-purpose equipment, we had to be creative and at the same time ensure that the pricing will not deter buyers,” Chang says of the project, which is slated for launch at the end of this year.

Serial entrepreneur

Even as the property project was on the drawing board, Chang and her brother Dominique (who is also her business partner) stumbled on another business idea. Both were regular users of coin-operated laundry services, and it was during one of their laundry runs that the siblings reckoned the operations could be improved upon. “We would see the laundry shop owners coming in daily to collect the coins, and we thought there had to be a way to streamline the process.”

This was how, Strallex’s fully automated laundromat, called LaundreMart, was born. “We developed our own prepaid card and our own washing machine and dryer dubbed iLaundrix. The store also has a vending machine, so customers can buy drinks while they wait for their clothes to be washed, and keyless lockers for customers to store their things — all these accessed with the prepaid card.

SURVIVAL TIPS FOR ENTREPRENEURS



★ Situations can change quickly, so you need to be agile and dynamic.

★ For many people, the priority is starting the business; they hope that once it’s up and running, success will come quickly. But every business needs time, so you have to continue to have that determination and belief.

★ Always think outside the box to grab opportunities. Swim out of the red ocean into the blue ocean to find your niche.



“With the card, which they can purchase and re-load at a kiosk in the store, customers only need to tap on the washing machine and select the desired programme. Everything is automated, including the dispensing of laundry detergent,” she elaborates. The streamlined process is hassle-free for business owners and is completely contactless.

Unveiled last December, the maiden LaundreMart is located at Southgate Commercial Centre in Jalan Tun Razak, KL, and was the culmination of months of tinkering. “We designed and built the process and equipment from scratch ... It was not easy because we had to fix design flaws and continuously improve the user interface. The Covid-19 pandemic also accelerated our efforts because we knew that people wanted a more contactless operation,” she says.

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swimin12.com's virtual classes get attention from students around the world

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When he started teaching swimming skills to adults 12 years ago, he decided that his students should learn basic swimming skills in the shortest time possible. This approach was quickly chastised as it is often financially advantageous for the coach if a student does not progress quickly. The longer they take to learn, the more the swim school makes.

Then an outsider to the swim coaching industry, Yeap was quick to realise that most swim schools prefer to teach young, competitive potential-award-winning swimmers. Little attention is given to adult students or those who only want to learn the basics.

He found this to be an untapped niche market with low competition and high demand, compelling him to leave a high-paying job with IBM Malaysia to strike out on his own. Soon, his days and nights were completely booked, and residents of the condominium where he taught complained that there were too many students using their communal pool.

"You need a different mindset to teach swimming skills to adults, especially to those with a deep-rooted fear of water. It can be a very long process. You must do a lot of research on each student and this is rare in the swim industry if that student isn't a competitive swimmer," says Yeap.

"To teach students who have a fear of water or other issues, you need to understand their personality and concerns. Do you know what is holding them back? Can you change your coaching style and content to cater for this student?"

He founded swimin12.com on the premise that anyone should be able to swim in 12 hours. "The duration of 12 hours is a general target. Some students take longer, some are faster. Basically, we want our students to learn as fast as they are comfortable with. Once they have the basics, they can choose to stop coming to us or to stretch their ability by swimming a longer distance or learning a different stroke," he says.

Besides students who are looking to improve their swim technique, Yeap also caters for adults with aquaphobia or other psychological issues that prevent them from learning how to swim, much less be comfortable underwater.

These students prompted him to design and offer a "swim-guarantee" programme, where for a fixed fee, students can take as long as they need to learn how to swim.

At the start, this programme raised eyebrows in the industry, as there may be aspiring swimmers who

take years to be comfortable in the water, much less swim. Nevertheless, Yeap was willing to offer this guarantee and quickly found it to be a win-win proposition for students and his swim school.

When the pandemic hit last year, Yeap applied the same thinking-out-of-the-box approach to generate new ways of earning revenue during lockdown. His coaches developed the online curriculum for swim science and their exercise classes in a short span of 10 days and their virtual classes quickly garnered young students from around the world.

He also used this time to build a curriculum for his future swim coach academy. This is part of his plan to build a pool of swim coaches who are vested in their students' learning to the best of their abilities in the shortest possible time.

As the pandemic showed no signs of abating, Yeap decided that his swim coaches and lifeguards should learn new skills and paid for their courses. Some picked up video editing and photography, skills they are now putting to use to further develop his swim school.

During the prolonged lockdown this year, Yeap stopped taking a cut from the online classes offered by swimin12.com. Now, profits made from these classes go directly to his coaches.

"This is the least I can do. The pandemic turned the sports world upside down and our lives inside out. There is a concern in the industry that so much damage has been done that retaining a sense of normalcy afterwards is almost impossible. But based on our experience in 2020, I believe the swimming industry will boom post-pandemic," he says.

Swimmers flocked back to the pool when restrictions were lifted after the first MCO, although Yeap had to reduce the duration they could stay in the pool to an hour. Swimmers also had to pre-book their swim time so swimin12.com could limit the number of people in the pool.

"I would like to offer more online services. One of my coaches has started teaching virtual fitness classes for anyone, even those who are not interested in swimming. Like everyone else, I hope the pandemic will end soon," says Yeap.

"When it does, the swim industry should move away from the pre-pandemic belief that one school can only grow at the expense of another. This is not the case. A rising tide lifts all boats. It will continue to be difficult for all of us if there isn't a clear end to the health pandemic. To move forward, we can work together to change and improve what we offer." ■

DisMac launched to meet market demand

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LaundreMart's fresh and vibrant concept also appealed to Petronas Dagangan; come year end, two outlets will be opened at Petronas stations. "Petronas was looking at ways to draw traffic to their petrol stations, and with LaundreMart, people can drive in, fuel up, do a quick 15-minute wash and grab a bite at the Kedai Mesra."

Opportunity knocks

It was while Chang and her team were working on their various businesses that she embarked on her third entrepreneurial venture — one that she is especially proud of. This too was born out of a challenge.

"When the pandemic began last year, it got me thinking about the cost of disinfection, especially for small businesses. I knew that it was costly to contract a third party to carry out disinfection, what more if regular disinfection was required. So, I looked at the existing disinfection technology, the time required for the disinfection process, the burden on the personnel carrying out the disinfection as well as their exposure to the chemicals," she says.

This led Chang and her team to design and build a portable disinfection machine. Having completed the prototype in April last year, they set about improving it over the next few months before finally testing it in the field. With this machine, called DisMac, one need only fill the tank with disinfectant, set the timer, leave the room and let the machine do its work. DisMac caters to spaces between 500 and 3,000 sq ft and the disinfection process takes about 15 minutes to an hour.

"It's innovative because with this machine, it eliminates the need to wipe down the surfaces after disinfection. The disinfectant, which was developed by our own chemist, is sprayed as a fine mist, and it has been lab tested as well as tested for corrosion," she says of the rigours DisMac has been put through. Chang adds that the product has also been tested by Sirim and been endorsed by the Ministry of Health for use at its healthcare facilities.

Since its launch last July, DisMac has received encouraging responses from the market, including sanitisation providers, O&G-related companies, manufacturing companies, clinics and hospitals. "We've made good progress and have deployed DisMac at AirAsia's facilities in Kota Kinabalu, Johor, Penang and KL, and plans are underway to expand our services to their facilities in Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines."

Western Digital, Petronas and other O&G services companies are among its clients.

The biggest thumbs-up for DisMac came from the Ministry of Health, which approved its use at Sabah hospitals, says Chang. She discloses that Strallex donated five disinfection machines for the fight against Covid-19 in the state last year.

'Brilliant idea, crazy Glenda'

With so much on her plate, Chang says staying organised is key. "Each day, I come up with a list of priorities for the day, what needs my attention and review," she explains. This is a habit formed from her years in the O&G industry, she adds. "It has been my practice to not have work pile up, and I feel that it is by being organised and systematic that I'm able to juggle the three businesses."

Her accomplishments in a short span of time have given Chang a sense of satisfaction and the encouragement to keep going. "It has been a tough journey. Whenever I come up with something, people always say, 'That's a brilliant idea, crazy Glenda'. The fact that I've created something that people appreciate, that keeps me going."

The team's enthusiasm is a big plus too. "It gives me a lot of satisfaction knowing that I am creating jobs and training new engineers to be creative and innovative," she says.

Chang hopes to continue growing the businesses. With LaundreMart, she is keen to franchise the business or work with partners to expand. She believes there is tremendous potential for DisMac to be deployed in schools, tuition centres, mosques and the tourism industry, to name a few.

"I hope to grow the distribution of DisMac to Indonesia and the Philippines, and for the group to expand into more cutting-edge technological solutions. We also want to forge partnerships to leverage our partners' knowledge and expertise, and grow together." — By Sreerema Banoo ■