





# Playing the hand you're dealt with

**ANDY SOO** is someone who sees the glass as being half full rather than half empty and believes that success isn't determined by the cards that you're dealt with but how you play them. This optimistic outlook coupled with determination and willingness to take on challenges has resulted in his rise up the ranks in the industry.

BY SREEREMA BANOO



Andy Soo doesn't believe that one should spend time feeling sorry for oneself or lament that one's life could be different. "Use the time for more constructive things," he says in a matter-of-fact manner. The 20-plus-year veteran of the oil and gas industry who is today the Southeast Asia Business Development Director for Baker Hughes believes that if one is optimistic, half the battle is already won.

It's an ethos that he has subscribed to from the time he was a teenager. Andy's parents had sent his elder sister abroad to further her studies, and not wanting to burden his parents who were both school teachers, he opted to pursue his tertiary studies locally.

He gained a place in University Technology Malaysia to pursue a degree in Electrical Engineering and set his sights on the oil and gas industry. "I heard stories about working offshore and it just sounded so adventurous." He didn't wait for opportunities to come his way, and in the final year at university set about applying for a job in the industry. Together with four other coursemates, Andy was offered a job at Halliburton.

The decision to leave stemmed from a desire to gain new experiences. "I saw my counterparts who were well into their forties and because of the nature of the job spent a lot of time away from their families. I was single then and I volunteered for shifts during the holidays so they could be home with their families, but then I started asking myself if I wanted to be in their position later on," he says.

In 1996, Andy joined Western Atlas as a data processor. He was back in Kuala Lumpur but it was not long before he was offered an overseas assignment, this time to set up Western Atlas' office in Melbourne to support Shell Development Australia. A year later he was moved to New Plymouth in New Zealand. During the two years abroad, Andy operated the remote log analysis centre and provided petrophysical analysis, as well as undertook business development activities for the Oceania region.

In 1999, just after he tied the knot, Andy was assigned to Bangladesh as the company's station manager. His wife resigned from her job and moved with him. In Bangladesh he was responsible for providing technical and operational support for clients such as Shell Bangladesh, Cairn Energy,

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The year was 1991. "I started as a wireline logging engineer and within five days of joining the company, I was on a plane to Jakarta ... I joined on a Monday and by Friday I was on my way to Indonesia," he recalls. His first reaction when told that he was being assigned to Jakarta was "wow". "This was something unexpected especially since I was a fresh graduate, so I was definitely excited."

Andy was 23 years old at the time, and although he was unsure as to what the assignment would hold for him, he went with an open mind.

Buoyed with an adventurous spirit and a love for travel – he had backpacked in Australia during one of the university term breaks – Andy embraced the challenges and opportunities ahead.

He spent the first two months on an offshore project in the Java Sea, and following that stint was sent to the Halliburton Training Centre in Dallas, Texas. Upon his return to Indonesia three months later, he was assigned to another offshore rig, and in the first two years of his career he was exposed to the various stages of well drilling, well completion and workover operations. He worked his way up the ranks and was, before he left the company in 1996, the engineer in charge of operations in Irian Jaya (today known as West Papua).

Occidental Bangladesh and Unocal. "It was an eye-opening experience ... I went with an open mind without any expectations and my wife and I enjoyed our stay," he says.

Upon his return to Malaysia in 2000, Andy took up the position as customer service manager based in Miri. His responsibilities primarily involved providing technical support for Baker Atlas' two major clients, Shell Malaysia and PETRONAS Carigali.





### Turning point and highlights

By 2001, Andy was already a family man (his daughter Natalie was born the year before) and when the opportunity came for him to move the family back to Peninsula Malaysia, he took it. "I left Baker Atlas with a heavy heart," he says.

The move to Roxar Sdn Bhd however, turned out to be a major turning point in his career. Joining the company, which was better known for its reservoir software services, as project/sales manager for its Production Monitoring Department, the going was slow in the beginning. "There was hardly any business and so it was our team's responsibility to grow the business." He describes his time when he was the project/sales manager and later as Asia Pacific project manager as a great learning experience.

"We were just a small team and were responsible for sales, application, project management and execution. We were given the authority to do anything within the boundaries to provide a total solution to meet the needs of the customer, from designing the surface acquisition to the communication system, be it internally or looking at solutions from suppliers in the region ... we had to think outside the box. This was the time when I had to apply the electrical engineering knowledge that I gained during my college days"

When he left the company in 2007, it was with some sadness but he was also content because the company was on a stronger footing. "There were many projects and we had secured contracts in Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei." So why did he leave then? "I was 39 years old and I felt that I needed to explore other facets of the industry. I didn't want to be too comfortable and wanted to expand my learning experience," he says.

He joined Weatherford Sdn Bhd, first as business development manager for Malaysia and later as region project manager for intelligent completion technology. Here, he again was exposed to the challenges of managing customer expectations, managing cost structures as well as gaining understanding of the tender landscape and SWOT analysis of the company and its competitors.

Andy joined Baker Hughes in 2010 and was for two years the region marketing director where his responsibilities included supporting the geomarkets within the region, growing the product line and positioning for major tenders as well as developing strategic marketing plans. He served as country manager from June 2012 to July 2013 when he was offered his current assignment.

"As Business Development Director for South East Asia, I look at the entire portfolio of Baker Hughes and tailor solutions to meet the requirements of customers," he says, adding that the role requires a more proactive approach. His portfolio covers Malaysia, Thailand, Brunei, the Philippines, Vietnam and Myanmar.

Not one to remain complacent, the 45-year-old is keen to put his experiences of the last two decades to good use in positioning the oil and gas service provider for greater growth.

"We look at what our products can offer for the customer and source for whatever that we lack. It's certainly challenging and rewarding at the same time because we are positioning and anticipating pipeline opportunities for the company's next phase of growth. There is a lot of technology at Baker Hughes and from that perspective we look at what can be applied to address the challenges."

The company has a strong subsurface group and Andy is excited at the prospect of using this to map solutions using what Baker Hughes can provide. "There is a lot of data and people within the organisation that know how to use it, and by understanding the value of this data we can then convert it into information and knowledge – this allows us to understand customer needs and the landscape of the industry going forward. We're also able to understand issues related to current production and what we can provide to slow the depletion and lengthen the plateau period of production."

### Changes in the landscape

The two decades he's been in the industry have not been without challenges, concedes Andy. Besides managing customer expectations, what's been a



challenge is managing people. “We work as a team so if we do not have the same objectives then it’s going to be tough. The chemistry has to be there and sometimes finding the best fit is difficult,” he says, adding that in communication and trust are vital.

“As an engineer it’s easy to manage equipment whereas the same cannot be said about people ... no two people are the same. People are a company’s greatest asset and managing this asset is crucial ... we have to understand their strengths and weaknesses, and the values that they bring to the organisation,” he says.

He counts mentors such as Peter Murphy as having been invaluable in offering support and shaping his own leadership style. “He was the Western Atlas district manager and I looked up to him, He was firm but fair and brought out the best in people. He would listen, support and provide guidance,” says Andy, his respect for his mentor palpable.

“So in my case, I trust my people, I tell them what’s needed but I don’t tell them how to do it. I tell them that if they feel that they cannot do it, then they can see me and I will tell them how I would do it,” he says of his leadership style.

In the time he’s been in the oil and gas industry, Andy has seen the industry grow in leaps and bounds, but what is perhaps the most prominent difference, he says, is the emphasis on safety.

“When I first went on a helicopter there was no sea survival training or briefing or underwater escape training ...it was a question of the survival of the fittest. Over the years there has been greater emphasis on safety from both the operator’s and service provider’s perspectives,” he says. He adds that there was even a time when he had to shut down the rig operations because of insufficient manpower offshore and this was given the green light by the operator.

“The entire industry has accepted the fact that things can be done in a safe manner. After all it’s easier to explain to a customer that the operations cannot continue rather than explain to family members why their spouse or parent or sibling won’t be coming home,” he says.

He also observes closer ties between service providers and operators, with the relationship evolving towards that of a business partnership. “This is important because this means that we are working towards a common objective and all parties take ownership in delivering a successful project.”

Excited and optimistic of what the future holds for him, Andy hopes to further his career in the industry. For now, he says, the focus will be on staying in Malaysia, until his children, Natalie who is 13 and Gregory 11, complete their schooling. After that, who knows? An overseas assignment perhaps? With his can-do approach, the opportunities are limitless.