

Flying the Malaysian flag at Keysight

BY **SREEREMA BANOO**

In the late 1990s, HP executives en route to Asia for a prospective investment made a pit stop to visit its facilities in Bayan Lepas, Penang.

“We showed them how advanced we were in automation and the talent that we had, and when they saw the manufacturing facility here, they decided to expand its operations instead. So, that’s how the test and measurement operations began in Penang,” says Angela Cheong, Keysight Technologies vice-president of business HR for global order fulfilment, digital software solutions, electronic industrial solutions group and HR head of Asia-Pacific, who was at the time in a learning and leadership development role at HP.

In 1999, through a global strategic realignment, HP created an independent measurement company composed of test and measurement components, chemical analysis and medical businesses, and a separate computing and imaging company that included all of HP’s computing, printing and imaging businesses. The new measurement company was Agilent Technologies. In 2014, Agilent split into two separate pure-play measurement companies, with the new electronic measurement company now called Keysight Technologies.

It is from this legacy that Keysight dates its presence in Penang to 1972. One of the so-called “eight samurai” of the local electrical and electronics (E&E) sector, HP made its pioneering foray into Penang with the setting up of its semiconductor manufacturing division. Operations began with 60 employees producing core memory stacks in a rented bungalow on Macalister Road before moving to the Free Industrial Zone (FIZ).

On the heels of HP’s decision to expand its footprint in Penang came the eventual manufacturing transfer of test and measurement products from various sites globally to its facility on the island. Today, a majority of Keysight’s range of testers from handhelds to mega systems are manufactured in Penang. A significant portion of global research and development is undertaken on Keysight’s 42-acre campus at Penang’s FIZ — providing electronic design and test solutions for communications, automotive, education, semiconductor and Internet of Things industries, among others.



Keysight’s electromagnetic compatibility test lab

Keysight’s staff strength here stands at close to 3,000 — making the Penang campus one of the company’s largest outside of its headquarters in Santa Rosa, California. Of the 3,000 employees, 90% are knowledge workers made up of professionals and engineers. At Keysight, the R&D group is closely engaged with customers in developing new products and solutions such as the radar target simulator and the radar scene emulator, with the latter said to be a revolutionary step forward for autonomous driving developers who value safety first.

With the advent of new technologies — for instance, 6G, artificial intelligence and increased digitalisation — the R&D team is focused on capitalising on Keysight’s technological capabilities honed over the decades to boost its product offerings, says Cheong.

Besides R&D, many of the HR functions are based out of Penang.

“We have expanded our responsibilities to manage global HR information systems, global relocations, global pre-employment checks and global HR services centres. Five years ago, our customer contact centre expanded beyond Asia to support the US and Europe, and we started hiring people fluent in German, Spanish and Portuguese, among others,” says Cheong, pointing out that many of these additional responsibilities came into being when Keysight was formed about a decade ago.

A point of pride for Cheong — an E&E engineer who joined HP in 1992 before moving to Agilent in 1999 and then Keysight in 2014 — is the number of senior leadership positions globally that have been filled by Malaysians, many of whom, like her, started their careers at HP.

“Keysight Malaysia has a strong leadership bench with two senior vice-presidents reporting directly to the CEO, including the first female business leader for all of Keysight, Ee Huei Sin,” she says.



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Ee, senior vice-president of Keysight Technologies and president of the Electronic Industrial Solutions Group, oversees a US\$2 billion (RM9.3 billion) global business that addresses the automotive, energy, general electronics, manufacturing, education and semiconductor industries.

The senior and pivotal leader is Keysight Technologies senior vice-president and president of order fulfilment and digital software solutions, Datuk Gooi Soon Chai, whom Cheong credits as the person instrumental in convincing the HP executives to make that pit stop in Penang all those years ago.

Malaysia, Cheong adds, has been an attractive location for Keysight thanks to the E&E ecosystem developed in the last five decades, particularly the emphasis on training. Besides training stints in the US, engineers from the US who were on assignment in Penang were also tapped to offer training for the local engineers.

Employee engagement activities are also important at Keysight, Cheong says, pointing to the many informal networks established to foster the company culture and camaraderie. For instance, for new hires, there is an employee network group dubbed the “wavelets” that organises networking events as well as activities to serve the underprivileged and care for the environment.

Keysight has been instrumental in establishing and sponsoring science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) activities such

as “Introduce a Girl to Engineering Day”, which aims to encourage more girls to take up engineering as a career. During this programme, schoolgirls aged 14 to 15 spend a day on Keysight’s campus experiencing the life of an engineer and engaging with its female engineers — who make up 35% of engineers at the organisation — who help inspire the girls to pursue engineering. Keysight is also a key player in the establishment of Penang’s STEM initiatives such as Penang Science Cluster, Penang International Science Fair and Penang Digital Library.



Employee learning and development at Keysight



Aerial view of Keysight’s campus at Penang’s FIZ