

Special feature brought to you by PwC

Strategy in Action

Creating value from strategy to execution

Providing world-class expertise across different competencies in one seamless offering has helped PwC become one of the world's leading advisory firms

WHEN Michelin awarded its first stars in Singapore last year, it generated much buzz and equally spirited debate – about which recipients were deserving, who missed out, and whether eateries that serve essentially a single dish should be compared with full service restaurants. The last point is the same conundrum faced by professional services firms – should they be a single-service or a multi-competency firm?

PwC is firmly in the latter camp, and this strategy has fuelled its phenomenal growth over the past two decades. Its global network, with revenue of US\$35.9 billion in the last financial year, has been the world's largest professional services firm for six of the past ten years.

"Even if it is possible to assemble a three course meal with each course from a different specialty restaurant, it lacks the consistency of a meal crafted by a single kitchen," says Ong Chao Choon, Advisory leader of PwC Singapore. "The trick for the single kitchen is to ensure that each course is of such high quality that none is a compromise."

PwC's advisory practice has spent much of the last two decades developing its own version of a dream kitchen; one that provides best-in-class expertise across all areas of the business – from strategy, corporate finance and project advisory, to due diligence, valuation and consulting.

Along the way, the practice has expanded from a mere outgrowth of its traditional tax and audit businesses to become one of the largest advisory firms in the world with over 42,000 people globally.

PwC Advisory in Singapore

"We have 430 people in Singapore alone working in various Deals and Consulting competencies making up the Advisory line of service. Ninety per cent of them work in competencies that did not exist in our firm just 15 years ago. We have significantly grown our depth of expertise in each area of specialisation," adds Mr Ong.

He adds: "We differentiate ourselves from a single competency firm by providing our clients with end-to-end service from strategy to execution." Reflecting its diverse makeup, the Advisory team in Singapore is comprised of 30 different nationalities with working experience from many parts of the world and speaking a variety of languages. "We are literally diversity in action," quips Mr Ong.

An important gap in this ambitious end-to-end offering was plugged when PwC bought Booz and Co – then the world's fourth largest strategy consulting firm – in 2014 and rebranded it as Strategy&.

"Strategy takes point in our range of service offerings in both Deals and Consulting. It helps our clients think about what, where and how they want to play and formulate a game plan to achieve those visions. The acquisition of Booz and Co was a key milestone because it catapulted us into the leading pack in the strategy consulting space," says Mr Ong.

"The rest of our advisory competencies will then help our clients execute those plans, be it acquisition, green field projects, capital and debt raising or operational improvements," he adds.

In the last 12 months alone, PwC Corporate Finance advised on eight announced transactions worth over US\$1 billion in South-east Asia and the rest of its Singapore Deals practice worked on another 100 over deals in various capacities.

A differentiated service offering

PwC Singapore was also able to draw on its global network for capabilities even as it was developing its own. Around the world, PwC's award-winning advisory practices boast accolades such as Consulting Firm of the Year, the Private Equity Financial Adviser Award, and leader in various M&A league tables, among many others.

"We drew on the expertise of the more developed and larger territories like UK, USA and Australia when we started building our capabilities. We did not have to reinvent the wheel," says Mr Ong. Today, PwC also has a very active overseas secondment programme to expose its staff to different markets.

As a business largely dependent on its people, one key challenge for the firm is attracting suitable talent to fill its growing ranks, as well as train them to maintain the firm's high standards.



'We differentiate ourselves from a single competency firm by providing our clients with end-to-end service from strategy to execution,' says Ong Chao Choon of PwC Singapore. Photo taken at Artemis Grill

"All our clients want an A-team. As the business grows, the challenge is to develop multiple A-teams with consistent high quality," says Mr Ong. PwC does this by both bringing in experienced industry experts into their fold as well as hiring bright, fresh graduates every year from a disciplines as diverse as liberal arts, law, engineering, actuarial, business and accounting. These new hires are put through a rigorous selection process and training. "We can teach these graduates the technical skills, but what we can't give them is their personality, their ability to think out of the box and their drive to succeed."

Having such deep expertise across a range of areas allows PwC to eschew offering its clients prepackaged or "stapled" solutions, but rather an integrated one customised to their specific needs.

He says: "We don't want to just sell prepacked 'boxes'. Our range of competencies allow us to offer our clients a bespoke 'box' of services with different specialists assembled to solve the issue on hand. This is not something you can replicate easily by engaging a few specialist firms. Our integrated approach helps companies create enduring value."

On a personal note, Mr Ong relished the intellectual challenges of working with clients on a variety of projects, while leading the growth of the advisory business over the past 15 years.

"As a professional, I still enjoy working with clients to add value to their business. In M&A, the feedback can be fairly immediate. This keeps us on our toes. We work on the maxim that we are only as good as our last deal. We take nothing for granted," he says.

Looking ahead, he sees the firm's holistic approach continue to help them grow and mitigate the economic slowdown.

"In the last three to four years we have progressively moved

from being a deal jockey just chasing deals to helping clients unlock value – from strategy to execution."

■ This is the last instalment of a second five-part series 'Strategy in Action', which is brought to you by PwC

Deals competencies

- Deals Strategy
- Corporate Finance
- Valuations
- Due Diligence
- M&A Operations
- M&A Tax
- Capital Markets
- Restructuring
- Capital Projects & Infrastructure

Consulting competencies

- Strategy consulting
- Management consulting
- Technology consulting
- Risk consulting

