

# A big heart for small businesses

ERC Holdings' Andy Ong keeps an eye out for the budding entrepreneurs no one else pays attention to

## dean'slist

Andy Ong

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FIVE years ago, Mr Andy Ong decided to help budding businesses – “the really small ones which nobody pays attention to” – to succeed.

Maybe, he thought, he could even uncover another Sim Wong Hoo.

Now, the CEO of the Entrepreneur's Resource Centre (ERC) – a hub to train, fund and mentor entrepreneurs – is helping many more people to realise their potential through studies rather than business.

In three months, his company will have 1,000 students enrolled in various programmes, from business and finance to tourism and media. So, how did an incubator and business consultancy branch out intensively into education?

“It was a discovery process. Some people ... don't have what it takes to be an entrepreneur,” said Mr Ong, who firmly believes that entrepreneurs “are born, not made”.

“But these people need to make a living. And they have a lot of potential. Some people are very services oriented; it's just innate. Perfect for tourism,” he said emphatically. “That's why one of the first acquisitions we made was a school. Besides encouraging people to start a business, we want them to consider careers in the most promising sectors of Singapore.”

And so, ERC Holdings snapped up pri-



IN THE BUSINESS TO HELP SMALL BUSINESSES: ERC Holdings CEO Andy Ong.

DON WONG

ivate educational schools like the Asian Centre for Professional Excellence and the Centre for Professional Studies (ACPE), and turned them around.

“ACPE was not in very good shape when we bought it. Now, they're one of the top 10 private educational companies,” said Mr Ong.

Helping education firms became part of ERC's goals since it teamed up with the Economic Development Board two years ago.

“Our incubator partner mandate was to encourage educational concepts to blossom. It's our agreement with EDB. We can assist other companies, but we try to assist as many education firms as possible,” said Mr Ong.

ERC Holdings is building its education base on four pillars: Digital media; financial services, including wealth management; tourism and hospitality, including spa and wellness management as well as casino management; and, of course, entrepreneurship. It offers scholarships, job placements and, according to Mr Ong, some of the most cost effective programmes in Sin-

gapore, thanks to government sponsorship through the Skills Development Fund.

“We have connections with hotels and restaurants, so we can arrange jobs,” he said. “We also offer to sponsor any staff in ERC, after one year of service, to study with us all the way to the Masters level. And we find like-minded companies to do the same.”

There is no bond, but students cannot leave their companies during their studies.

The result, said Mr Ong, is that many companies are willing to partner ERC because “they are always on the lookout for talent”, organic or otherwise.

“It's the one thing all businesses in Singapore lack,” he said. “At the same time, I tell everyone: ‘There's no way you're going to work for me for life. No bloody way.’ But once you've got the skills set and you want to start a business or go somewhere else, I'll be more than happy to assist.

“Employers now must think of things from that perspective ... because at least you get to capture that person's potential.”

It may be an uncommon concept, he admits, but then again, so is the way ERC works. In its contract with budding entrepreneurs – it helps to start up or accelerate at least 20 businesses each year – the company expects them to help others in the future.

“Of course, I can't enforce it. But, we want to groom 10 or 15 very successful entrepreneurs and we want them to commit to us that they will groom another 10 or 15 more individually,” he said.

“It's a legacy issue. The shareholders of this firm are all able to retire very comfortably. But we want to nurture the next generation of entrepreneurs.”

Of course, when it helps a business to succeed, ERC's cash registers ring just as loud. Just last year, a quick service food company was on the verge of closing down because of a cash flow problem from over-expansion. ERC came in as consultants, bought a stake in the company and reformatted the food chain's entire marketing plan.

“One brochure cost 11 cents. I cut it down to 2.5 cents. Postage for each brochure cost 22 cents. I asked them to do inserts in TODAY in very targeted zones around their outlets. The effectiveness impact doubled. I got them profitable in three weeks. Five months later, a public-listed company bought our stake,” he said.

Of course, with a success rate of about 55 per cent, ERC works with its share of entrepreneurs who never get their business plans off the ground.

But with its expansion into education, ERC now has alternatives at the ready.

*Do you wonder if you have the makings of an entrepreneur, or if your talent lies elsewhere – as yet undiscovered?*

*If you need advice from an expert, here's your chance. Send in your question to [succeed@newstoday.com.sg](mailto:succeed@newstoday.com.sg) and we'll pick the best question for Mr Andy Ong to answer in this same space next Monday.*

## CEO101

the big question: is passion at work an overrated virtue for success?

MS SUSAN TEH, CEO OF MOUNT FABER LEISURE GROUP, REPLIES: Virtues will never be overrated, as they are virtues. Distinguishing the real drivers behind passion is the key in determining success.

There are two sides to passion: The positive and negative, for example, affection versus anger. It is astute for a leader to identify an employee's motive to passion, and then motivate and drive that passion to success.

Of course, passion can also be self-inspired. Still, passion is not the only determinant but just one of the key rudiments to success. Perseverance, integrity and being consistent are important too.

So, always learn to grow and enjoy yourself at work for success!



TODAY FILE PHOTO

## BRAINFOOD

The Motivation Point

Josh Hinds



SUCCESS coaches are plentiful around the world, but one that is making a big name for himself, especially with the online community, is American Josh Hinds.

The 32-year-old author and syndicated columnist is making waves on the Internet with his motivational site, The Motivation Point ([www.getmotivation.com](http://www.getmotivation.com)), an inspirational community for self growth and personal development.

He became an entrepreneur at the tender age of 15 when he started work at his father's new startup firm in the mortgage industry. Armed with the gift of the gab, he outdid all sales expectations from the management within months and shortly after, he was introduced

to motivational thinking after he read a book by Hillary Ziglar, himself a renowned author and speaker during the 1980s and 1990s.

Mr Hinds' website, which is marking its 10th anniversary this year, is widely regarded as the premier motivational resource for all those looking to get energised and inspired.

A popular favourite is the vast collection of articles available, ranging from topics such as “17 words that changed my life forever” to “How to be a negative optimist”.

All new visitors who register at his site will also be able to download two free eBooks which he authored, titled *A Year of Inspiration* and *A Journey of Inspiration*.

You can also subscribe to a *Let's Talk Motivation!* newsletter which features daily columns by top motivational speakers and writers around the world. Each shares ideas and insights on how to lead a more successful, fulfilling life. — LEE U-WEN

*Know any good education/career/management/motivational websites? If so, let us know at [succeed@newstoday.com.sg](mailto:succeed@newstoday.com.sg)*