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“We’re building with passion and precision for perfection.”

Though Sanwah Construction is only five years old, its robust international and local market reputation has developers knocking at its door for collaboration opportunities.

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Despite being founded only in 2012, it's hard to deny that Sanwah Construction has been on a steep path to growth. The design-and-build construction company was established by three veterans of the construction trade five years ago and has since grown its operations significantly, in both the number of employees it has and the countries it has presence in, as well as the registered companies within the Sanwah Group.

Anthony Ong, Managing Director of Sanwah, has a long history of construction experience, in both design-and-build and conventional projects, with a portfolio totalling more than S\$1 billion in value.

These projects include buildings for institutions such as polytechnic teaching hubs; a prison complex; fire stations; commercial buildings such as sports complexes, private clubs, office buildings; industrial buildings including automotive yards, biological plants and chemical warehouses; and residential and civic projects. He graduated from the Nanyang Technological University in 1999, starting as a local building contractor before climbing the ranks to become general manager of a local construction company, a position he left to set up Sanwah with his two co-founders.

Sanwah directly translates as “three Chinese”, a name that has cultural significance and represents the fact that there are three founders. The ‘wah’ on the end also forms the initials of each of their first names – Woo Boh Chun, Anthony Ong and Ho Heng Whye. Together, the partners have a 50-year legacy of construction experience, and through



Sanwah they aim to set new standards in quality construction. “The three of us were colleagues in a contracting firm at one time, and we’ve been great friends ever since – for longer than 10 years,” says Anthony. “Our partners specialise in and cover different aspects of construction, such as finance and

“Our designs are optimised for the intended business of our clients.”

administration; business development, safety and corporate matters; and contracts and project management. Knowledge aside, we are all very passionate about construction. Character-wise we’re all positive and cheerful!”

This is a sentiment enshrined within the business in the form of its company values, which Anthony calls “the three Ps” – being Passion for growth, Precision in building and construction, and Perfection in the delivery of services. “We’re building with passion and precision for perfection,” he notes. The combination of know-how, friendship born of working relationships, and positive attitudes has served the »

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trio well in establishing their own business. Sanwah is already a respected company, and a leader in local and overseas design-and-build construction, which includes providing prospective developers the “one-stop turnkey solution for all their building and development needs.”

The projects taken on by Sanwah include design-and-build, build-only, and project-management contracts, to which the company brings a focus on partnering, health and safety, quality finishes and sustainability. The projects range from warehouses and education institutions to luxury hotels, aiming for distinctive and innovative structures in a variety of styles, depending on client requirements. On their ideal project, Sanwah would provide full project and site management, from drawing up initial plans to adding the last components in construction. The company aims to implement the most seamless construction service possible,

For the past two years, most of Sanwah’s projects have been invitational.

through its established connections with architects, surveyors, civil engineers and trade specialists.

“We are also able to engage team members who service banking and financing needs, legal needs and land acquisition bids, as well as the leasing/ selling of current premises to finance a new development,” says Anthony.

Among the most recent projects completed by Sanwah are: the Multiway Industrial Building at Gul Avenue, completed in March 2017; the Sim Siang Choon Building at Changi South, including additions and alterations to the existing building, completed in December 2016; and the LHN Group Work + Store

industrial and commercial building, also completed in December 2016.

Anthony points out that Sanwah charges on a “success basis”, meaning that anyone engaging the company for a project need only pay upon the successful acquisition of premises and official appointment for services required. “Our designs are customised to the process flow, are unique for all projects, and are optimised for the intended business of our clients,” notes Anthony. He adds that keeping these important elements in mind has been crucial to Sanwah becoming so successful in such a short space of time – so much so, in fact, that for the past two years, most of Sanwah’s projects have been invitational.

“This means that developers and owners are inviting us to quote for their projects directly,” he says. “This is very different from having to bid for projects, competing with numerous other tendering companies and then having to engage in a price war in order to win the business.”

It’s a signal that conveys the reputation the company has managed to achieve in its five years of operation, a reputation that has both brought and benefited from the achievement of several awards, including the certification as a bizSAFE Partner Enterprise and the ‘Highly Commended Award’ for its Axis Residences at the Cambodia Property Awards. Furthermore, the business has expanded, with the addition of several other companies to the Sanwah Group, each with a different focus. “We have managed to venture from being solely a design-and-build



contractor to a company providing international project management [through Sanwah Project Management] and construction services [through Sanwah Project Overseas],” says Anthony. “We have also purchased land in Singapore and overseas for development [through SWHL].”

Despite the rapid but positive growth over the past few years, the company has had its fair share of obstacles to overcome. Anthony says he tackles these challenges in a practical manner, with a solutions-based approach. In response to a rising manpower levy – with construction

being the labour-intensive industry that it is – increasing productivity was the solution, achieved by sending workers to courses to make them more versatile and able to perform a wider variety of tasks.

Working in a slowing market, Anthony says, the maintenance of a sterling reputation through every project it works on allows many projects to come through referrals. »

LOOK AT THE LOGO

The Sanwah logo is designed to reflect a traditional Chinese number ‘three’ character, encircled with a bold calligraphy stroke. Why that number? In Chinese, three is the most stable of all the numerals. It’s also fitting given that there are three co-founders.



Sanwah



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Then, in response to staff turnover, the owners of Sanwah foster an inclusive working environment “which brings work–life balance to all our colleagues,” he notes.

Providing an inclusive working environment for staff and an overall positive workplace culture is implemented by Sanwah through three core areas: safety culture; company culture; and gracious culture, or charity. The company provides the encouragement needed for all staff to participate in this way: to ensure they feel welcomed, safe and rewarded in their work with Sanwah. There are also benefits for employees that further encourage participation and company cohesion.

For example, there are company-wide games and celebrations for major festivals such as Christmas, Hari Raya and Chinese New Year. There are also monthly exercise days when all staff can leave work early for activities such as night trekking, yoga, or bubble soccer, which contribute both

to company cohesion and staff health and fitness. There’s an annual overseas retreat for all key office and project personnel. Furthermore, there’s a monthly ‘fruit day’, where Sanwah distributes fruit to each staff member, with the intention of promoting healthy living.

It’s all intended to help “make everyone physically fit and mentally alert,” says Anthony. “At Sanwah, we offer all our colleagues a closely bonded relationship and a fulfilling career – not just a job.”

Not only does Sanwah assist its current staff with professional development, regularly sponsoring handpicked employees for courses to upgrade their existing skills and to train them in new ones (including professional degrees and diplomas in relevant fields such as project management and safety management); the business also actively seeks out and encourages workers within the industry. Sanwah operates an ambitious internship program, taking several interns at once from local technics

and universities. The end goal is to offer employment to these interns at the conclusion of their posting. Sanwah also offers attractive positions to recent graduates, ensuring it is capturing and employing talented new staff members at the start of their professional careers.

This focus on people, which the partners at Sanwah are so keen to drive, certainly pays off. “It’s not just a response to an acute shortage of passionate and qualified professionals in the construction industry,” Anthony says. “It’s a key part of both Sanwah’s business strategy and its aim to be the contractor of choice for the areas in which it operates.”

While the company’s full-service option for design-and-build construction is attractive, its people power is often what gets it across the line with new contracts. “Instead of forming a new team for each

project,” says Anthony, “which most of the time means just getting the architects and engineers who offer the lowest quotes, our team is made up of regular consultants who have already completed more than

“Our team is made up of regular consultants who have already completed more than 20 projects together over the past four years.”

20 projects together over the past four years or so.” This team of consultants, who already have an established, cohesive working dynamic, are also able to leverage from the established rapport and familiarity they have, both within Sanwah itself and with various authorities. This enables Sanwah »

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to act more nimbly when negotiating with stakeholders and regulatory bodies. The cohesive team approach, and reinforcement of workforce skill and culture, is enriched by a rigorous approach to safety in Sanwah's operations. Since Anthony joined the industry, he says, there has been a major shift in the way companies engage construction groups, requiring them to have a strong focus on safety and speed over cost.

"The industry has started to focus more on productivity and being safe," he says. It's a change that has come about as a result of pressure from both within the construction sector and outside of it. "From prefabricated, pre-finished volumetric construction to the various safety programs [such as bizSAFE and

Culture-SAFE], the industry has realigned for contractor sustainability. It's no longer just about 'whoever is cheaper' but there's been a shift in focus to 'whoever is better, safer and faster for this project'."

Their own focus on this approach has won them wide-ranging business. One of the latest projects Sanwah has taken on, announced in January, is for one of four new mega childcare centres in Singapore on behalf of Skool4Kidz. The centre in which Sanwah will be working will be the first childcare centre to be housed within a park. The facility, to be built in Sengkang Park, will have space for 400 children from the age of two months to six years, about four times the size of the average Singaporean childcare centre.

It presents its own challenges and innovations for Sanwah: it will have learning spaces that incorporate the natural environment and a Butterfly Lodge where children can learn about nature and insects. Furthermore, it will have an onsite

"Sanwah Construction is a strategic partner that has played a crucial role in the development of MBL, and we look forward to closer collaboration in the future. Every project is a challenge: we strive to excel, and excel we will." – Bernard Ling, Director, MBL Engineering

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garden from which food will be taken to serve to the children at snack and meal times. The development of these childcare centres is in response to the rising demand for childcare in Singapore, and Sanwah is keen to work with Skool4Kids on this innovative project.

For a company that has grown so quickly in such a short time, all the while maintaining an excellent reputation, innovation is part and parcel of planning for the future. But even in planning for new technologies, Anthony says, safety and productivity come first. "We're constantly looking at ways to construct more productively and safely," he says. "We've launched and successfully received the patent for our recent precast wall installer SPI*N system – an innovative way to install precast concrete walls both productively and safely."

SPI*N is a Sanwah research and development innovation, designed to be flexible and safe, and to increase productivity in a simple way. The system can be incorporated onto all common forklifts with a modification, and allows for more simple movement of precast concrete panels with reduced need for manoeuvring and decreased risk of toppling. It is evidence of Sanwah's commitment to making the workplace safer, workers more productive, and delivering on construction schedules. It's this kind of innovation that Sanwah aims for, to increase both productivity and safety for workers.

With five years of operation this year, Sanwah is marking its success so far,

"We are constantly looking at ways to construct more productively and safely."

having grown from a team of three founding partners to a staff of more than 100 employees working all across Asia. Over that time, the company has worked on around 35 projects and has completed 25 to date. Despite this early success, the partners of Sanwah have no intention of sitting back. Instead, they're planning for the future.

"We strive to become the contractor of choice via positive feedback and recommendations from project owners of current and completed projects," says Anthony. For Sanwah, this means that its business comes about not by pricing out any competition in a race to the bottom. Instead, it wants to rely on the company's personalised service and existing reputation in this area, solving all the ambiguities of a given project and executing the vision of prospective developers and property owners.

Looking to the future, Anthony points out several priorities that Sanwah intends to focus on to continue its growth, to cement its reputation in the industry, and to win further business around Asia.

"We will continue to grow and strengthen our current design-and-build construction service," says Anthony. "And we'll continue to drive project development by acquiring land and buildings. Sanwah will also keep on providing design-and-build and project management services for a range of overseas projects, and further strive for innovations and better safety measures.

"Furthermore, Sanwah will venture into other construction-related industries such as development, overseas construction and project management, as well as safety-related innovations such as the SPI*N system." ■



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