

Staying ahead of the pack

Skills upgrading has enabled SC Auto to succeed in coaches and buses manufacturing

By SHEN YANG, YU DIAN
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IT has been a long and difficult journey for SC Auto Industries. A winner of the Enterprise 50 awards this year, SC Auto has achieved what many small and medium enterprises would really desire to achieve.

SC Auto is the market leader in the Singapore coaches and buses manufacturing industry. When asked about the factors contributing to its success, Tan Siow Chua, founder and the chairman of the company, cited "engineering capabilities, constant learning and upgrading of skills".

Unlike many other industry leaders, Mr Tan does not hold any professional degree in engineering. Despite this, he has led a team of professional engineers in developing cutting-edge products to wow the market.

Now SC Auto has more than 100 designs registered with the Intellectual Property Office of Singapore. These include patents on the unique glass designs that streamline the exteriors of the coaches with appealing aesthetics. SC Auto has also achieved a breakthrough in the interior design of the coaches, engineering the coach to fit in more seats than its competitors with the exact same chassis.

Mr Tan has credited these achievements to constant learning in the field of automobile engineering. Since the establishment of SC Auto, Mr Tan has led his team of engineers every year to participate in major automobile exhibitions around the world. These exhibitions are like windows for SC Auto to keep up with happenings in the automobile world. From these exhibitions, SC Auto learns about the latest technologies available in the market as well as the latest design trends. Moreover, updates on safety equipment are also available for SC Auto to incorporate into its own products.

SC Auto's own research and development department has won international acclaim over the years. Many overseas well-known automobile companies which have visited SC Auto are surprised with its level of engineering expertise. "Even the Japanese and Europe counterparts praised our advances in design after the visit," Mr Tan told us.

To have total control and assur-



ance on the premium quality of its products, more than 95 per cent of SC Auto's products are designed, engineered, produced and assembled in-house. No sub-contractors are used. Mr Tan believes in "nurturing" rather than "buying" talents. The company is willing to take in people with little or no relevant experience if they possess the right values. The company puts in great effort and resources to provide intensive training based on the company's needs.

The core focus of the training conducted for workers is on skills upgrading. Since the technology renewal rate in this industry is high, workers must upgrade themselves continuously in order to stay competitive.

Skilled workers are given the chance to work as team leaders, and subsequently a chance to be promoted to supervisors. To prepare the workers who have been dealing with technical aspects of the business to perform a management job, SC Auto sends them to relevant management training programmes to internalise the new management skills. The smooth transition is crucial in ensuring seamless operations within SC Auto.

SC Auto's culture of internal promotions serves as a great incentive for workers to perform and stay. To retain its talents, SC Auto is willing to go to great lengths. It keeps the full

team of assemblers and technicians stationed in the company in spite of the fluctuation in demand. Even in bad times, the workers are kept and retrenchment has never been one of the options considered by the management.

In 2004, when Sars hit Asia, transport-related companies suffered intensively and SC Auto was not exempted. It had to carry on operating for six months without any incoming orders. Even during that period, not a single employee was retrenched.

With continuous learning, well-trained engineers and a passion to stay ahead of the pack through consistent upgrading, SC Auto managed

to achieve a record-breaking industry moment. It was able to assemble a coach in just seven days including all the steps from the ordering of raw materials and at the same time, to ensure 100 per cent premium quality. No one in the industry has ever been able to achieve this.

When asked about their future plans, Mr Tan directed our attention to the company logo: two swans symbolising the letters 'S' and 'C'. The swan, which can walk, swim and fly, symbolises SC Auto's hope of excelling in product and service offerings for land, sea and air transportation.

The writers are students at
NUS Business School

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