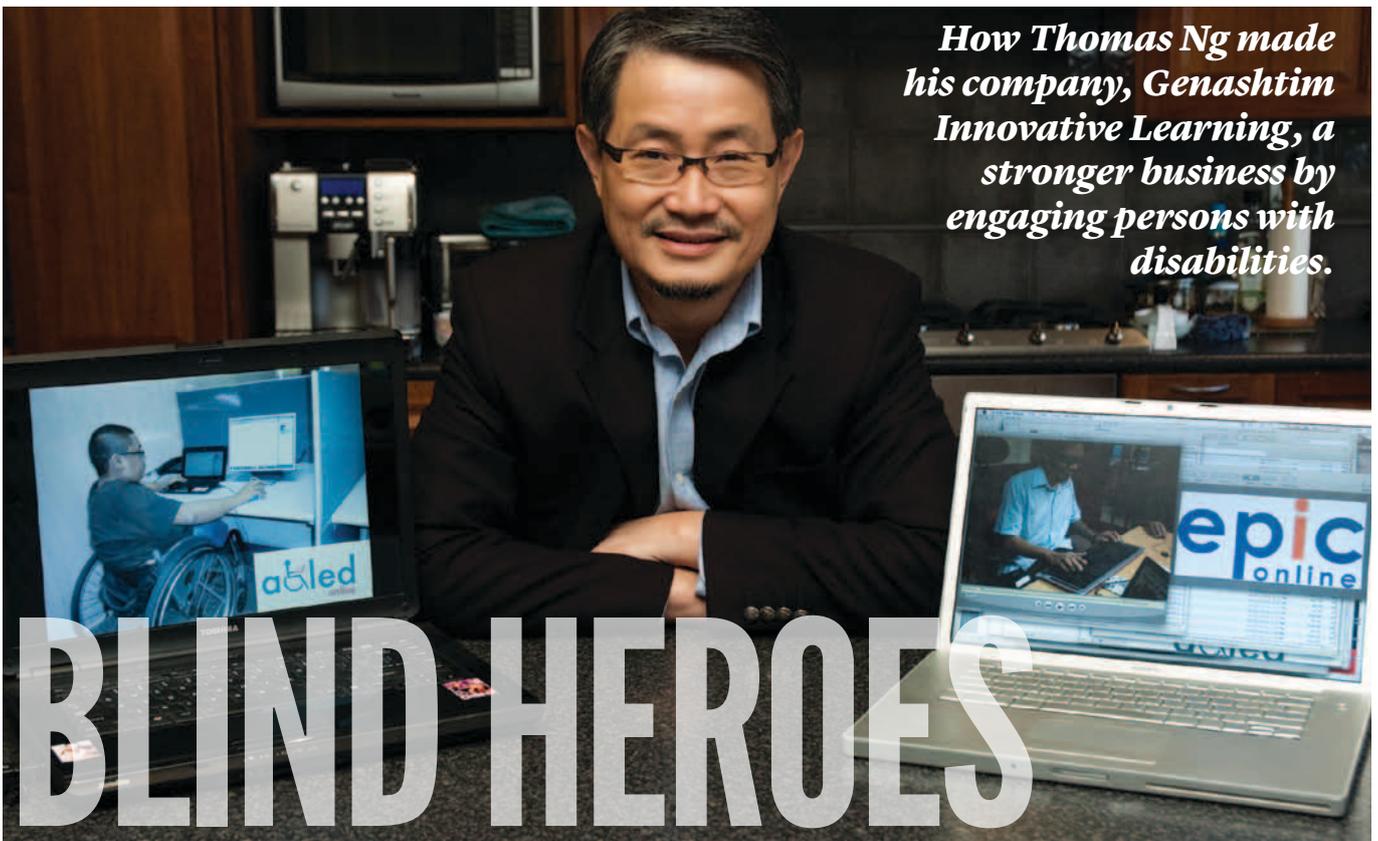


How Thomas Ng made his company, Genashtim Innovative Learning, a stronger business by engaging persons with disabilities.



BLIND HEROES

BY DIVINE DURAN

“**G**ood morning, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Thomas Ng, and my handicaps are poor anger management, lack of patience, and I can’t stand head office mentality. What are yours?” This was how Ng opened his presentation at the Spine Unit of the University of the Philippines, Philippines General Hospital. He had been invited by the doctors there to speak about how and why he offered a job to one of their leg amputee patients. Thomas then went on to elaborate that assembling a team is a basic management principle. “You need to know the strengths and weaknesses (handicaps) of each member of the team, and craft processes, and a business model that leverages the collective strengths of the team members, and find ways to overcome the weaknesses. I look at persons with disabilities (PWDs) like any employee who is not perfect.” he said.

How it all started

In 2006 Ng was a major sponsor for a concert for a computer school for the blind in Manila. “I figured that if a blind person would go through the struggle of learning how to use the PC, they deserved all the help they could get. He was subsequently invited to join the board of trustees of that computer school for the blind. At his first board meeting, he changed the direction of the school from measuring how many people they trained, to measuring how many people they put into employment with their new skills.

The statistics were rather dismal. Ng then took it upon himself to bring the blind graduates to prospective employers, to show

how productive they could be. He targeted the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) companies where he thought the blind graduates could perform. “Just about everyone we met was impressed. But after a year of bouncing between departments in the organizations, staff changes, and the usual ups and downs of companies, I figured this was not to be.”

Frustrated, he tried to start a BPO within the computer school. But starting a business, with a team of visually impaired who had no experience, proved too much of a challenge.

The hero

It was around that time that Thomas got to know Marx Melencio. At the age of 23, Marx was gunned down randomly while buying food at a street stall in the poorer parts of Manila. The 38 calibre bullets to his right temple and chest irreversibly severed his optical nerve. After a period of depression, he learnt to use the PC as a totally blind person, and completed his college degree. This was followed by two years of trying to land a job, which landed him in his second bout of depression.

When he finally got a job, his salary was US\$ 140 per month. With a wife, and a daughter on the way, Marx reckoned he needed more money. “Most of us would go and ask our boss for a raise. But Marx asked for a second shift!” exclaimed Ng. Marx eventually took a third shift, and starting outsourcing some of his work to others.

This was the birth of Grayscale Business Consultancy & Marketing Services (www.businessmarketing-solutions.com). In mid 2008, Grayscale employed about 100 people in seven production centres

in the Philippines. About 20 of the Grayscale staff had various disabilities. This successful business won him the “Most Inspiring Entrepreneur of the Year” award in the Philippines in 2008.

“Marx is my hero. But damn it, why can’t I do what he has done with his eye closed?!” remarked Ng. He then looked at his businesses, and felt that his eLearning business had a lot of potential. Increasingly gaining comfort with Web 2.0, many of his people were already working from home. “I figured that the key must lie in leveraging the power of the internet. I already knew that PWDs can acquire the right skills and be productive. I had learnt from Marx that it would be foolhardy to try and start with too many PWDs, and certainly not just the visually impaired.

Significant coincidences

Two significant things happened in late 2008/early 2009 for Thomas. As a certified YPO forum trainer, he trained a forum in Tokyo. He learnt that one of the YPOers running an American subsidiary in Tokyo had spent US\$ 100,000 in the past year on English lessons for his executives, yet they still couldn’t speak with any fluency. The second coincidence was Thomas’s daughter, Ashley, joining him in the business. With her help, they were able to develop their own-branded product – EPiC Online (English Proficiency in Conversation Online). Using Skype video they started helping the American subsidiary in Tokyo with coaching of their executives. Filipino English coaches with good accents were carefully selected, and trained not to teach language, but rather to encourage conversation and build confidence.

The sky opened up

“Our language coaches work from home. And with this, the sky opened up. Today we have more than a dozen PWDs in this business. We are just a year old, and PWDs make up about one third of our workforce. We are still a very small business, but we already have some very prominent clients, and we are very busy working on many more”.

Among the clients of EPiC Online are McDonalds Thailand, a number of prominent hotels, and multinational companies in China. Kaplan University in Singapore is offering EPiC Online to

its overseas students. An agreement was signed earlier this year with the Beijing Science Technology and Management College (BSTMC), which also included an arrangement where EPiC Online will help BSTMC to develop a Chinese equivalent for EPiC Online to market to the developed world.

Virtual team, winning team

Not all his PWD staff members are language coaches. The company has two operations supervisors, Spohia and Delia, who are wheelchair-bound due to polio as toddlers. Rommel is their Accountant, who was also stricken with polio when he was two. Their Quality Assurance Supervisor, Villy, became totally blind when he was 16. Their IT Supervisor, Anthony, became a paraplegic, from an accident as a seaman. Thomas’ Secretary, Vicky, was a pharmacist working in Saudi when a car accident damaged her spine. They also have a Japanese blind girl in Bangkok, to help with their Japanese clients, and a blind girl in Shaanxi, China to deal with their Chinese clients.

Thomas’ Executive Assistant Ryan, has been in a wheelchair since he was two. “Ryan is very much involved in helping me develop the business, as a partner,” says Thomas.

The journey ahead

“So what’s next?” I asked. “Firstly, scale”, says Thomas. “Our goal is to grow EPiC Online (with CNPiC Online) 50 times in the next 5 years. Even then, we would still only have a small fraction of one percent of the potential market. I expect my team to grow to about 1,000 and I hope that more than 50% will be PWDs.” The Philippines has a booming call centre business with about 400,000 call centre agents serving mostly the American market. “We are already engaging American and Australian language coaches, so that we can offer our clients native speakers.” He went on to add that the challenge will be finding enough PWDs who are up to scratch. “We hope that in coming years more PWDs will strive to learn and to improve their skills. We call our advocacy “the last mile”, which means that you have to do most of the hard work to be ready to serve on a global platform, and we will provide the opportunity by connecting them from wherever they are.”

“And then there’s scope”, he continues. “As you know, our people work from

home all over the country, and now even overseas. So how does our creative IT team support them? I only found this out when I was on a trip in Malaysia, and my laptop totally crashed on me. I bought a new one, connected it to the internet, went on Skype with my IT person at home in the Philippines, and started venting. He sent me a link to download a software so that he could take over my PC. He then told me to go for my dinner, and have a few extra drinks at the bar. When I got back to my hotel room that night, most of the programs that I used were re-loaded on my new laptop, including my back up files. And my Microsoft Outlook was up and running. I hardly missed a beat, and went back straight to work. How cool is this? In the following weeks during my travels through many countries I grew accustomed to having my IT person take over my laptop, and fixing all sorts of things for me.”

“It then dawned on me this was another useful service that we could provide, and it can be done by PWDs. We are now developing the website for our new product Abled Online. We are now frantically hiring PWDs, and training them.”

They (PWDs) deserve to be given the opportunity to thrive. It ‘s really not that hard to focus on someone’s abilities rather than disabilities.

“What advice would you give other YPO members who want to go into this?” I asked him. Thomas replies: “I strongly believe that engagement of PWDs or other CSR initiatives have to be woven into your business strategy, and form an integral part of your business. Even our work-from-home model, and delivery over the internet, leaves the smallest carbon footprint. Whilst having your staff spend an afternoon doing some charity work, or clean up a place, is very honourable, it is not really sustainable. CSR should not be a cost or a chore in your organization, but rather a strategic advantage.

Thomas is WPO SEA Regional Chair 2010/12, and a member of the international board of WPO. He is on the panel of experts for the ASEAN Institute for Disability and Public Policy, the ASEAN Disability Forum, and the Blind Future Leaders Dialogue. Thomas has also been a speaker at the International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment. www.genashtim.com