



X Del

# XDEL SINGAPORE PTE LTD

In a nation served by some of the world's biggest couriers, one local company has not only managed to survive this fiercely competitive industry, but flourish. Under Managing Director and 2012 SME One Asia Prominent Award Winner Harold Lee, XDel Singapore has overcome numerous trials to become the preferred domestic courier for many of Singapore's biggest companies. The success of his 20-year entrepreneurial odyssey stems from his unwavering determination, foresight and entrepreneurial ingenuity.

## Toughening up for the trials ahead

The prelude to Harold's journey begins in the quiet district of Sembawang. During the 1980s, the district was considered a "kampong," and had a fierce reputation for being gang-infested, with fights between rival gangs occurring frequently. "Sembawang was a ferocious place during those days, you had to join a gang to survive," relates Harold. He lived a gangster lifestyle in his teens, becoming involved in numerous street battles. He was also rebellious in the classroom and was expelled from two secondary schools before finally completing his O levels at a third school.

Growing up street smart with the tenacity to fight for what he wanted was his childhood's greatest contribution to his success. At 18, he once again immersed himself into Singapore's seedy side, this time as a police officer and was seconded to the Central Narcotics Bureau (CNB). The experience of being on the "other side" of the law, helping individuals who grew up in similar circumstances to his own profoundly affected him. Working with CNB also taught him how to "read" people's reactions and mannerisms to detect fabricated stories, which he sees now as a useful skill in business.

## The odyssey begins

After leaving the Police Force, Harold went on to the Singapore Armed Forces to complete his National Service. While serving his NS, he came across a job advertisement for a storeman position that required a minimum O level education. Harold only had "O" level and with such qualification, he realised that these were the kinds of jobs open for him. Thus he decided then he would work for himself and went on to start a courier business after recognising the business potential. So he took



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out a S\$15,000 loan from a long-time friend, purchased a van, hired a driver and officially went into business in 1993.

The first few years of his odyssey weren't easy. Harold canvassed neighbourhoods, going door-to-door looking for potential clients and delivered anything that could fit in his van. He soon resorted to supporting house move-ins and flyer distribution to make additional income. This led to regular 15-hour workdays, processing orders in the evening while delivering from sunrise to sunset. Even with the immeasurable effort he put into his business, the annual income wasn't even sufficient to make payments on the courier van and pay his driver's salary. The fight to retain ownership of his company's lifeblood, the van, through multiple repossessions was a constant battle.

### A break in the journey

Three years of this routine would have broken the spirit of most entrepreneurs, but for Harold, giving up was never an option and, in 1996, his efforts finally paid off. Making deliveries for a major industrial parts distributor, Harold saw profits soar. Riding the wave of success, he invested in expanding his business, purchasing several more vans and hiring additional employees. However, the calm of the moment would soon be disturbed by the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997.

### The odyssey continues

With business disappearing as a result of the Crisis, the investment in vehicles that was supposed to take his business to the next level became its biggest burden. The combination of hefty vehicle maintenance costs, rent and employee salaries accelerated the accumulation of debt to S\$500,000. Even in the worst of situations, he never let his circumstances diminish his desire to become successful. “I don't believe in dead ends. There is always a way to overcome your

problems,” states Harold.

And overcame them he did. Through the streamlining of operations for maximum efficiency, he completely revamped his business until it was lean enough to not only survive, but make a profit.

### Playing the soothsayer

Harold started building the technology infrastructure for his Company from 1994 with a DOS program which was a simple application to facilitate the work processes. The idea of a more robust infrastructure started to take shape after 1996. While restructuring his business, he realised the immense potential in automating XDel's operational processes. “If technology can assist you with productivity and efficiency, embrace it,” advises Harold. Foreseeing the value of technology to his industry, he made the resourceful move to invest in a customised IT infrastructure for his business. The system was capable of tracking courier transactions and invoicing, and facilitated fast and accurate delivery with minimal errors.

The move to act on his premonition of using technology to support his business put him up to a decade ahead of his local competitors. He also had the foresight to ensure that the IT infrastructure could be modified to account for changes in technology, company processes and customer needs. For example, XDel modified its IT infrastructure to accommodate online ordering and digital archiving of consignment notes in 2002, years ahead of most local companies. As for his debt, he was able to settle it within four short years.

### The odyssey doesn't end

After facing countless trials during his 20-year odyssey as an entrepreneur, Harold believes that technology must be embraced in order to overcome the

difficulties that will arise in the future. "Problems will always occur, whether they are caused by personal, national, regional or global decisions," remarks Harold. He now shares the load of business responsibilities with his key management team, which gives him more time to come up with innovative solutions to future problems.

He believes that running a business successfully also depends on your ability to inspire and groom your staff. The experience of seeing employees being treated poorly during his working days was another factor that drove him into business. Harold wanted to become an employer that people loved working for, who appreciated and rewarded their efforts. The ingenious idea to implement an IT infrastructure turned his business fortunes around, but without the right staff, it would have been an empty investment. "You need to look after and upgrade your staff, as well as your technology," urges Harold.



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Foreseeing future opportunities

Harold is now in the process of doubling his staff numbers to prepare for the influx of new businesses coming to Singapore. Leading the way for local courier companies looking to capitalise on the nation's growth into an international business hub, XDel is certainly primed for the continuation of a prosperous odyssey under the leadership of Harold Lee.

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Sundays & Public Holidays: Closed



The courier that makes a difference.