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— Mr Tan Suee Chieh

HOW HWEE YOUNG

Prudential CEO at 34, he gave it up to chase dream

Ex-insurance boss now pursues passion in organisational psychology

By **LEONG CHAN TEIK**

HE WAS 40 when he gave up status and a fat salary to go back to school.

Now, two years later, Mr Tan Suee Chieh is back with a master's degree and a job in an entirely different field.

Previously, he was managing director (established markets) of Prudential Corporation Asia, overseeing 1,100 staff and about US\$1.3 billion (S\$2.3 billion) of business a year. He was also president of the Life Insurance Association of Singapore.

For more than 15 years, he had been fascinated with organisational psychology, which is about understanding people dynamics in the workplace and motivating people.

After 20 years with Prudential, Mr Tan was himself running out of motivation: "I believe passion is the foundation of excellence. At Prudential, I lost my passion in the last year or so. I felt I was playing the same tape for too long."

So he resigned and, despite his apprehensions about his next career, headed for Columbia University in New York

for a structured education in organisational psychology.

Back when he was much younger, psychology was his first love. But he also had practical considerations about a career and, in the end, studied at the London School of Economics.

Armed with a first-class honours degree in actuarial science, he then joined the insurance industry. At age 25, he became Malaysia's youngest actuary.

And at 28, Mr Tan, son of a rubber trader in the small Selangor town of Semenyih, was named Outstanding Young Malaysian of the Year by Malaysian Jaycees and Malaysia's Business Times. He became CEO of Prudential Singapore at 34.

Today, he is back with a master's degree from Columbia — and a job as president of the Asia Pacific region at SHL Group, a British company that helps organisations select, recruit, promote and develop employees.

Its clients include DHL International, Sony Electronics, Singapore Airlines and Singapore Press Holdings (SPH). SPH uses the tests to help it choose who to give out undergraduate scholarships to.

SHL, which is the largest British-based private employer of psychologists with more than 300 psychologists worldwide, offers psychometric tests to measure people preferences, motivations, competencies and abilities objectively.

Such tests are a big aid to recruiting the right people, or assigning them the right roles, instead of relying heavily on gut

feel, says Mr Tan. The tests are useful too when promoting people, putting a project team together, and creating new competencies for organisational change, he adds.

Making the right decisions can help create a workforce which is excited about work.

Says Mr Tan: "At the moment, very few people can say, 'I love my job. I wake up every morning raring to go'."

Can people fake their answers in the tests? "There are certain 'lie detector' indicators in the tests. If these indicators show up, we would be alerted and we will probe further into the areas of concern during the interview," he says.

Singapore contributes \$2.5 million a year in revenue to SHL, or more than a tenth of the Asia Pacific region's. The company has 15 staff in Singapore out of its 200 employees in the region.

Psychometric tests are not widely used in Singapore, unlike in Britain, says Mr Tan.

An expert with a leading executive search firm in Singapore explains: "When you recruit senior executives who have worked for, say, 20 years, the best prediction of how he will perform is his track record."

What about personality traits and weaknesses?

"If you talk to his peers, bosses and business associates, you'd be amazed how much you can find out," says the expert.

But Mr Tan counters: "Are these objective and measurable? Obviously not."

YOU'RE HIRED: How SHL put him to the test

HOW Mr Tan Suee Chieh got hired by SHL Group sheds light on the human resource practices that the firm tries to sell to its clients.

Last year, Mr Tan sent an e-mail message describing his past career to SHL chief executive John Bateson.

"Can I have tea with you when I'm next in London?" wrote Mr Tan from New York, where he was studying for his master's degree in organisational psychology.

Shortly after, in September, they met for 1½ hours.

Six weeks later, Mr Bateson asked if Mr Tan was interested in a job with SHL.

He also e-mailed a password for Mr Tan to access the SHL website to do two psychometric tests.

The tests were to find out more about his personality, and to assess his numerical skills and verbal reasoning.

"He could see the way I prefer to work, what sort of boss I am, the type of boss I like, how emotionally intelligent I am, how comfortable I am with change, how eager I am to influence and control events, and so on," says Mr Tan.

These are details that a conventional face-to-face interview won't throw up — at least not as easily or quickly.

Mr Bateson also arranged for SHL's president of the Americas to have lunch with Mr Tan in New York. "Obviously, it was to size me up," says Mr Tan with a laugh.

Then came two days in London where Mr Tan went through some more tests.

One was a hypothetical business problem which he had to devise solutions for in 50 minutes, and then make a 10-minute presentation to top SHL management.

Next, he had to arrange six packs of cards according to certain patterns within a set time.

"This is a good way to find out someone's intellectual horsepower, which you can't really tell by way of an interview," said Mr Tan.

Then followed some customary interviews. Just before Christmas, he landed the job.