



Asian Productivity Organization “The APO in the News”

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Harnek Singh: No job is difficult when you put heart, mind to it

Starting of as aircraft mechanic at RSAF, Harnek later led Productivity Development Unit at Singapore's Ministry of Defence. He is now VP/Director of Business Excellence at Singapore Technologies Engineering Ltd

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Harnek Singh: Singapore's ST Engineering – PHOTO / BOOK

How do business units build on their strengths and ensure sustainable growth for the business as a whole? "The business excellence framework is the answer because the business excellence categories address everything – leadership, customers, strategy, people, processes, knowledge and results", Mr Harnek Singh, Vice President and Director of Business Excellence at Singapore Technologies Engineering Ltd., pointed out.

Harnek's outstanding career in promoting business excellence has been anything but planned. He came to Singapore from Malaysia with an 'O' Level certificate in hand. He joined the Republic of Singapore Air Force (RSAF) in 1973 as an aircraft mechanic. The industrious young man took the initiative to study simultaneously, obtaining a Diploma in Aeronautical Engineering (Operational Technology) and Personnel Management, pursuant to which he was made an Air Maintenance Officer. While working in the RSAF, he also actively promoted productivity and teamwork. He fondly recollected that his 140 Squadron was always ranked highly in the RSAF. This was due to the critical role that "taking good care" of team members and colleagues played in ensuring peak levels of performance.

As a result of his work ethic and good performance at the RSAF, Harnek was headhunted to lead the Productivity Development Unit at the Ministry of Defence (MINDEF). Not only did he successfully push for the adoption of programmes to enhance productivity during this stint, he also concurrently served as the Secretary for MINDEF's Productivity Committee and several other productivity related committees.

At MINDEF, Harnek oversaw the implementation of programmes to engage the full-time national servicemen and regular servicemen on a deeper level and strengthen their sense of belonging to the Singapore Armed Forces. He was the Secretary of the inaugural PS21 ExCEL (Excellence through Continuous Enterprise and Learning) Committee. The PS21 proposal, which was initiated by the Prime Minister's Office, was aimed at positioning Singapore's public service for the 21st century.

Throughout his career, Harnek espoused the philosophy that no job is difficult if one sets his or her heart and mind to it. He proved this personal philosophy time and again to the extent that no one harboured second thoughts about the quality of his work. Accordingly, he proceeded to earn both national and international acclaim for it. He very candidly acknowledged that, right from the beginning, he was not trained for all the productivity promotion and business excellence jobs that he undertook. This, however, was no hurdle for him. He acquired the necessary skills along the way as he continued to put his best foot forward and went from developing one capability after another.

In 1995, Singapore Technologies (ST), with its stable of companies, was keen to embrace the PS21 ExCEL initiative that Harnek had facilitated as well as other programmes that MINDEF had successfully implemented. Harnek was, once again, headhunted for the job and he joined ST in 1995. He has been instrumental in introducing and sustaining the relevancy of business excellence standards in ST such as by the QUEST (Quality and Excellence in Singapore Technologies) programme. As a result of these efforts, all the business units within ST embarked on the business excellence journey in 1997. Devoted to learning and personal development, Harnek obtained a Master in Business Administration during his time at ST.

In 2001, Harnek joined ST Engineering Corporate headquarters as Head of Department facilitating the process of all business units embracing business excellence and working synergistically as an integrated engineering group. This yielded better coordination within the ST group and enhanced its business performance. The initiatives that Harnek spearheaded facilitated ST Engineering's attainment of numerous awards including the Singapore Quality Award in 2002, Singapore Innovation Excellence Award in 2003, the first public listed company to be bestowed this pinnacle award, the Inaugural Singapore Quality Award with Special Commendation in 2007, and the Asia Pacific Quality Organisation Global Performance Excellence Award (World Class) 2011. Today, ST Engineering is an integrated group with a global presence in 46 cities across 24 countries and is one of the largest companies listed on Singapore Exchange by market capitalisation. Productivity and innovation have been the key enablers of its success and Harnek has had a key role in it.



In addition to working at ST Engineering, Harnek works closely with SPRING Singapore at the national level to promote the business excellence initiative among Singapore companies and the public sector. In addition to helping companies assess their performance and identify opportunities for improvement, the programmes also help companies align their operations to their mission and vision, and meet customer requirements. He has played a significant role in facilitating numerous public and private

sector organisations towards attaining and maintaining various certifications, such as the Singapore Quality Award (SQA), and Singapore Quality Class (SQC).

As a result of his unparalleled experience, Harnek regularly represents Singapore's interests at multiple international fora. He has led many certification assessment teams locally and overseas for awards such as the SQA, SQC, Business Excellence Niche Awards (namely Innovation, People and Service Excellence), and the Singapore Service Excellence Medallion. He has also represented Singapore at the Global Human Resources Forum in 2006 and as member of the Strategic Advisory Group for ISO9001. He was also invited to join the International Academy for Quality (IAQ) as an Associate Academician. He is recognised as a Technical Expert by Asia Productivity Organisation and Asia Pacific Quality Organisation and has been invited to provide advice and training to various Asian government bodies, including Iran and Fiji on business and service excellence. He represents Singapore on the ISO TC 176 and has contributed to the introduction of the revised ISO 9001 2015 version. In this process of Harnek's international engagement, Singapore's efforts and achievements in business excellence are evidenced by the fact that SPRING Singapore was designated as a Centre for Excellence (COE) for business excellence by the Asian Productivity Organisation (APO) in 2009, this being the first time that the APO has appointed a COE.

“ *Harnek has been a great pillar of support to SPRING's business excellence initiative since 1998. He has made significant contributions to ST Engineering's business excellence journey, notably facilitating the organisation's successful attainment of the Singapore Quality Award in 2002, the Singapore Innovation Excellence Award in 2003, and the SQA with Special Commendation in 2007.*

In addition, he participates actively as a business excellence assessor in both certificate and award level assessments. The quality of his work has been highly commended by fellow assessors and the organisations he assessed.

His invaluable contributions, high competence, and knowledge are well regarded by the business excellence fraternity. He is truly an inspiration for other business excellence assessors and the community.

-Mr Sauw Kook Choy SQA Administrator SPRING Singapore

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Within the Sikh community, Harnek was part of the pioneer team that facilitated the registration of Sikh Sewaks Singapore as the first Sikh youth group in Singapore. Harnek served in the public relations function as and Secretary for Sikh Sewaks Singapore from mid-1978 to early 1984. The groups adopted various innovative approaches to reach out to Sikhs youths. These included evening to dawn prayers with the use of projection screens to project hymns, public highlighting of Sikh festivals and

celebrations, debates, camps, sports events and blood donations drives. These efforts inspired many to take time to better understand the Sikh beliefs and way of life. Sikh Sewaks Singapore can also be credited with organising the Veskahi Di Raat at the National Theatre in 1983. It included an all-Singaporean performance by volunteers comprising students, teachers and youth. The event was graced by then-Minister for National Development, Mr S Dhanabalan.

In the early 1980s, Singapore schools began teaching Religious Studies. Sikh Sewaks Singapore started the process of having Sikhism included in the curriculum. It reached out to various learned sources, including in the United Kingdom, to develop a quality curriculum benchmarked against similar programmes to ensure quality and consistency. The group then organised a Sikh Studies Forum and invited various stakeholders to discuss the proposed curriculum. The proposed curriculum was presented to the Ministry of Education and Sikh Studies was introduced in schools in 1983.

The sincerity with which Harnek has always approached his commitments is truly inspiring. It is this sincerity that has allowed him to become a leader in business excellence and make his mark at the national and international levels.

[UPDATE: Harnek retired from ST Engineering on 11 Oct 2016. At the time of publishing this news, he was still the President of Asia Pacific Quality Organisation, APQO)



[This article is courtesy of SINGAPORE AT 50: 50 SIKHS AND THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS, a book published by the Young Sikh Association, Singapore (YSA) in conjunction with Singapore's 50th birthday]

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