

Digging deep for success

Geoengineering company does well by playing in the dirt



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NO MAN is an island when it comes to problem solving, and science and engineering have proven time and again that a multi-disciplinary approach is key. Even devices like smartphones, are a combination of having access to the internet, GPS, electronic components and others – all pack-

aged neatly into the palm of your hands. Renowned American scientist, entrepreneur and inventor Robert Samuel Langer Jr, who runs the Langer Lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology is known to encourage a multi-disciplinary approach at the lab. Known for fostering collaborations between scientists from diverse backgrounds, he also has about 1,050 patents worldwide that have been licensed or sublicensed to over 250 pharmaceutical, chemical, biotechnology and medical device companies.

Locally, engineering consultancy service provider G&P Professionals Sdn Bhd has employed a philosophy of collaboration to expand from just a pure geotechnical consultancy to a multi-disciplinary organisation able to provide consultancy services ranging from underground construction to coastal reclamation projects in the country.

Its co-founder and chief executive officer Datuk Dr Gue See Sew said the company started with doing earth-related forensics, work that commanded low fees but interested him as it gave him the opportunity to find out the root cause of a soil erosion, test hypothesis and subsequently offer safe and economical solutions.

The company was founded with two other partners and two employees in 1999 after a disagreement with his previous company's management.

In 1995, Gue, who was the managing director of another consulting firm, was informed in a shareholders meeting that with a recession looming, salaries and allowances had to be cut by 30%.

He argued that if the firm made a profit, the "savings" should be paid back to employees. However, in 1998, when the audited accounts showed a profit, the shareholders only agreed to pay half of what was cut from the staff allowance and salaries earlier.

"I was upset and told our senior staff who wanted to resign that I would join them to start a new firm as I did not want to be an MD who did not honour a promise," he told Metrobiz.

With RM50,000 in capital pooled from his two partners, Gue started G&P in a rented 1,500 sq ft office in Bandar Tasik Selatan, Kuala Lumpur.

Recalling the company's early days, he said the company got three contracts to work on in its first week. The work was mainly for consulting on residential and commercial



- 1 G&P Water & Maritime Sdn Bhd technical director Lim Choon Lin (left) analysing the flood severity of a site and the possible solutions to it.
- 2 G&P Structures Sdn Bhd managing director Heng Tang Hai looking at the structural design with one of the computer aided design software.
- 3 Gue inspecting a site at the Cochrane underground station that is part of the MRT project. G&P was involved in the design of the temporary support system for excavation works and geotechnical support for tunnelling and excavation works. This station also served as launching shaft for tunnelling work toward northern and southern side with a maximum excavation depth of 32m below ground.
- 4 An overall view of one of the floors in the engineering consultancy service provider.

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- 5 A tunnel boring machine breaking out at Maluri Portal. This TBM was launched from the Cochrane launching shaft. G&P is known for its expertise geoenvironmental projects such as this.
- 6 Gue (seated) discussing engineering complexities in one of the tunneling projects with his team members.

Growing to encompass 12 companies

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developments. He said company subsequently made a name for finding solutions to foundation or piling problems.

"As engineers, we continue to help by advising local councils on landslides and hillside development issues," he said.

Today, G&P has 325 employees and 12 other specialist companies housed in a six storey, 52,000 sq ft office in Bandar Tasik Selatan. It has offices in Singapore, Cambodia and Vietnam.

G&P started growing after 2001 when the company was awarded a consulting project for a 1,200 acre township project by a local infrastructure and property developer for fees totalling RM10mil over a 10 year period.

"Apart from carrying out investigations on the soil structure, we also do value engineering, giving our clients advice on cost, time

and long-term maintenance management options that clients can implement. When you deal with experienced people within the industry, they appreciate that you went the extra mile.

"The developer trusted us and wanted to deal only with us. They needed consulting in other areas, including structural, infrastructure, mechanical and electrical engineering — expertise that we did not have but could source within the industry," he said.

As a result the company grew, with more specialist companies being formed and subsequently taking part in other projects, from analysis of tunnels, flood mitigation projects, earthquake engineering, tsunami assessment, highway and transportation to the investigation of foundations for high-rise buildings.

The former president of the Institution of Engineers Malaysia from 2001 to 2003 added

that his interest in geotechnical analysis deepened after completing his doctorate in Oxford University in 1984.

"Soil is not a man-made material, hence soil in every area is unique, and you have to understand it all, from its strength to its compressibility," he said.

Soil is not the only thing Gue understands when it comes to building the company. He also has a firm grasp of human motivation which can be seen in the "specialist company" model employed in G&P.

"The other companies are not subsidiaries. The managing directors of these companies hold 70% of the shares and we are in midst of pushing it up to 90%. We do not want to control the companies and we want them to be the bigger boss," he quipped.

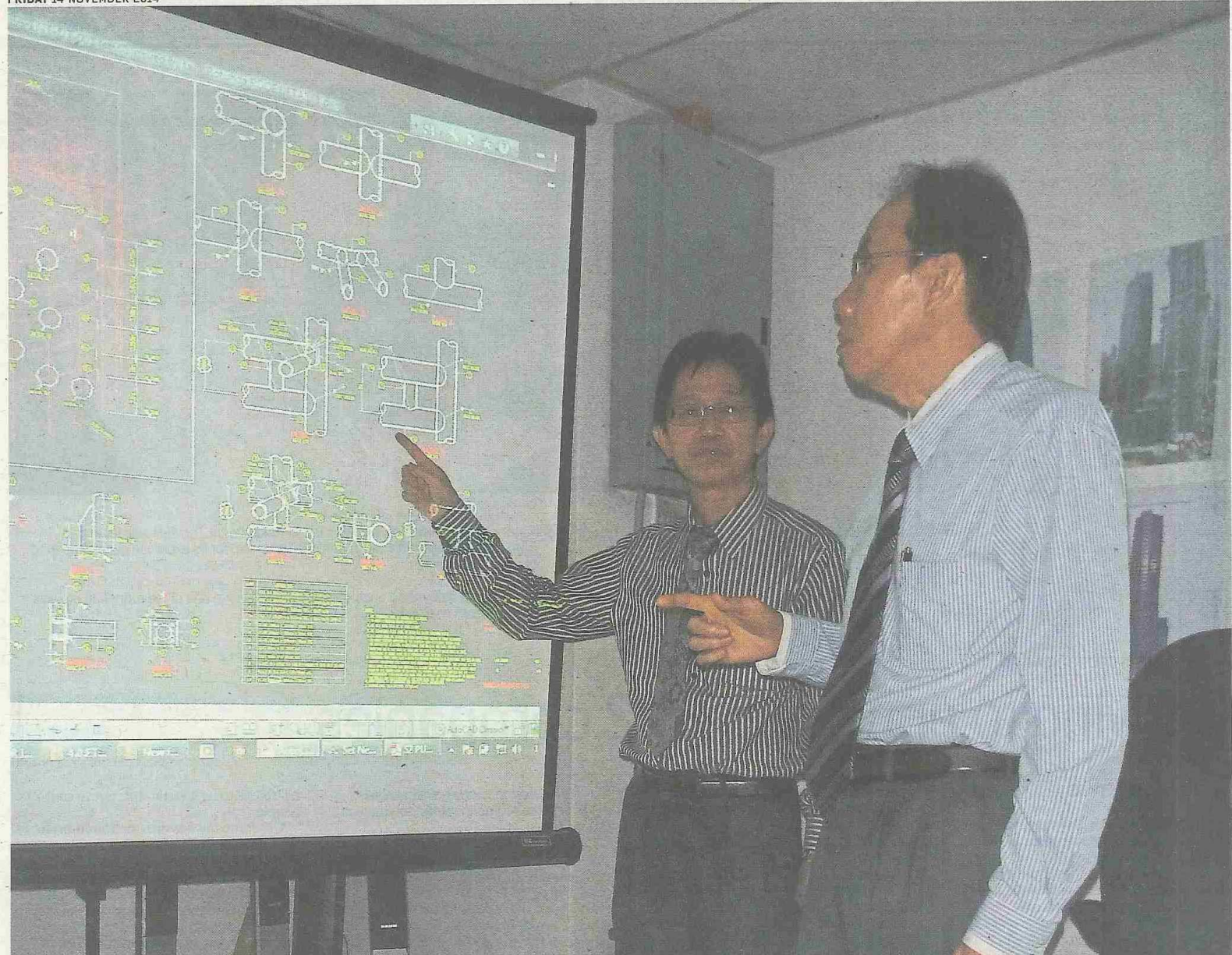
He added that people were initially uncertain about the policy as it might create more management issues, but he emphasised that

his role is to be a facilitator, not to control people.

The company has also instituted profit sharing for employees with more than three years of service. Gue said it was one of the methods the company used to retain talent.

He said experience was valuable for the company, citing soil testing as an example. "If you do not understand the soil profile, you have to be very conservative in your estimation of the soil's strength. But you will need experience to define what conservative is," he says.

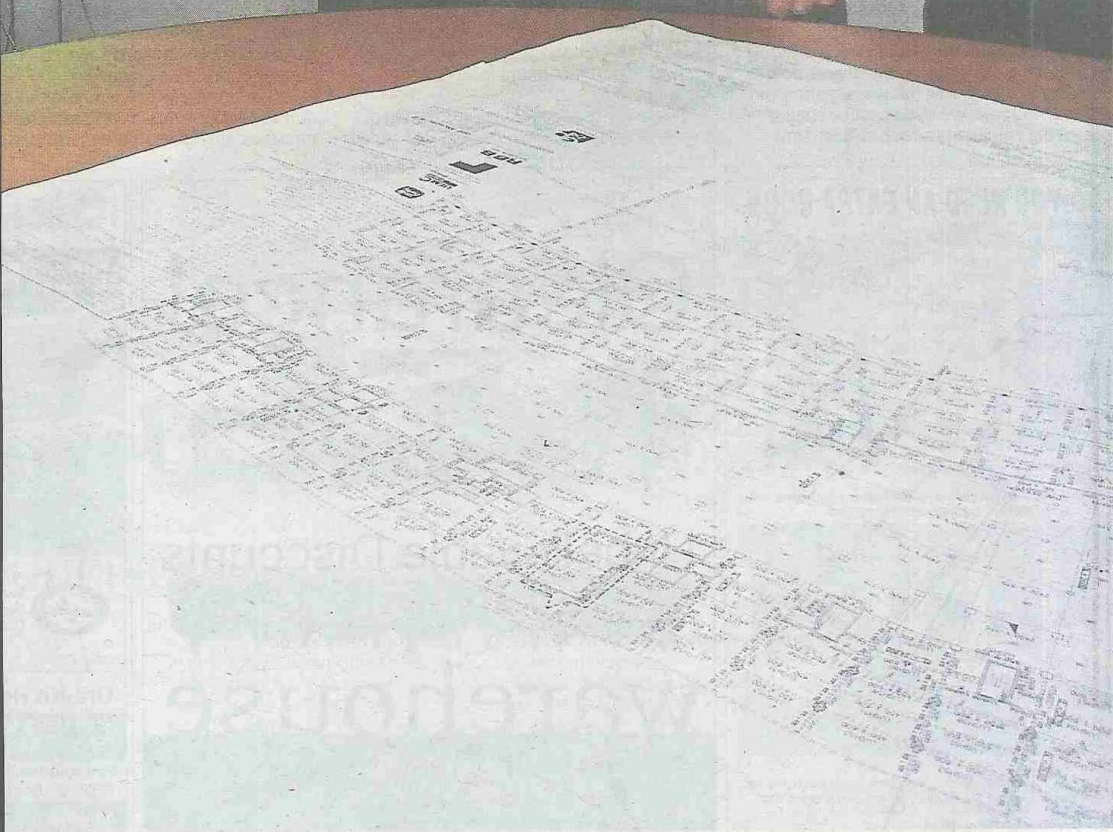
These days, the company continues to invest in its people. To date it has ploughed RM3mil into training and upgrading the relevant software that can help the engineers do better design and strength estimations, while taking up more complex projects that will need the best of its multi-disciplinary approach.



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Growing expertise: G&P Professionals Sdn Bhd founder and chief executive officer Datuk Dr Gue See Sew (left) analysing the technical drawing of a project with G&P Structures Sdn Bhd managing director Heng Tang Hai.