



Southeast Asia
Centre of
Asia-Pacific Excellence

Inspire Group: Inspiring Asia with a unique approach

The Company

Inspire Group is an award-winning learning design and leadership solutions company founded in New Zealand in 2001 and now operating globally in the leadership development and digital learning industry. The company's founder, Dan Tohill, envisioned a business that would excel at making learning work and recruited a team that understood what it meant to learn and teach. From his previous experience of working across the Asia-Pacific region on a series of large SAP implementations, change projects within government and corporate mergers, he applied his knowledge to form the backbone of Inspire Group's ethos, to "apply the perfect mix of creativity and experience to understand the application of learning at work."

Several years later in 2008, Tohill started investigating how blended learning approaches could be applied to management and leadership development. From this, Inspire Leaders was formed to provide learning solutions that accelerated the performance and development of people who were new to leadership roles. It was a recession period then and he was confident that while everyone else was assuming a low risk position, he could offer something fresh to the market.

Since then, the company has helped hundreds of clients lift capability and culture globally. It has developed thousands of learning solutions for clients worldwide, including bespoke e-learning courses, leadership workshops and online blended solutions through its own authoring tool, Chameleon. The company works with clients across a broad range of industries and sectors from banking to telecommunications, government and not-for-profit. Notable clients include Meridian, Beca, ASB Bank, ANZ, New Zealand Post, Spark, Kmart, Seek, New Zealand Customs and MBIE.

Inspire Group's expertise over the past 20 years has been recognized through more than 25 global awards, including a recent Brandon Hall Gold for Best Advance in Leadership Development, one of the top global accolades in the industry, as well as Best Training Provider and Best Leadership Development Consultant at the 2019 World HRD Congress. Inspire Group has previously been named a New Zealand JRA Best Workplace top 10 places to work for several years consecutively.

Inspire Group currently hires a total of 51 employees. The company has offices in New Zealand and Australia, in cities such as Wellington, Auckland and Melbourne, and it has most recently established a new office in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia to serve as the company's gateway hub into Asia. The company's business foray into Asia is led by Inspire Asia's CEO, James McCulloch and the newly appointed Director of Inspire Group Asia, Ulrika Brunner.



Challenges

Inspire Group's business expansion into Southeast Asia had several key challenges related to the industry that it was operating in. Nevertheless, confidence in being able to seize opportunities to add value in the region as well as a growing demand for leadership and learning solutions led Inspire Group to target and plan their international growth strategy for success while managing the challenges encountered along the way.

Finding and winning over new clients in Asia

The company presented itself with three key questions that outlined the main challenge of growing their business in Asia. "Where do we find our clients? How do we win over clients? How are we going to be paid? These were the three key questions we had," says McCulloch. The company's target audience was primarily HR Directors, and being able to reach out effectively and engage with them was difficult when the company was new and relatively unknown in the Asian market.

McCulloch shared his experience in conducting close to 140 meetings in a timeframe of 9 - 10 weeks. It was time-consuming, some meetings were very productive while some were less productive, and overall, it was an "intense" period during which time "stamina and resilience" were required to persevere on the journey of establishing the business in Asia. Being new in the market also required the patience and hard work to build the credibility and profile of Inspire Group's brand name. Local organizations were curious to know who Inspire was working with in the local market, and it was indeed "a real challenge when you are new in the market with just a handful of new clients," says McCulloch.

Distance, different cultural perspectives, different expectations

"Being in a different part of the world, it was totally complex," says McCulloch. He did not have a local team in the early days and the distance between New Zealand and any Asian country required at least a 10-hour flight. That meant frequent travels and being away from home a lot more than expected, in addition to managing time zone differences.

Inspire Group started out by engaging with prospective clients in different countries that predominantly spoke English, but addressing the language barrier was just a first step. Different cultural perspectives varied amongst countries and within countries with 'multi-cultural populations', contributing to the complexity. For instance, in Malaysia, the main population groups are the Malays, ethnic Chinese and ethnic Indians, each of which separately retain their own religions, customs and way of life. Understanding the different cultural perspectives, customs and etiquette would be key to successfully engaging with clients, but when Inspire Group was new to Malaysia, it was a learning journey every day.

Expectations of prospective clients can also vary significantly. McCulloch cited the example of differences in expectations that influenced receptiveness of their learning solutions on the part of clients in Singapore compared to Malaysia. Expectations of a rapid response time by clients required emails and messages to be replied to promptly at any time of the day or night.



Relationship management

Relationship management is critical in Southeast Asia and it is “a full-time job,” says McCulloch. Companies vary in their leadership development and learning solution needs, and it requires invested time to understand each client’s individual needs. This understanding was key to gaining a client’s trust and belief in the company’s approach. It would typically take at least “several meetings” to be able to secure a formal engagement with a client.

Networking and location proximity to clients goes hand in hand with relationship management and it requires time and energy to get to know each client. McCulloch shared that, “In this part of the world, clients like to know much more about you and your family; they want to get to know you personally before moving on to the next level of business discussion.” That was something new to him compared to working in New Zealand.

Strategy

Establishing a clear market entry focus

Establishing a clear focus and implementing a strategy backed by research was essential. Inspire Group’s strategy for growing in Southeast Asia is to “go to where you are welcomed,” says McCulloch. He commented that, “The company will work with the willing as what they do is already quite amazing.” The company’s point of difference is being “simple” and “focusing on impact” and they actively seek out clients who want to work with them.

Reflecting back on the earlier days when the company initiated their business expansion journey to Southeast Asia, in-market visits in countries such as Singapore, Malaysia and Myanmar were fruitful and eye-opening. “Little observations count,” says McCulloch, explaining the importance of being super observant of how locals go about conducting their daily lives, what they talk about and how they communicate to each another. Observations and cues enabled the company to gain better understanding of prospective markets.

Selecting the location to set up their first hub to act as the gateway to Southeast Asia was a key to growing their business. Even though there was a perception held by many that Singapore was the “ideal location to serve as the gateway,” in-market visits, observations and detailed research suggested that Malaysia would be a better option for Inspire Group.

There were several reasons for this choice. First, Malaysia is English-speaking and has a large multicultural population with various mix of industries and companies, both local and international. Specifically for the leadership and learning solutions industry that they were operating in, there was a lack of similar competitors in Malaysia, as a large proportion of customised learning organisations were franchisers with American training providers and did not provide any offerings akin to Inspire’s unique, bespoke approach.

Most importantly, “Malaysians welcomed Inspire,” says McCulloch. The market was curious and excited about what Inspire had to offer. At the same time, Inspire Group consulted with NZTE on the



location choice for setting up a regional hub and was provided with positive feedback and support in selecting Malaysia as this hub.

Incorporating a local regional office and establishing a local team

Inspire Group had dedicated staff based in Wellington who worked flexibly in tandem with Malaysian hours to provide the support required in the initial stages, but as the business grew, incorporating a local regional office became a more realistic option. It allowed for stronger in-market presence and closer proximity to clients. Inspire Group Malaysia was officially incorporated in Malaysia in June 2019 with plans to grow the company's local team.

The company currently has a team of five associates, a mix of local and NZ trainers who act as programme facilitators, and the company recently appointed a highly experienced Director, Ulrika Brunner, to work alongside McCulloch. Valuing the contribution and support from experienced industry experts, the company appointed Andrew Goodwin, a current Beachhead Advisor at NZTE and former Chief Operating Officer of Datacom Malaysia, to the Board of Inspire Group Malaysia. The company aims to hire a local marketing manager to "help put us out there" as the company begins to look beyond Malaysia to grow its regional business into countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia and possibly Vietnam.

Experimenting with different approaches to widen market reach

Inspire group's expansion into Asia is still "a learning journey." McCulloch says, "You need to find out what is working and you have got to try a few different approaches." To unleash potential opportunities, McCulloch travels from Wellington to Kuala Lumpur and the surrounding region as often as once or twice a month. "Creating an impression of constant presence in the region" was very important.

McCulloch shared that he participated in over 25 conferences over a period of six months, presenting at large conferences of over 2000 people, as well as at several workshops, and supporting local HR events such as the Hacking HR Forum in Kuala Lumpur. Participation at conferences and speaking events provided the platform and opportunity to educate the market and share Inspire's solutions and point of difference. Engaging in such events provided an ideal networking point where their target audiences convened. McCulloch says that it was difficult gaining the first few clients initially, but it got easier along the way, highlighting that "it was helpful to highlight to prospective new clients who Inspire was currently talking to or engaging with" at prospective meetings.

Understanding social media usage within the context of Malaysia and leveraging it as a complementary tool to build brand awareness and for reaching out to new clients was an approach that was undertaken by Inspire Group from the very beginning. LinkedIn was popular for sharing news and updates in Malaysia, and WhatsApp was widely used as a communication and sharing tool. Recognizing the importance of referrals and word-of-mouth marketing as a common phenomenon in Malaysia, it was an approach that was embedded into the company's marketing plans.



Additionally, the company collaborated with other like-minded local organizations to facilitate a wider market outreach. When Inspire opened the doors of their first office in Asia in Malaysia, they were excited to share it with one of their regional partners, SelfDrvn Enterprise, an organization which provides a Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) platform to help organizations improve engagement with their employees and customers through effective communication, gamification and behavioural analytics.

Develop cultural understanding and integrate with the local business environment

Developing an understanding of the local market and knowing what the market likes is very important. Equally important is the ability to instinctively understand the “rhythm of the day,” says McCulloch. Learning about the local business environment and having an appreciation for the local culture is crucial, and so is “learning a few words of the local language.” Although English is very widely spoken in Malaysia, making an effort in this way creates a good impression.

The business environment is very different in Malaysia compared to New Zealand, and learning the subtle nuances helped McCulloch forge stronger working relationships with clients. For example, in a country where the majority ethnic group is officially known as Bumiputera (literally, sons on the soil), a category that is dominated by Muslim Malays, being mindful of their religious customs and business etiquette goes a long way.

One example is waiting for the other party to extend their hand for a handshake first, as some are uncomfortable shaking hands with a member of the opposite sex. Another is when a client proposes ‘Let’s meet for coffee at 8’, it would typically mean coffee at 8pm, in contrast to New Zealand, where it would be quite the reverse at 8am. A typical working day can be filled with as many as seven meetings back-to-back and the day would have just appeared to have begun at ‘5pm’ where social networking over drinks and food were customarily seen as part of the working day.

Meetings can often be “unpredictable” in this part of the world and it was particularly helpful to learn how to get around the city and have a good understanding of transportation infrastructure as “traffic in this part of the world is unlike the traffic in New Zealand.” Overall, the recommendation is that when in Malaysia, do as the Malaysians do.

Resources

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