



# ERNST & YOUNG ENTREPRENEUR OF THE YEAR®

THE EDGE  
JANUARY 13 - JANUARY 18, 2003

## Honouring entrepreneurship



Alex Kong, CEO, Asiatravelmart



Chan Boon Yong, MD, The Carat Club



Chuah Choon Bin, CEO, Pentamaster



Ang Kim Jhew, MD, JSP Consulting



Dr Bernard Tan, MD, AsiaEP



Jaspal Singh, EC, PKTech



Hazimah Zainuddin, MD, Hyrax Oil



Helen Read, MD, MS Read



Margaret Kaloo, Principal, etc  
International School Malaysia



Tan Sri Bok Nielsen, MD,  
United Plantations



Tan Sri Chua Hock Chin,  
Executive Vice Chairman, Road Builder



Major Dr Donald Yap Tat Keat,  
Group MD Ire-Tex



Tan Sri Francis Yeh,  
Chairman, YTL Corp



Dr Lim Wee Chai,  
President, Top Glove Corp



Tan Sri Mustapha Kamal,  
Group EC, MK Land Holdings



Datuk P Kasi,  
ED, MK Land Holdings



Tan Sri Rozali Ismail,  
EC, Puncak Niaga Holdings



Datuk Yeap Sew Chung,  
Group CEO, INS Holdings



Datuk Mohamed Zaini Amran,  
MD, BumiHiway Ventures

### BY NETV@LUE2.0 TEAM

They are the people who matter when it comes to creating and adding value, providing new jobs, being in the forefront in innovation, and putting in the hours and the efforts necessary to make their ventures work. And they have a vested interest more than anybody else for they are the owners themselves. They are the entrepreneurs.

This week, some of them will be honoured by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi at the inaugural awards ceremony for the Ernst and Young Entrepreneur of the Year Award.

Nineteen shortlisted candidates will vie

for five awards, the most prestigious of which is Master Entrepreneur. The winner of this award will proceed to no less a glamorous place than Monte Carlo later this year for a crack at the World Entrepreneur of the Year Award.

Other categories include Emerging Entrepreneur, Information & Communications Technology Entrepreneur and Women Entrepreneur.

The candidates have varied backgrounds and different motivation — some were almost altruistic (or at least that's what they said) while others were driven by a compulsive desire to make money. Some, especially in the Master Entrepreneur class, are well-known while others

you may not even have heard of.

But they have some things in common. They either created an enterprise from scratch with impressive growth and potential or considerably improved upon an existing one, being not only the primary mover but a significant owner as well, differentiating the entrepreneur from the manager.

And in our interviews with the candidates in the following pages, it becomes clear that they share certain characteristics as well, among which is an almost overriding will to succeed against all odds and the willingness to put in the hours and effort to make a success of their enterprise.

Often, the path to success is fraught

with obstacles and many of them, if they have not failed before, have come perilously close. Courage and determination saw a number of them through.

There has to be a clear vision of what the product or service is that is going to be provided and how it will be differentiated from the rest. The only way for an enterprise to succeed is to serve an existing market (or create one if there is none) and do it better than anyone else.

The following interviews of how some did it will not only be an inspiration to others who want to follow and surpass their example but will also serve as a valuable guide to what should be done (or avoided) to succeed as an entrepreneur. ■



**EDITORIAL TEAM**

**Editor**

Karamjit Singh

**Contributor**

Bernice Low

**Design**

Sharon Khoh, Raymond Khor,  
Azree Haidar Bin Jeffrizal

**Production**

Thomas Chin, Zamri Razali,  
Hong Kin Slang, Yong One

**ADVERTISING & MARKETING**

# master entrepreneur



**Tan Sri B Bek Nielsen**

**Managing director, United Plantations Bhd**  
Despite his age, Tan Sri B Bek Nielsen is still very much in charge and in control at United Plantations. Nominated in the master entrepreneur category for the Ernst and Young Entrepreneur of the Year awards, his experiences over the years have no doubt helped to shape his business mettle.

Nielsen arrived in what was then Malaya at the height of the Communist Emergency. The young Danish engineer was soon being told by his friends to leave the country since it seemed to be unsafe then.



...ing the dangers of the Emergency, the race riots of 1969 (where he recalls making a mad dash to the Federal Hotel in KL in the midst of a riot) and climbing the ladder at United Plantations to eventually become its chairman.

As befitting his background as an engineer, Nielsen believes in being hands-on. He is an entrepreneur who sees little value in sitting in an ivory tower office and is a keen advocate of what he calls "management by walking around." Leaders, argues Nielsen, need to be seen and by walking about the office, act to influence employees in a positive manner and create a sense of team spirit.

Nielsen is immensely proud of the scheme instituted under his leadership at United Plantations, the Benevolent Fund for the Employees of United Plantations Bhd, which is designed to provide financial support for estate workers who have retired and also scholarships for children of estate workers.

A bachelor till his forties, Nielsen believes that any person desiring to embark on an entrepreneurial venture must always consider the impact of such a decision on the family, especially the spouse.

"Entrepreneurship is not a nine-to-five job. You might find yourself working till midnight, so discuss it with your wife before you embark on an entrepreneurial venture," he advises.

**Tan Sri Chua Hock Chin**

**Executive vice-chairman, Road Builder (M) Holdings Bhd**  
Way back in the 1970's you could actually count the number of graduates in the country. Tan Sri Chua Hock Chin was one of them. The policy then was for all graduates to serve a minimum of three years with the government. As an engineer, Chua joined the Public Works Department. Little did he know then that this was to pave his way for relationships built that would later help him win some Public Works jobs when he left in 1977 to start his own construction company. But lest you think his success today was built on relationships he quietly corrects you. "I delivered. That was the key that opened more jobs. Not who I knew." However, he does not deny that building relationships is also important.

That may have been fortuitous but everything else that happened to Chua and his company Road Builder have been about smarts, quality and reliability.

What was his toughest experience in building Road

Builder? It was mid-1997 and the baht had been devalued, triggering a chain reaction in the region. And in the midst of all this, Chua had paid RM50 million for a stake in Besraya! "The *Titanic* was sinking and I had just the week before invested our entire cash hoard in toll-road operator Besraya."

One can understand the sinking feeling he must have had. But he found a way to survive and today says that buying into Besraya was one of the best decisions Road Builder ever made. Another smart move was stepping back from management to let professionals run the show. "I provide the leadership and let them make the decisions as I believe they know better," he modestly says. And in the office, he adopts an open-door policy where anyone is free to walk in and share ideas with him. His belief is that people will become more creative if encouraged to make decisions.



**Dr Lim Wee Chai**

**President/managing director, Top Glove Corp Bhd**  
You can say that Dr Lim Lim Chee Chai learns his life lessons very well. "In 1997, one of our largest customers did not pay us RM1.3 million and that experience taught me not to rely too much on a few customers." He was selling his latex gloves to customers in over 30

continues on Page 4

## Ernst & Young Entrepreneur Of The Year Awards

from Page 2

countries back then. Today, he has customers in 118 countries. In terms of managing his business, every senior executive must e-mail him at least once a day. "It is important to have good communications with your leaders," he explains. In his business, continuous improvement is a must and Lim likes to tap the knowledge of his entire eco-system — staff, suppliers and customers. He gets suggestions from staff once a month and adopts an open style of management. He likes to lead by example in terms of hard work and discipline. Knowledge is power, he believes, but adds that without discipline, "knowledge is useless".



**Tan Sri Mustapha Kamal**  
Group executive chairman, MK Land Holdings Bhd

**Datuk P Kasi,**  
Executive director, MK Land Holdings Bhd

Before the interview, Tan Sri Mustapha Kamal insisted that the writer read a two-page backgrounder about the relationship between him and Datuk P Kasi. "You must read it to understand why it is both of us standing for the award," he says. At any rate, anyone who spends more than 10 minutes with Mustapha and Kasi will be struck by the uncanny way they finish off each other's sentences or stop halfway through an answer to let the other continue. Naturally, they share the same management philosophy. In a 1,700-strong organisation, they recognise that it is important to have systems and processes in place so that everyone is clear about what he or she has to do. "We came up with these on our own, based on our collective industry experience," says Mustapha. That's about 40 years of experience between the two of them. They have also initiated a transformation of their organisation from an entrepreneur to a manager-led company. To them, people and systems go hand in hand. "We believe people manage systems which provide the know-why and know-how which then leads to profit," he adds. If it sounds easy, it is not, but that's why two heads are better than one.



**Tan Sri Rozali Ismail**  
Executive chairman,  
Puncak Niaga Holdings Bhd

A glance at Tan Sri Rozali Ismail's list of achievements and it is unquestionable that he is nothing less than a serial entrepreneur. Although his career began in the government sector at the Urban Development Authority, his entrepreneurial instincts soon emerged. He founded his legal firm, Rozali Ismail and Co before proceeding to venture into the property sector. Puncak Niaga Sdn Bhd, the company entrusted with the task of treating, distributing and managing water resources for Selangor and the Federal Territory, was founded by Rozali in 1997 and was the realisation of his entrepreneurial dreams: To have a public-listed company and in doing so, make a valuable and meaningful contribution to society. He counts his former law professor, the late Professor Ahmad Ibrahim and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad as some of the figures that have mentored him over the years.

"Our prime minister is the best mentor that I can think of since he always gives advice to Malaysian businessmen on how they should behave, especially the bumiputra entrepreneurs and I always take his advice in my daily business dealings."

While many entrepreneurs count difficult or poor economic conditions and even a change in the political climate as difficulties they have had to face, Rozali's most formidable adversary has been Mother Nature. Puncak Niaga is a company that needs water to earn its keep. A drought, such as the one that affected much of Selangor and the Federal Territory in 1998, posed tremendous challenges to the company.

Clearly, when one is battling Mother Nature, determination, perseverance and a desire to excel are not just required, but mandatory for success. Hence, Rozali strongly believes that entrepreneurs must be resilient and strong. At the height of the 1998 water crisis, Rozali personally ventured into the jungle and climbed hills in search of new sources of water, all to ensure his company would be able to meet the needs of Selangor's and the Federal Territory's 1.1 million water users.

Rozali believes that much more needs to be done to encourage more Malaysians to become entrepreneurial-minded. "I truly believe that to make Malaysia a more entrepreneurial society, we would have to educate and cultivate a knowledgeable younger generation on the importance of participating in business ventures and to practice good business culture, etiquette and good corporate governance. We must instil the willingness to work hard to make the business ventures successful and demonstrate the spirit of *Malaysia Boleh!*."



**Major (CD) Dr Donald Yap Tat Keat**  
Group managing director, Ire-Text (M) Sdn Bhd  
If you've ever bought a PC, a consumer electronic item like a MP3 player or even a personal digital assistant, then chances are, you've encountered a product manufactured by Ire-Text, the company founded by Major (CD) Dr Donald Yap Tat Keat.

The company, which has offices in Europe, Asia and the US, manufactures polymers for packing. The product is also sometimes known as styrofoam or polyurethane and is used to protect consumer electronic items and electronic parts during transit or shipping.

With a headcount of 500 in Malaysia alone, management is no doubt the key to the company's success. Cross a traditional Chinese upbringing with a four year US education, throw in a stint at a cutting edge Japanese corporation and what you have is a culmination of experiences that have helped to shape Yap's management philosophy. A mixture of both East and West, Yap tries to draw on the best practices of both cultures and combines them into a mix which he describes as not yet perfect. But it has so far worked out fine. He is also very proud of the fact that he has set up a company that creates jobs for Malaysians.

Yap feels that success in building a company isn't just about good management or even the ability to persist in the face of daunting obstacles such as the 1997 Asian financial crisis, which hit just as Yap was contemplating expanding the company. Sometimes, luck plays an important part. Naturally old-fashioned hard work, coupled with a strong knowledge base are important.

Yap would also like to see more incentives available to young people as a means of encouraging them to venture into business. "We need a more lucrative environment," he notes.



**Datuk Yeat Sew Chung**  
Group CEO, INS Holdings Bhd

As an entrepreneur whose trading and multi-level company survived two financial crises (1987 and 1997), Datuk Yeat Sew Chung has seen a lot of pain. In 1987, his partner went bankrupt and left the country and in 1997, his company was on the verge of bankruptcy.

Fortunately, in the 1997 episode, he managed to pay off his debts and even recovered his losses within a year

continues on Page 6

## Ernst & Young Entrepreneur Of The Year Awards

F6  
REVIEWS 6 JANUARY 11, 2005

from Page 4

In terms of social responsibility, Yeat is very much in touch with the needs of his people — he started Yayasan Penyayang INS to look into the welfare of his 200 staff and the 200,000 people in the company's distribution network.

"The group puts 10 per cent of its annual net income into this fund," he says. "You can earn so much but the real measure of your success is how much you give back to society."

And here's something interesting: If he spots an entrepreneur among his staff who has served for at least five years, he assists the individual spin off into a new company. To date, there are 20 such companies within the group.

"I offer to become a partner or a shareholder," he says. For budding entrepreneurs, Yeat has this to say: "Nothing is free and there are no short cuts in building a company."

### Tan Sri Francis Yeoh Chairman, YTL Corp

Tan Sri Francis Yeoh's darkest moments came in the early 1970s during the oil crisis when his family business saw its profits wiped out and the company struggled to pay its workers on time.

At one point, workers became so disillusioned they refused to work. Yeoh had to unload sacks of cement himself. "It took a while but eventually they helped out," he recalls.

Some workers were kind enough to even pawn their jewellery to salvage the company. "As a young man, I learned a lot about loyalty, and it was pretty touching," he says.



His management philosophy is simple: Believe in God. "If you are really God-fearing, you have a more harmonious organisation. Of course, hard work counts too."

As for social responsibility, Yeoh has picked three areas — art, music and sport.

"I am not doing it for corporate PR but because I believe it is part of our soul to nurture people in alternative fields."

In nurturing leadership, Yeoh is very hands-on. He holds three meetings a week. Monday's meeting is with the top 30 leaders in the company, Tuesday is on management and Wednesday is for micro details.

"If you are not in touch, you cannot feel their pulse," says Yeoh.

His advice to budding entrepreneurs: "Run a good race and never give up."



### Datuk Mohamed Zaini Amran Managing Director, BumiHiway Ventures Bhd

For Datuk Mohamed Zaini Amran, the worst moments for the company came in 1998. These troubles, however, had less to do with the financial crisis and more with the political climate at the time. "We were alleged to be Anwar [Ibrahim] cronies and part of a project to maintain all the roads in Peninsular Malaysia was taken away from us. And there was further talk in the air that the whole project would be taken away."

Fortunately, that did not happen although Zaini clearly regards those times as the darkest in BumiHiway's history. A self-proclaimed "dominant figure", he confesses to having been highly driven in the early days of BumiHiway. "But after 20 years, there's a change in my style," he notes, with a twinkle in his eye.

It's like running a country — as the country progresses, the system takes care of itself and you can afford to be more democratic. "In tune perhaps, with his less dominating tendencies, Zaini spends more of his time now nurturing and creating new leaders, the next generation of corporate managers who will help take his company to new heights."

# Woman entrepreneur



### Helen Read Managing Director, MS Read Sdn Bhd

Barely five feet tall, Read's small frame and gentle handshake mask a steely entrepreneurial backbone. Her defining moment came when her bank wanted to foreclose on her loan. She was indignant. She had extended credit to a customer because the bank had told her that the customer — which also used the bank's services — would close down if she did not sell it her textiles. She did,

but it didn't help the company. It closed shop and didn't pay her. And now that same bank wanted to close her down too. "I had to fight back and sent a letter to the chairman of the bank, which helped persuade them to back off and give me more time," she recalls. "Before that, I was a timid person but I learnt to fight for myself and for what I believed in." It's no surprise then that her main advice to entrepreneurs is to believe in themselves, to persevere and to have the hunger to succeed.

She takes good care of her seamstresses. She was the first in the garment industry to give her employees EPF benefits and she pays them above industry levels. "It is important that my sewers earn a good living," she explains. That's quite a package in just a five-foot frame — steel and heart.

### Margaret Kaloo Principal, etc International School Malaysia

It was 1996 when Margaret (Kaloo is her husband's surname) was given nine months by the Education Ministry to relocate her primary school which was situated in a commercial area in Taman Tun Dr Ismail, Kuala Lumpur. She was also running an existing secondary school at the time and was advised to combine the two.



"The problem was that it was at the peak of the property boom and land was scarce," she says.

Looking for land wasn't the only problem. Contractors were hard to come by too. "Those days, contractors had so much work," she says.

Margaret identified a plot in Sierramas, Sungai Buloh. And as luck would have it, the developer was looking for a school that

would enhance the development. It turned out to be an ideal match. Born in Scotland, Margaret has been in Malaysia for 36 years. She believes that entrepreneurs should have sticking power and her advice is to "stick to what you are good at. If you don't know, get help, because nobody's good at everything", she says.

### Hazimah Zainuddin Managing Director, Hyrax Oil Sdn Bhd

When Hazimah launched her lubricant company in 1995, business was good. She had South Korean partners who owned 45 per cent of the company. Two years later, the Asian financial crisis struck and the South Koreans pulled out. "I was worried because we were just starting and they had to leave," she recalls. But Hazimah survived.



She bought 15 per cent of her partners' stake, with the other 30 per cent sold to Perbadanan Usahawan Nasional Bhd. While she likes order and discipline (which was certainly not the case post-1997), she can be reasonable. "I expect my staff to produce and meet deadlines and I like people who are pro-active," she says. Nurturing leadership is key to her. "I have a few

employees whom I taught who are now successful entrepreneurs. I'm so proud of them," says Hazimah, who is actively involved in organisations that promote women entrepreneurs. Her advice to those starting out: When you decide to be an entrepreneur, it's like starting a family: There is no turning back.

# Emerging entrepreneur

## Chan Boon Yong

**Managing director, The Carat Club Sdn Bhd**  
Talk about lousy timing. Chan started promoting his luxury jewellery just as the Asian financial crisis was unfolding.

"The solution was to introduce products more suited to the climate then," he says. It was tough but he survived. One reason, Chan believes, lay in empowering his people: He lets his managers work as independent business units.

"They are entrepreneurs and I believe in rewarding performers. There's no politics, no favouritism or cronyism," he stresses.

He places strong emphasis on people development. "People are our competitive advantage. I want to change The Carat Club into a people factory. In today's world, the element that makes a company different is the people," he says.

His current concern is to make a difference to the people in the company. This includes showing them that their own contribution makes a difference. "It's not giving them a conducive environment and rewarding them," he says.



## Chuah Choon Bin

**Chief executive officer, Pentamaster Sdn Bhd**  
Two years after starting his business, Chuah reached a point where he considered "making a U-turn" and packing it in.

"For the first two years of our company's existence, we were unknown to the business world. It was very difficult getting our foot in the door to even talk to our customers," he reveals. It was an uphill battle just to survive.

But he finally decided that "once you come out, never turn back." Persistence and willpower won the day. Pentamaster is now a Multimedia Super Corridor-status company and a leading provider of industrial automation solutions to the semi-conductor and manufacturing industry. It has offices in Kuala Lumpur, Penang and China.

Chuah places his staff at the core of his management philosophy: "My first priority is to treat the staff well. Without a good team of people around you, your vision or customer base is irrelevant. People are the backbone of a company."



## Alex Kong

**Chief executive officer, Asiatravelmart Sdn Bhd**

It was late 1998 and Kong had been using his credit cards for four straight months to pay staff. Bleak as the prospects seemed, his belief that "things will get better" saw him through that period. Today, while prospects are looking up, the company is by no means a high-flying company yet. Kong, and his unshakable belief that he will eventually succeed, is the biggest asset of Asiatravelmart, which provides Internet-based products to the travel industry.

From being a micro manager, Kong is now very hands-off. "The company can now run without me," he says. That is a good thing, he says, as he admits he is not a good operations guy or a manager. "As an entrepreneur, I sell the vision of the company and make my people believe in me. So I spend a lot of time communicating with them."

He also spends between 50 and 70 per cent of his time flying around the region, doing what he makes things easier for himself, he has moved to a condo in KL Sentral. "It is so much easier now," he sighs in relief.



# ICT entrepreneur

## Jaspal Singh

**Executive chairman, PKTech Sdn Bhd**  
"We are in the business of delivering promises," says Jaspal. "That's because we are delivering services and are not an inventor of technology," he explains.

Jaspal constantly reminds his people that their job is to make technology work for clients. Having grown to its current stage of over 200 staff and with customers in six countries, Jaspal is keenly aware that delivering this promise to clients depends on his team. He is a great believer in empowerment.

Jaspal is also passionate about growing his people but it is in the seeds of his success that he now faces a dilemma. "I just love bringing up people from zero base [no experience]. Normally, I recruit between five and 10 fresh graduates every year and for the first eight to 12 months, they work with me. I show them what it means to do business and try to impart my knowledge to them," he says.

A sign of how successful he has been is that after one to two years, they tend to leave for higher pay.



Though he admits this has caused him to lose some enthusiasm, Jaspal says it is also his challenge — how to retain those he has trained.

## Dr Bernard Tan

**Managing director, AsiaEP Sdn Bhd**  
You won't find many entrepreneurs involved in an Internet business equipped with a degree in

e-commerce, much less a doctorate — or who say they would have become a hawker if they were not doing what they are doing today. The Internet is the school of learn-as-you-go-along. But despite having survived the dotcom bust and now in the midst of establishing a brand name for his business-to-business (b2b) exchange, Tan got a doctorate in e-commerce because he wanted to combine theory with experience.

And experience is one thing he has a lot of. He started his b2b exchange five years ago and experienced all the highs and lows of riding the Internet roller coaster. But he is still very much in the game and cautiously ventures to say that his exchange is probably one of the biggest in Asia.

It has more than 100,000 sellers who offer a combined US\$20 billion worth of products looking for buyers. Oh, and why a hawker if not the entrepreneur that he is today? "Being a hawker, too, can provide me a

platform to expand and evolve to a much larger scale commercially. It is also a form of entrepreneurship."

## Ang Kim Jhew

**Managing director, JSP Consulting Sdn Bhd**  
One of the worst moments in Ang's career was when his company lost a major contract with an existing client. And it was not because of service level or price competitiveness.

"There was nothing we could do. As you know, in Malaysia, the best does not always win," he says.

But the experience just increased his desire to succeed. To date, his IT consultancy and system integration company has over 100 consultants and is toying with the idea of listing in Mesdaq by the middle of the year.

His management philosophy has much to do with how he has steered his company to where it is.

"I believe in trusting my people. I give them a high degree of independence because people like to be respected and feel they are important. Of course, management plays a role in guiding them. We are not totally hands-free," he explains.

Budding entrepreneurs, he reckons, need to understand the marketplace and be able to identify business opportunities. Work hard, accept challenges and have a burning desire to succeed is his advice to them.

