

# Putting people first

Technology and talent go hand-in-hand at Connect Group, a travel management company which prioritises people over systems

By Chelsia Tan



Connect Group's focus on its talent has helped it soar to greater heights and weather unexpected storms.  
PHOTO: CONNECT GROUP

Unlike some technology-led companies in the industry, travel management company Connect Group sees talent as its most valuable asset.

"We started with the idea of providing back-to-basic customer service. While we are leveraging highly on technology to offer this, we believe it is the people behind the system [that makes a difference]," says its deputy managing director, Joanna Kaunang.

Established in 2012 and headquartered in Singapore, Connect Group oversees the operations of Travel Cue, a travel logistics service with branches in 15 countries such as Australia, Malaysia and Thailand.

This year, it has been recognised as one of the fastest-growing companies in Singapore for the first time in a study compiled by The Straits Times and global research firm Statista.

As Travel Cue specialises in managing details like flights, hotel bookings and visa arrangements for the highly mobile staff of shipping

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**Ms Joanna Kaunang, deputy managing director, Connect Group**

and marine companies, it utilises an advanced IT infrastructure that is designed and built in-house to support over 150 Travel Cue staff stationed globally.

Crucial information ranging from clients' profiles and requirements to the latest in Covid-19 restrictions are recorded and regularly updated in the central system. Easy access to such intelligence enables its staff to make informative decisions, especially when dealing with logistical crises.

## **Empowering talent with technology**

The nature of shipping and marine industries is a volatile one that is driven by supply and demand, and

this often places the team at Travel Cue in unpredictable situations that require smart, personalised solutions.

To tackle this, Connect Group invests in rigorous staff training that emphasises customer service quality, an initiative that is conducted through the company's online learning platform.

This people-centric approach does not stop there: Connect Group has even developed a Business Continuity Plan that taps its unique infrastructure before the Covid-19 pandemic struck.

"Thanks to our centralised computing system – which includes telephony, booking, customer relations management and back

office functions – we were able to manage the transition of resources to work from home seamlessly," explains Ms Kaunang.

This, together with prudent cost management, helped the company retain its staff without a need to reduce their salaries when Covid-19 hit.

"We decided at the onset of the pandemic to retain all of our staff with no reduction to their remuneration. People are our No. 1 asset and retrenchment was not an option," she says.

## **A business with heart**

Connect Group's unwavering commitment as an effective solution provider can also be observed in the way Travel Cue collaborates with its clients. Ms Kaunang candidly reveals that the team is unafraid to challenge the status quo.

"We are not afraid to say 'no' to our clients when we think the proposition is not sustainable. We have often revamped internal processes at the customer's end to their benefit even when these

changes do not benefit Travel Cue," she says.

Establishing an ethos that places people at the heart of the company has paid off. Ms Kaunang reveals that Connect Group has been sustaining a growth of about 15 to 20 per cent year on year, and is now in the process of expanding with an office in Beijing

She adds: "Despite the pandemic, we closed 2020 with a bottom line that is up by 40 per cent. Bucking the [recessive] trend, we have also been inducting new customers who sought our assistance when their existing suppliers were not able to provide the required solutions."

This year, Connect Group plans to grow its focus on empowering its talent.

"With all the strengths of technology and leadership, the eventual strength lies in the individual team member. We are looking to further consolidate, stabilise and empower the lower levels of our organisation," says Ms Kaunang.