

# WOMEN WHO INSPIRE

## 20 STORIES FROM ACROSS ASIA

ROBERT WALTERS



# MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIRMAN



**Learning from others and their experiences is the fastest way to grow and I wish I had a mentor to give me this advice.**

Carol Hui, Chairman, Robert Walters

**For over 30 years, Robert Walters has been committed to helping businesses around the globe find the very best talent, and professionals build their careers. In our role, we get to open doors to opportunities, powering people and organisations to fulfil their unique potential.**

Encouraging greater diversity and inclusion is one way we achieve our purpose and on this International Women's Day, we hope to further this conversation by celebrating women. When I look back on my own career, I'm proud of putting in the hard work to get to where I am today. However, if I were to do things differently, I would tell my younger self to build my network and find myself role models, mentors and coaches. Learning from others and their experiences is the fastest way to grow and I wish I had a mentor to give me this advice.

That is why we've compiled stories of 20 women across Greater China and South East Asia who have taken brave and bold steps in their journey towards their own version of success. For some, they define success as dreaming big and overcoming the odds to achieve the seemingly impossible; for others, it is about creating positive impact and finding balance within their myriad roles as a professional, manager, daughter or mother. We hope that through their stories, you will be able to draw inspiration and learn from their experiences, to write the next chapter of your own success story.

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# FOREWORD

As a recruitment consultancy, we have the privilege of accessing the lives of a myriad of people daily. Our interactions with them give us a glimpse into their work lives and often, their personal lives as well. While not all their life experiences may be featured within their CVs, job interviews or work conversations, these have shaped and molded them into the unique individuals they are today. Some of the stories we've heard are incredibly inspirational – stories of dreams and aspirations, overcoming failures and setbacks, grit and resilience. Every time we hear a story like this, we always hope to share it with more people, to hopefully motivate and drive others.

It is with this thought that we've decided to compile stories of 20 women across Asia this International Women's Day. We have identified four themes that we feel many modern women today can relate to, and identified five women from across Greater China and South East Asia to represent each theme:

**Challenging the odds** is about women who have overcome their personal limits. These are women who are strong, resilient and possess a growth mindset that keep them learning and honing the skills they need to overcome any obstacles.

In **Dreaming big**, we feature women who have dared to pursue the seemingly impossible. These include leaders, innovators and entrepreneurs who have had the courage to take bold steps in chasing their dreams.

**Making positive impact** spotlights women who have gone and beyond to create the change they want to see in their lives, community and society. They have undertaken journeys of transformation and advancement – to better the lives of others.

**Finding balance** is a struggle many women can relate to, and we share the experiences of women who juggle multiple roles as wives, daughters, mentors, leaders and more to achieve harmony between work and personal life.

While you will find elements of multiple themes in each story, no two stories are the same. We encourage you to take time to read these 20 stories to find your own inspiration. We hope you enjoy these stories as much as we did sharing them.

To the 20 amazing women, thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule and sharing your stories with us. And to the many other female role models amongst us whose stories we have not been able to feature in this book, continue to inspire and do the great work you are already doing in your community.



**Joanne Chua**

Regional Client Development Director – Asia  
Robert Walters

# 20 STORIES OF WOMEN ACROSS ASIA

In this book, we explore the journey behind 20 female leaders, and the ways they are creating inspiration for the people and communities around them.

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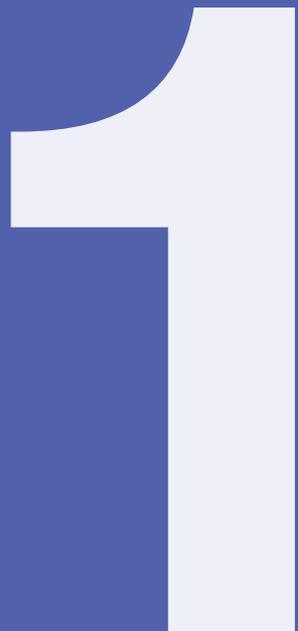
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# CHALLENGING THE ODDS





# Bhunyaras Panichsiri

## Regional Manager – Asia Pacific

### Luthi Machinery Co, Inc.

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When Bhunyaras Panichsiri took on a regional leadership role at Luthi 15 years ago, she found herself faced with the challenge of growing an uncompetitive business in an industry that was completely new to her. Luthi's customers then were quite unhappy that the company wasn't able to efficiently provide a range of services. Bhunyaras spent the first months of her career at Luthi working closely with her team to improve their products and services. Within three to four years, she turned the business around; growing Luthi's business by 200%, with customers far more satisfied with their improved levels of service.

#### Could you tell us how you got into manufacturing and your journey to your current role?

I graduated in engineering and also a Master of Business Administration as well. In the early years of my career, I was an engineer but I eventually moved to marketing and selling industrial products. My engineering experience and my business knowledge helped immensely in my work, as I could leverage my technical know-hows to better market industrial products. My clients have always appreciated that I have a strong understanding of their requirements and am able to offer them effective solutions and great support from our professional team.

When I joined my current company, I had very minimal experience in the tuna can-filling technology. I put in a lot of effort to understand the products, industry, the competition,

and our customers' needs. It was like building everything from scratch, and it required deep listening, understanding, and a strong commitment to improving our clients' experience.

At the same time, I knew I couldn't do it alone. To compensate for my own inexperience within the industry, I built a strong team of experienced people instead. Together, we worked hard to create and explore new opportunities, and we eventually saw our hard work translated into greater growth for the company. I'm incredibly grateful to my company who allowed me to manage things independently my way as it required some creativity to achieve our current results.

**You're a woman in a regional leadership role in the manufacturing industry, which is relatively male-dominated in Thailand. Have there been any challenges so far?**

I do sometimes sense that some clients may have slightly less trust in me as a female, but I don't let it bother me too much because I know it might just be my own perception. I have a strong history of delivering good sales performance and results, and I have confidence in my own abilities.

However, it is a fact that I didn't have a lot of experience in the industry when I started, and I was very transparent with my clients regarding this fact. When they had questions I couldn't answer, I wasn't shy in saying "I don't know". However, I always promised them that I would find out and give them a satisfactory solution – and I made sure to deliver on this. Over time, they came to like, trust, and respect me and my team, and a big part of that is due to my open, transparent, and communicative approach.

**How do you maintain such an open and positive mindset?**

I love helping people achieve their goals – which is why I enjoy my work. When I hear from customers that they've achieved better performance because of our equipment, I feel extremely fulfilled, and that motivates me to do even more for them.

Similarly, as a leader, I like to see my team achieve their targets and grow as individuals, and that drives me to try and become a better leader for them. To me, my team is my family, and we work together like siblings would. We set clear goals for each year, and when an unexpected problem or challenge arises, we focus on finding a solution as quickly as possible, so that stress levels remain manageable. We're also very big on collaboration. We work closely with our clients, and we support them as our business partners, friends, and siblings. This reduces the number of stressful situations we face at work as well.

**You are a leader to your team, a problem-solver for your clients, and a wife to your husband. How do you juggle all these roles?**

I don't believe true work-life balance exists. Instead, I embrace the fact that life happens, and some days are just going to be more about work, while other days are going to be more about my family. In fact, I try to integrate both where I can – I've brought my spouse to dine with my colleagues and boss quite a few times! I think that helps them all better understand me as a person, both in and outside of work, and see things from my perspective a little better.

One thing I sometimes forget though is to switch off the 'leader' toggle when I'm home. The dynamics at home are obviously different from work, and I consult my husband when we make

decisions instead of simply taking the lead on them. It's a good balance, and it also helps me feel more supported in many ways.

**I knew I couldn't do it alone. To compensate for my own inexperience within the industry, I built a strong team of experienced people instead.**



# Fayza Mohamed Amin

## Malaysia Managing Director HP Inc

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Fayza Mohamed Amin is one of the leading female leaders in tech in Malaysia, with over 15 years' experience within the industry. However, Fayza started her career very differently – she graduated from college in political science, and worked as a journalist in the early years of her career, before making a move to Telekom Malaysia (TM), the largest telecommunications company in Malaysia, where her career in technology – and her journey towards making positive impact – begun.

### Going from political science and journalism to tech doesn't sound easy! How did you make the transition?

My relationship with technology began long before I became a journalist. I've always been a techie at heart, experimenting with the latest tools and technologies – in fact, I dabbled in a little bit of hacking even before it became a popular skill to pick up.

My love for technology and my curious nature allowed me to make the transition into the industry more easily when I moved to TM and subsequently HP. I wasn't daunted by all the technical terms and concepts – I was excited by them! I was also fortunate to be working with one of the largest leading companies in technology within the country. It meant that I could learn a lot very quickly and get exposure to latest tools and trends.

Working with talented colleagues who had ample experience in technology was a journey that helped me grow personally and professionally. I had to gain the trust of teams and leaders, and I did it by tapping into my expertise of telling stories. Technology as a topic can be quite dry – but I used my skills as a storyteller to appeal to people, make it relatable, and that I quickly gained trust within the industry.

### It's amazing how you've leveraged the skills you've learnt as a journalist to make your mark in technology. What challenges did you face?

One challenge I faced was making sure my voice and opinions had impact. I had the trust of my team and the people around me, and they knew they could rely on me – but this did not necessarily mean I was creating impact. To be respected, recognised and heard, I had to work a million

times smarter, and make sure that I brought something different and unique to the table each time.

For example, when I was working at UMW, we were exploring different approaches to embrace technology and digitalise. I told them we could take the usual route of hiring a CIO and bringing in the usual systems – but we could do more. We could invest in start-ups and create an ecosystem. This would not only give us the digital capabilities we needed, it would also allow us to invest in the future, and have an edge over our competitors with access to innovative ideas and technologies. This was something different that my boss had never considered.

By coming with different ideas and perspectives each time and presenting them in a way that is a positive change for the business, I've been able to make my voice heard and create positive impact.

### **How do you find that creativity and innovation every time?**

It's not easy but it can become a habit through cultivating a growth mindset and the need for continuous learning. I think we romanticise creativity as something that just strikes you but it's more a skill than coincidence. What's important is a strong understanding of your work or your business. This would allow you to identify the gaps. Then it becomes a matter of what you can do to fill those gaps. You just have to get

out of your comfort zone, think a bit harder and see things through different lenses.

What fuels me to keep trying, though, is my love for my country, Malaysia. I studied and lived overseas and while that was an amazing experience, I still wouldn't call anywhere else home. I love Malaysia for its ability to accept differences without even thinking about it. I feel incredibly blessed to be where I am today, and to be given all the opportunities I've had. I want to open the same doors for my fellow Malaysians – that is my motivation, and that is why I keep going.

### **What advice would you give to women who are looking to achieve success like you have?**

Understand what motivates you in life. Broadly speaking, there are many people whose only motivation is to get to the top of the corporate ladder, or to get to a certain position. I personally think that this can be tough because when things don't go smoothly or when the next promotion doesn't come as planned, then it's hard to dig deep and push through. Even if everything goes smoothly, then after reaching the top rung – what's next? Do you just stop and stay stagnant?

Instead of aiming to reach the top, I would encourage everyone to aim to do their best with a growth mindset. It's one of the core values of everyone who works at HP, and one that has created

an innovative business that we have sustained for the past 80 years.

As long as you consistently aim to do your best, you will naturally improve, grow, and get to the next level. Everything will fall in place. There will be challenging times and difficult moments, but even in those times, you can continue to push through, because all you need to do is your very best.

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# Rosaline Chow-Koo

## Founder & Chief Executive Officer

### CXA Group

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Rosaline's idea to create a platform that would allow companies to overcome the rising costs of group insurance was rejected year after year for five years by her previous employer, a multinational insurance brokerage. She was determined to address the inability to customise insurance for diverse employee needs, but was never given the funding it needed. In 2013, Rosaline decided to pool together her own and her husband's life savings to bring the platform to life independently. Today, CXA has almost 800,000 users, 500 clients, across 20 countries in Asia and has won multiple awards, including 'Innovations in Healthcare' by the World Economic Forum, McKinsey and Duke Health.

#### **Having your request for funding be rejected for five years straight – most people would have given up. What made you decide to forge your own path in the insurance space?**

When I first proposed the idea of this platform, I'd already been with the company for three years, and I'd helped the firm move from zero growth to hypergrowth. I brought in a number of new clients, and managed to triple their revenue at that time.

It was around that time that clients started coming to me, worried about their escalating insurance costs. This was due to worsening health, same-size-fits-all benefits as well as the insurance industry's fragmented value chain of intermediaries such as brokers, agents and third-party

administrators to connect the clinics and hospitals. As such, companies had to invest large amounts of money to get the diverse coverage they needed for all their employees.

I tried to get approval every year for the next five years, but was unable to ever convince them. The CEO and my global head eventually left, and that was when I knew if I wanted to make this platform a reality, I would have to do it on my own.

#### **You gave up a stable, well-paying corporate job to invest your entire life savings into CXA – weren't you worried about that decision?**

It wasn't a hard decision for me. It was my dream and I was obsessed about making it real. I would say it was probably

harder for my husband. He not only had to see me invest all our money in something that wasn't guaranteed to pay off, and he even had to come out of retirement to help cover the bills. I'm grateful that my husband was there with me every step of the way when I was starting up the company and for being very supportive throughout.

Personally, I'm not scared of failure – what I am afraid of is not challenging myself and trying new things. This stems from my childhood and upbringing. My parents, who are immigrants to the United States, could afford very little but at the same time, it also meant that as a family we had nothing to lose. They didn't worry too much about failure and instead always encouraged us to keep trying new things because that was the only hope we had of finding a way out of poverty. That's probably why I grew up open to challenges and resilient in the face of failure.

### **Being a start-up founder is not easy even if it's your dream. Have you ever felt like giving up?**

There are so many challenges we face all the time. I worry about funding, finding talented people, developing the right solutions for our clients, building the technology and the list goes on. There are definitely times when I feel overwhelmed and the idea of giving up pops into my head but it really isn't an option. I've invested my family's entire life savings into my dream of

revolutionising the insurance industry. I have to see it through, and this keeps me going.

What helps me cope on a daily basis is swimming. It allows me to process everything that has happened in the day. I meditate while I swim, and this helps me resolve any people conflict that I may be facing. When I'm done, my mind's clearer and sharper. I can make rational, logical decisions that are focused on solving the problem or issue at hand.

### **What is one life lesson you would like to share with other women?**

Skills are muscles you have to practice in order to learn and grow. You don't immediately get good at something – you have to keep on trying, keep on practicing, and you'll eventually get better at it. Talent helps, of course. It expedites the process, but at the end of the day, it boils down to how often you've practiced a particular skill.

Being innovative and challenging yourself is a skill too. I believe it is important to go out of your comfort zone to keep trying new things because you get better at it. You learn how to take calculated risks for the best returns, and you also learn that failure isn't a bad thing – particularly if you manage to fail fast. The important thing to focus on is how to pick yourself up after failing and extracting important lessons from each mistake.

**Skills are muscles you have to practice in order to learn and grow. You don't immediately get good at something – you have to keep on trying, keep on practicing, and you'll eventually get better at it.**



## Veranita Yosephine Chief Executive Officer AirAsia Indonesia

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AirAsia Indonesia CEO Veranita Yosephine has countless achievements to her name. Not only has she reached the position of CEO in her early 40s, she is also one of the first few female CEOs in Indonesia's aviation industry. In addition, Veranita has also received the UN HeForShe award for initiating a women empowerment programme at her previous employer, Danone.

### **It's amazing how much you have achieved, Veranita. What is your greatest highlight?**

I'm incredibly grateful for the opportunity I currently have as CEO at AirAsia Indonesia and I'm proud of the hard work I've put in to get here. However, as I value accomplishments based their impact on others, I would say my greatest personal achievement would be what I had achieved at Danone – the creation of a HeForShe community across all our offices globally.

During my years at Danone, I had several mentors, but there was one who helped shape my professional growth the most. No matter how busy or stressed he was, he would always make time for me every month for more than four years, giving me support in my career when I needed it. He also helped me see things from different perspectives and build awareness – which has been incredibly useful in my leadership. He also

helped me build confidence in myself, which I often lacked. I gained so much from this mentorship and I wanted other women like myself to have access to this kind of support too. I knew many young women lacked confidence, were reluctant to speak up or ask others for help, and faced difficulties in balancing their personal and professional goals. As such, I decided to build a mentorship program and leadership training for women to help them develop their leadership capabilities. I also built the program for men to understand unconscious bias and challenges for women in workplace.

This program began in Danone Indonesia, but eventually expanded to Brazil, Netherlands and the rest of world. This movement I initiated in Danone was then recognised by UN Women in New York in 2016. I was truly honoured by the experience and the opportunity to bring positive impact to people at a global scale.

**That's amazing, particularly since it was borne out of a local branch and not the regional or global headquarters. Did you face any challenges along the way?**

Initially, I faced some resistance in terms of finding funding and support. I was a sales development director in the Indonesia office, not from human resources, and as such it was difficult to connect with the right people to get my idea heard and executed. It was a new concept, and a completely new idea, and while it was frustrating, I understood where the company was coming from, and I don't blame them. Change takes time.

However, I knew I wanted other Indonesian women like me to have a chance at success, and that drove me to keep trying. My persistence and a strong belief in the project eventually moved the leadership and management team. They saw how serious and committed I was to building this programme, and I think that convinced them to give me a chance. When the programme in Indonesia saw success, it attracted the attention of other offices, and eventually it spread to the other parts of the organisation.

**Were there times when you felt like giving up and what kept you going?**

It was tough at times but I never really had the thought of giving up. Every time

things got tough, I always tried to go back to my purpose – making positive impact on other people's lives.

It came from my childhood, which was difficult for me. I had learning disabilities that I had to work much more than my friends did just to keep up with them at school. Being normal was to me an achievement. I grew up also in Batak (North Sumatera) culture that is very paternalistic. That time, it was common for a man to marry another woman if his wife couldn't give him a biological son. Women are by far secondary. The experience taught me how difficult inequality means and to always fight for my dreams.

Today, I find joy in helping others to access opportunities they probably can't otherwise. That gives me energy and sense of purpose. That wakes me up in the morning. That is my passion.

**Your work in empowering women is truly inspiring. Can you share some words to young female leaders who have just stepped into a management role?**

Embrace being a woman. There will be people who will tell you that females are too emotional as leaders, and that they should be more like men who are more logical. I would say, just be whoever you are. Tap into your own strengths, and don't try to be like someone else. You can have role models and coaches,

but understand what it is that works for them and adapt it to something that can work for you.

We're very lucky to be living in a time where more and more organisations, like AirAsia, understand the need for diversity and inclusion. They realised all these differences are what make a business more well-rounded, creative, and innovative. That is why I want to encourage women to stop thinking they have to lead like men do. Instead, be confident in your own strengths, and leverage them to help your team and organisation be better.

**Tap into your own strengths, and don't try to be like someone else. You can have role models and coaches, but understand what it is that works for them and adapt it to something that can work for you.**



# Victoria De Alwis

## Director

### InterGen Capital Partners

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After heading up HSBC's Tax Function across 22 countries in APAC as well as other operational non-tax roles regionally, Malaysian-born Victoria De Alwis now works for a private office in Hong Kong, and additionally supports her husband with advisory and succession planning for selected families. She came to Hong Kong 16 years ago as a recently divorced mother with three children. Life certainly wasn't easy to begin with, but Victoria has found her faith, her second husband and family to be great sources of support over the years.

#### **As someone from a legal background who has built up a successful career in tax and accounting, what would you consider to be your major career achievements?**

Entering the world of tax and accounting as a trained lawyer was definitely an eye-opening and challenging start for me. I am glad that through the years I have had experience in different industries doing roles beyond technical tax, managing teams and stakeholders, and thus been able to gain different skills.

However, I think my greatest achievement has less to do with the deals or things I've accomplished myself, but rather the small contributions I hope I have been able to make to the lives and work of colleagues, friends and family members. To work with them, to support them and to see them flourish, whether in work or in their personal lives, is very satisfying. It makes me proud to be able to contribute in some way to

colleagues and friends developing in their roles – some to roles beyond tax – and to see how well regarded they are where they work now. We still keep in contact after all these years!

#### **Have you encountered challenges in your career and your personal life? If so, how have you tackled them?**

When I was offered the role of regional head of tax at HSBC 15 years ago, I was just divorced with three children. Life wasn't easy as a solo mother and breadwinner, but I took up the opportunity with the support of my family. My role expanded from tax advisory to people and risk management and thereafter to non-tax operational regulatory project management – job profiles that were different from my technical abilities. I am very grateful to my bosses and team members for these opportunities and their support and guidance. During this time, I also met my current husband

and we're now a very close family with five children.

For me the biggest challenges are not about the work, but the people involved, how to manage stakeholders with different agendas and how to deal with conflicts. A piece of work is a piece of work – it's how you manage and deal with it. My way of coping is to take a few steps back and say a prayer. Walking away helps me see things objectively and with detachment. I have come to learn (and am still learning), through difficult experiences and many mistakes, that rather than just defending yourself, you need to understand other people's perspectives and objectives. This requires having an open mind, patience and EQ and I've found that it works for me most of the time when dealing with conflicts and helps avoid tunnel vision on issues.

### **How do you manage your family life? Have you had to make career sacrifices because of your family commitments?**

It is hard, there's no one-size-fits-all solution and I don't always get it right. There have been times I've missed our children's parent-teacher association activities. I have learnt from my husband that planning ahead is important, for example, setting aside time for family commitments and booking ahead with others in advance so you have the highest chance of making it. I find most people are happy

about booking ahead and adjusting if they know in advance.

Where sacrifices are concerned, I honestly think it worked the other way. I was a solo mother for a long time, and I acknowledge that work has been important to me to the detriment of my family. But looking back, I know I am very blessed to have my husband and family's support and for putting up with me. If it weren't for them, I would probably have taken my foot off the pedal where the family's concerned more often.

### **With your family and career in a good place now, what keeps you motivated and challenged to do more?**

It sounds like a cliché, but my motivation is to "make a difference". I used to be a tough and impatient person (my humble apologies to all whom I have upset and not been there for in the past!), but I feel blessed to have my husband, my family, friends and mentors who have had an impact on my life and taught me many important lessons. This has motivated me to help others and see them flourish. It doesn't have to be the big things; even the small things count, such as simply helping people have a better day.

I believe I also have a responsibility as a leader to advocate and help those who are in the early stages of their careers. If

more leaders were willing to take a lead and mentor others, I think we would create a better ecosystem with more young talent progressing at a faster rate and making a contribution in the positions they achieve.

**Rather than just defending yourself, you need to understand other people's perspectives and objectives. This requires having an open mind, patience and EQ and I've found that it works for me most of the time when dealing with conflicts and helps avoid tunnel vision on issues.**



The background features a series of smooth, flowing, wavy lines in various shades of blue and dark blue, creating a sense of motion and depth. A solid blue horizontal bar is positioned across the middle of the image, containing the text.

**DREAMING BIG**

2

## Ally van de Pol

**Owner & Managing Director at China White Limited**

**Head Conditioning Coach & Holistic Nutritionist at Dragon Fitness & Coaching**



**Starting out as a marketing and business development professional, Ally has gained more than 20 years' experience providing clients with marketing and consulting advice. Always challenging herself, she set up her own company, China White Limited in Hong Kong in 2010.**

### **Your professional life has taken many turns, and now you have set up two businesses in two totally different fields. Can you tell us more about your story?**

Life has been full of surprises for me! I began my career as a marketing professional in the UK. Then about 14 years ago, I lost my job and was invited by a friend living in Hong Kong to visit for a holiday. I spent ten days exploring the city and fell in love with it. I've never looked back. It wasn't easy – I arrived with a couple of suitcases, and life was tough in the first year; I started off teaching English to children to pay the bills and to gain a work visa. Since then, I have worked in several companies, building up my career before opening my own marketing consultancy business, China White Limited. All went well, but deep down it wasn't my true calling.

So what drives me in running Dragon Fitness and Coaching, which I set up four years ago? I have been involved in fitness

all my life. It started off with gymnastics as a kid, then I took up athletics in my teenage years, I've played netball for HKCC, and was a white collar boxer, so fitness has always been my passion. A friend asked me one day, "Ally, you're so good at fitness, why don't you become a personal trainer?" I thought why not, it has always been something I would like to do, and then my husband gave me a training course as a birthday gift.

I'm really glad I made that move. I now have a personal training gym and a lovely group of clients who I consider friends. I am now a certified personal trainer, a holistic nutrition coach, and I'm also studying to be a naturopath. I really like coaching people, and it makes me happy helping others and knowing I am making a difference in their lives.

**Unlike other businesses which can usually be run using email or phone, personal coaching requires you to be physically present. Does this make managing your time difficult?**

Striking a balance definitely isn't easy. I have to put myself first a lot of the time, as I have to be in a good place in order to help others. I have two step-daughters (one lives at home) and five dogs, and I have to be available when they need me, especially my daughter, who's 18 and in her last year of school. I have to allocate my time effectively, including not going out as often as I used to and keeping social media mainly for work, balancing home and family commitments as well as full time work, running a business and studying, plus of course training myself. It's a real juggling game but I really enjoy it.

Prioritisation is very important to me. I have seen quite a lot of my clients, especially those with families, putting everyone else first, so much so that they ultimately suffer themselves. Don't forget to "put on your own oxygen mask before helping others".

**I can see you have now found your dream career, and are continuing to build on it. Looking back, have there been setbacks or discouraging situations, and what lessons have you learned?**

I came to Hong Kong because I was made redundant in the UK. I had

worked in the marketing industry for 10 years by then, but Hong Kong is a totally different landscape. I began by teaching children for a year. I really wasn't into it, but I knew I had to be humble and persistent. I had to deal with mismatches in my career until I found a role that really suited me. I've been fired twice!

In a way, the discouraging situations have made me do a lot of things that I wouldn't have done otherwise. I strongly believe that when one door closes, another one opens. You have to take advantage of every opportunity, and treat opportunities as stepping stones. Sometimes setbacks are blessings in disguise.

Looking back, moving to Hong Kong was a risk. But here I am, 14 years later, having set up my own businesses and doing what I absolutely love. I believe that life gives you enough challenges to make you a better person, but not so many as to break you. So never give up, life will eventually send you in the right direction.

**What advice would you give to women who want to pursue their own passions, but have to struggle just to maintain the status quo?**

You only live once, so why don't you follow your gut instinct? I understand some people embrace change and others find it very difficult. There are always ups and downs in life, and you can never tell whether the move you

make will be absolutely the right one, but if you don't try, you'll never know. Sometimes you have to take that one chance in your life. I sold everything I had in the UK before moving to Hong Kong, and I have never regretted it.

I believe in trusting your instincts – if you feel it's the right thing to do, then go ahead! It might only be a small, incremental move, but you never know what it might bring, or who it will introduce you to. Do something you're passionate about, and seek out things that inspire you; something that wakes you up in the morning and motivates you. One day you will be surprised by what life brings and how far you have come.

**I strongly believe that when one door closes another one opens. You have to take advantage of every opportunity, and treat opportunities as stepping stones. Sometimes setbacks are a blessing in disguise.**



## Arianne Kader-Cu Country Manager Viu Philippines

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When Arianne Kader-Cu moved from the United States to her mother's home country 10 years ago, she was simply looking to work in a market that had more career opportunities. A decade later, Arianne has completed her Master of Business Administration (MBA), been an integral founding member of Zalora Philippines, and tried her hand at setting up her own start-up, before landing her current role as country manager of Viu Philippines two and a half years ago.

### That's a lot of achievements in just the past decade! What would you personally consider to be your major highlights?

I would say committing to staying in the Philippines is one of the biggest decisions I've ever made, and it has really paid off. When I moved here 10 years ago, I was just a graduate looking for a job. I worked for a year, then took some time off to do my MBA, and that was when I learnt so much about the country, the people, its economy, and the start-up scene. I was excited by all the opportunities available here, and that was when I found my purpose – I knew I wanted to be part of the new generation of leaders in the Philippines, and do my part in helping the country grow.

I'm very fortunate to have had the opportunity to be an early team member of two start-ups that have grown exponentially during the time that I've been with them – Zalora and Viu.

E-commerce, digital marketing, video streaming – these are all relatively new to the Philippines, and being one of the first five employees in both these companies has meant I have had the opportunity to actually seek out high potential talent and entrust them to learn, grow and build a strong business. Although I've left Zalora a few years ago, I'm glad to see them launch their IPO in 2019. I'm also proud to say that Viu is now the second largest streaming platform in the South East Asia.

### That's an amazing journey. We're sure you faced plenty of challenges along the way as well. Can you share more about those?

When I first joined the start-up scene about eight years ago, women were still very much underrepresented, particularly in emerging markets, like the Philippines. I was also still in my twenties, and there was a lot of pressure to prove myself.

There were occasions where I felt my ideas and contributions weren't taken as seriously just because I was a young woman.

One example I can remember was when I was stationed in another country, where the culture is much more male-dominated, for a period of time. Even getting team members to show up for meetings that I had set up was a challenge, much less having them hear me out. However, I knew it was up to me to change people's perceptions. I simply had to push through these obstacles, and find opportunities and different ways to communicate with them. Eventually I was given the opportunity to try out my ideas and proposals, and I'm glad to say they were successful.

### **What keeps you going in these tough times? How do you dig deep and find that motivation to persevere instead of just giving up?**

It's a variety of factors. However, one thing that keeps me going is knowing what my purpose is. I decided to stay in the Philippines because I wanted to be part of the next generation of leaders who would be part of the development of the country. That keeps me moving and improving. Whenever I find myself running into obstacles and feeling demotivated, I look for ways to overcome these roadblocks because I haven't reached the end of my journey yet.

Similarly, when I find myself stagnating and not learning anything new, I push myself to do something differently so that I can continue to contribute. I've also committed to reading one leadership book per month because I want to be a better manager. It's my dream to be a leader, and it's not going to just miraculously happen by itself – I need to make it happen.

### **What's the next step in your journey?**

I'm actually about to become a mother and that's very exciting, but at the same time, scary. I've built up my confidence to grow and lead a team over the years, but this is going to be a big change, not only for myself and my husband, but also for my team. Telling my boss, who is actually incredibly supportive, was quite daunting. I took a while to draft a letter that included my plans for the future, and the support I thought I would need. I'll be honest – I am anxious and stressed about it. How will having a baby impact my career? Will I have to slow down? These are just some of the thoughts going through my head.

Having said that, I'm thankful both my team and husband are incredibly supportive. Most people would say I don't have a work-life balance, but to me, I've integrated both my life and work. My team members know they can reach me 24/7 for support, and my husband understands that because he's also a start-up leader

himself. Dinner time is also a time for team bonding, because both our team members come over to just hang out and chill. It's not balanced by any means, but it works for me, and I'm sure my husband and I, along with my team, will find a way to make it work with the arrival of my new baby.

### **One thing that keeps me going is knowing what my purpose is. I decided to stay in the Philippines because I wanted to be part of the next generation of leaders.**



# Claudia Kolonas

## Founder Pluang

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With Indonesia being home to the largest gold mine in the world, it doesn't come as a surprise that gold is an asset many Indonesians are attracted to when thinking of investment. When working on a project at Celebes Capital, Claudia Kolonas discovered the interest Indonesians had in gold, and quickly realised there was a gap and demand in the market. This started her journey towards building Pluang, a start-up that recently received a US\$3 million funding from Go-Ventures.

### **Congratulations on your recent funding! How did the idea of Pluang come about?**

In its initial days, Pluang – then EmasDigi – was a gold-savings product. The idea of setting this up began when I was working at Celebes Capital, my father's company. While I was researching a deal, I realised that many Indonesians, particularly those in lower to middle income brackets, were very interested in investing in gold.

However, gold in Indonesia is largely state-owned. This means gold prices in the country aren't necessarily reflective of wider global gold trends, and when gold prices fluctuate overseas, they often remain stable in Indonesia. Risk is reduced, but so are returns.

I wanted to give people access to gold that was in the wider market. This would give them the ability to invest their money

in gold and gain higher returns. It encourages smarter and more conscious investment decisions, and I think that's an important step towards financial inclusion. That was how Pluang began, and now we are looking at other savings products and investments as well.

### **Going from being an employee at Celebes Capital to building your own start-up, was this a difficult decision to make?**

With Celebes as a family business, I've always assumed I would just be part of Celebes, and while I had the desire for entrepreneurship deep down inside, it was something I never thought I would actually pursue.

The same applied for Pluang – I'd always thought it would be a project that I would spearhead as part of the company. However, after two years of working out the licensing for

Pluang, there came a point where we had to decide whether we wanted to go independent. I ended up choosing to do so because I really believe strongly in our product and what we were doing for the market.

### **How has the journey been since you left Celebes to build Pluang full time?**

When I look back on it now, making the decision was probably the easiest part of the journey so far! As the boss of my own company, I've had to worry about things that I had previously taken for granted when I was an investment professional, and it's been a very humbling experience.

For example, salary was something I never thought I would worry about. In Celebes, I would work my hours, and I would get my salary credited into my bank account at the end of every month. However, with Pluang, prior to fundraising from Go-Ventures, I faced a particular time when cash was so tight I was not sure we could afford to pay everyone's salary on time. While I managed to cover it personally, it was a big low point for me. It was then when I truly felt the responsibility I had, as a founder, for everyone's livelihoods. I had to do everything in my ability to ensure such similar situations wouldn't happen again.

While the lows have been much lower than anything I've ever experienced, the highs have also been amazing.

It has been the most fulfilling and satisfying one and a half years of my life. I've learnt so much about running a company and a business, and more importantly, about myself. I realised I have so much potential; I can do so much more if I put my mind to it. It's just the start of the journey, and I'm incredibly excited about what else is in store for me.

### **It does sound like it's been an incredible experience! Would you share one lesson that you've learnt along the way?**

Surround yourself with good people, whether at work or in your personal life, because they can make such a big difference.

My team is still quite small, so everyone has a large impact on the entire business. There were a couple of bad hiring decisions that I had made, and it made me realise how important it is to spend time recruiting the right people. It's not just about technical skills, abilities or experience, it's also about having common visions and goals. Once I had my core team of trusted people in place, we really began to take off. They inspire and push me to do better everyday.

Outside of work, I also have my support system who keep me going through the difficult moments. They're there for me when I need advice, and they're there for me when I simply need to have some breathing space from

work. They help me look at the bigger picture because every day to me is about Pluang – but there's more to life than just Pluang. I think understanding that has been key for me to finding the motivation to keep on going, even when things get tough.

**There were a couple of bad hiring decisions that I had made and it made me realise how important it is to spend time recruiting the right people. It's not just about technical skills, abilities or experience, it's also about having common visions and goals.**



## Julie Tay

### Senior Vice President & Managing Director Asia Pacific, Align Technology

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Invisalign, the clear aligner system used for straightening teeth, may be a familiar name to many today but when Julie Tay joined Align Technology in 2013, the APAC team consisted of less than 100 people. Despite not knowing anything about dental healthcare and orthodontics when she first joined, Julie subsequently scaled the team and business, with the APAC team now consisting of over 2,300 people, and China now being the second biggest market for the company worldwide.

**Prior to working for Align Technology, you worked for large multinational companies, such as Bayer and Johnson & Johnson. What made you choose to move to Align Technology in 2013?**

To be honest, when I first heard about the opportunity through a headhunter, I didn't think I would take up the position. I had no previous experience in orthodontics, it was a very small team and I had not heard about the company before.

However, after I got to hear more about the role through the hiring manager, I was intrigued. The business model and the technology behind the Invisalign system are amazing. Additionally, it was an open canvas and I would get free reign in building the team across the region. That resonated with my personal career goals, so I decided to make the move.

**The team consisted of less than 100 people when you first joined. Within six years, you have more than 2,300 people. How did you grow the business so quickly?**

A big part of it is hiring the right people who are driven and have a growth mindset. In the medical devices sector, companies grow at about 10% or less, year-on-year. At Align Technology, we are looking at a 40-50% growth year-on-year, and finding the right people who can drive this growth can be challenging simply because people in the industry are often not used to thinking about such high growth rates.

How I've managed to do that is to have a very open conversation with candidates when they apply for a role at Align Technology. I tell them it's not going to be easy, and it's likely more fast-paced than their previous roles. However, if they're looking to learn, grow, and challenge themselves, then they should consider us because we are constantly looking to grow further. For people who are driven and ambitious, they

are not deterred by the challenge, in fact, they often welcome it.

**You mentioned finding individuals with a growth mindset is crucial to your hiring strategy. How do you maintain a positive growth mindset, especially when you have been doing this for more than six years?**

Growth, to me, is not just about the numbers, and that's what makes it sustainable. My focus is not on hitting the numbers; my focus is what this growth means for my doctors, consumers, my team, and myself.

A big part of that is because I really believe in our software, product, and solutions we are bringing to our consumers. Before Invisalign clear aligners, wearing braces to straighten your teeth can be an incredibly painful experience. The Invisalign clear aligners have helped more than 8 million people straighten their teeth with a much better experience.

The second part of it is that growth means greater opportunities for my team. If we're stagnant, it means fewer financial incentives, fewer promotions, and fewer internal mobility possibilities. However, if we are growing year-on-year, I can open up more positions on different teams, and keep on investing in my team and their learning. There's a lot of positive momentum, and people won't need to leave their current jobs to find space to grow. The team is also

overall happier, because they know their hard work is being translated into benefits for themselves.

It's addictive to see this growth, and gratifying seeing patients and consumers being happy. The growth of my team motivates me to keep on growing the business. And we all work towards the purpose of changing lives through transforming smiles.

**How would you then encourage young women and professionals to keep growing?**

Be open to everything that comes your way. Of course, not every opportunity is going to be suitable for you. It may require a pay cut that you can't afford, or for you to move to another country when you have elderly parents to look after. However, what I'm asking you to do is to not close yourself off to opportunities just because it requires you to step out of your comfort zone.

I've seen many people restrict themselves because they already have a career path in mind, and they are reluctant to deviate from it. For example, when I was just starting out in my career, I worked for a shipping and logistics company. It wasn't the most exciting business, and when I moved into marketing, I thought I wouldn't ever use that experience and knowledge again. There are people who will dismiss that part of my experience as wasted because it didn't fit my career trajectory.

However, years down the road, when I was leading Align's APAC team, I was involved in a logistics discussion, and suddenly, my shipping and logistics experience became relevant again. I don't remember the specifics, but my previous experience made it easier for me to understand the concepts again. It took over 20 years for the dots to connect, but looking back on it, I'm very glad I took on that job in shipping and logistics! Be open to new ideas and possibilities, and don't close the door to opportunities just because you're scared of the unknown. Take some risks, and they will eventually pay off.

**Growth, to me, is not just about the numbers. Growth means greater opportunities for my team.**



## Vu Van

### Co-founder & Chief Executive Officer

#### ELSA

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When Vu Van was exploring different careers she could pursue after quitting her job at a consulting firm in the United States (US), she was only sure of one thing – she wanted to be part of something meaningful. After speaking with several ed-tech start-ups, and reflecting on her own journey, Vu decided to create an app that would help millions of people overcome a challenge close to her heart. Today, ELSA, which stands for English Language Speech Assistant, has more than 6.5 million users from 101 countries, with 3 million users in Vietnam alone.

#### Tell us more about the origins of ELSA. Why did you decide to create it?

After I quit my job in a consulting firm, I knew I wanted to be part of something smaller, such as a start-up, where I could really see my contributions making an impact. However, building my own start-up wasn't really something I was looking for.

I narrowed my search to education as I have personally seen the changes education has made in my life. I come from Nha Trang, a small coastal city in Vietnam, and it's all thanks to education that I could even work for a consulting firm in the US. However, after learning more about ed-tech start-ups in the Bay Area, I quickly realised that having not grown up in the US I understood little about the challenges of education in the US. Their missions didn't resonate with me because I simply didn't grow up in the same education system.

It was then when I really took the time to sit down to think about what I was passionate about. When I reflected upon my own experiences, I remembered the days when I first came to the United States to study at Stanford University. Even though I had managed to enter Stanford, I always felt like I wasn't good enough, simply because my English was accented. It made me feel uncomfortable, and I lacked confidence. I did some research, and realised no one was really working on something similar within the area – so I decided I would tackle the issue myself.

#### It's been four years since you founded ELSA, and it has grown so fast. Could you share some of the most memorable moments during your journey?

Finding a great co-founder was definitely one of the biggest highlights throughout this journey. When I decided I wanted to create ELSA, I didn't know where to start. I could handle the business side of things but given the cornerstone

of ELSA is deep-tech and artificial intelligence, I realised that I wouldn't be able to easily learn how to create this app on my own or outsource it to someone. The first step then was finding a co-founder who could build this app together with me.

It wasn't easy finding a speech recognition expert who was the perfect fit. I spoke to dozens of people, and introduced the app to them, but no one seemed quite right. It took me six months, but I eventually found Xavier Anguera, my current co-founder.

**Six months! Many people would have thrown in the towel at that point in time. What made you continue the search?**

It's always hard to find that balance between persisting and giving up. I was honestly very close to the point where I would actually give up. In start-ups, we always talk about "failing fast" so I had set myself a deadline of six months to find the right person. If I couldn't find the right person to work with, I would move on to pursue other ideas.

Near the end of my six-month deadline, I decided to expand my search wider, going to the world's largest speech recognition conference, held in Germany that year. I got a chance to speak to over 3,000 experts in the field, and that was where I met Xavier.

I think what really kept me going throughout, was my belief that ELSA was something we truly need in the world. Even though it was like finding a needle in a haystack, and things seemed hopeless at times, I believed in my idea and that fuelled me to continue finding new avenues and channels to meet more people.

**ELSA is all about giving people the confidence and ability to communicate and shine internationally. Would you have any advice for women on how to find their own confidence?**

Make decisions that you have a lot of conviction in, and don't worry about what others may think about you. I believe many people in Asia, not just women, feel the social pressure to find a well-paying job and to achieve "success" but what does "success" truly mean? And is there only one way to achieve it?

I believe there are many ways we can define success, and even more routes to reaching it. I would like to encourage women – because women tend to be a bit more insecure in their decisions – to be brave, and to ignore what others may think and say.

To me, even though ELSA is very much a young company and just at the beginning of its journey, I personally feel I have found my own happiness and success. I believe in the work I'm doing

every day, and it makes me happy to know that my app is helping a lot of people. Pursue your own success with passion and conviction, and you will find happiness.

**I believe there are many ways we can define success, and even more routes to reaching it. I would like to encourage women to be brave, and to ignore what others may think and say.**





**MAKING POSITIVE CHANGE**

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## Angela Chow

### Founder & Chief Executive Officer Cachet Group

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Angela Chow is the founder of Cachet Group, a Hong Kong home-grown and renowned international financial institution with offices across Hong Kong, Mainland China and the United States. For her work, she has been recognised with a number of awards, including ‘Most outstanding entrepreneur’ by Corp Hub Hong Kong, ‘Most successful female entrepreneurs’ by China Association of Women Entrepreneurs, and ‘Top ten excellent female figures’ by Asia Brand. She has also been appointed as an honorary fellow of the Asia Social Enterprise Academy and honorary president of the Hong Kong Jewellery Association.

#### **You held some key roles in large financial firms before setting up your own business. What drove you to make the change, and what do you consider to be your most important achievements?**

Having worked in the leadership teams of a few prominent bracket banks for two decades, I have been struck by the amount of human potential that remains untapped, because of the policies and bureaucracy of large operations. No matter how senior I was, I wasn't going to be able to make a change in a big company, and deep down I wanted to do something innovative and create a legacy. This made me think about how I could make a change.

The core values were about creating a purpose and making an impact on people when starting my own business. In Cachet, I hope to build an ecosystem where people feel empowered and are encouraged to unleash their full

potential. Only by empowering people can our business flourish.

In the six years since I began, one of my greatest achievements has been shaping a culture where everyone is equally important, regardless of their position or identity, and where we can all realise our highest potential and achieve our biggest dreams. We're a people-driven business; we don't run on targets. It's by focusing on value that we can increase our engagement and productivity.

#### **It's certainly great that your company has created value out of encouraging people to fulfil their potential. Is there anyone who has influenced you in having this vision?**

Many years ago, I met Sir Charles Kuen Kao – the “Father of Fibre Optics” – and asked why he hadn't applied for a

patent. He said he had no intention of turning his invention into something he could profit from, as he considered his knowledge as a gift and something he wanted to share with the world. His words left a big impression on me. Even though I work in the financial industry, which can be money-driven, the idea that being successful is not about pursuing personal glory, but making the world a better place has stayed with me ever since.

In the financial world, it is easy for “make more money” and “quick promotion” to become career goals, forcing many people to focus on profit and power. For me, this is a flawed approach. That’s why I’m motivated to contribute to the community and spark long-term ambitions in the people around me.

**Indeed, you apply yourself to both professional and community roles. Have you ever struggled to achieve a work-life balance?**

Fortunately, I think I’ve had a good work-life balance overall. The key is to have clear priorities, and for me these are health, family, work, then friends. You can’t work and enjoy life if you don’t have health and support from your family.

When you set your priorities and make time for them, you’ll have no issue finding a good work-life balance. And do something you love, not something

to just make a living or fulfil someone else’s expectations. If you feel fulfilled in your work, you will do things more effectively and find it easier to achieve the right balance in life.

As a leader, I always make sure my staff enjoy work-life balance too. I like transparency and direct communication – this minimises time wasted through miscommunication, so my staff don’t have to spend time figuring out my expectations. As a company, we also keep meetings short and succinct – do more in less time, and avoid courtesy meetings. I believe good delegation is also important to achieve efficiency and have more time to spend on personal things. I am always aware of my priorities, and allocate time to what matters most to me. Then I drop or outsource the rest.

**What is the most important message you would like to send to young women thinking about their careers?**

Firstly, find a job that you’re passionate about! Women tend to be more sentimental, which is great. We are more sensitive to complex human dynamics, and are attuned to other people’s feelings. But at the same time, our job can have a big impact on us, especially early in our career. If you think you have the potential, but if the job just isn’t right for you, leave it and don’t look back! I have heard a lot of

women complaining about their jobs, but they have chosen to suffer rather than make a change.

Secondly, focus on self-care and wellness. Maintain a work-life balance and find a boss or team who shares your values. Don’t neglect your health and make time for yourself, your family, and friends.

Finally, I would encourage women starting out in their careers to learn more and strengthen their skill sets. Only with sufficient skills will you be able to make more career choices in the future, and avoid having to limit yourself to jobs that don’t suit you. Women should have confidence in themselves; we are good enough to make our own choices and we should make it our personal mission to choose the place that’s best for us.

**The core values when starting my own business were about creating a purpose and making an impact on people. In Cachet I hope to build an ecosystem where people feel empowered and are encouraged to unleash their full potential.**



# Chutima Sribumrungsart

## Country HR Lead

### Microsoft Thailand

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**Not sure which career path to pursue after your studies? You're not alone. Chutima Sribumrungsart, an HR leader in Thailand, studied literature in university, and went on to work in the travel industry after her graduation. She later tried her hand at recruitment before eventually finding her passion in HR. Today, she uses her experience to coach and mentor young HR professionals, helping them develop into well-rounded business partners.**

#### **After your graduation, you tried a few different jobs before you found your calling in HR. Tell us more about how you eventually found your passion?**

As a university student, I didn't know what I wanted to do but I was very sure that I wanted to be working with people. Understanding that really helped me narrow down the job choices, and from there on, it was about trying out different things to understand myself better. At the same time, it wasn't like I was job-hopping. I gave myself time to actually understand the job, the role, the industry and its challenges, before I made a decision about whether it was for me.

My journey isn't uncommon. I got the opportunity to talk at many forums and seminars, and I find many young people today are going through the same journey as I did. They're struggling to find a job that they like after graduating from

university, and they are stressed about it. It's okay to try out many different things!

I also encourage them to take part in internships and part-time jobs. It exposes them to a professional setting and corporate life – and that experience really helps them understand themselves, their likes and dislikes, and their strengths and weaknesses. This helps to make the job search later a little easier.

#### **You are also a very active member in the HR community in Thailand; conducting workshops and participating in conferences for younger HR professionals. Why do you find this important?**

Even when I didn't know what I wanted to do with my career, I knew I wanted to be part of people's lives and helping them.

That has been the guiding motivation behind my career all these years.

Now I'm the Country HR Lead at Microsoft, and as a senior HR professional in this country, I wish to leverage my experience and knowledge, and share them with the younger generation. In recent years, we have seen so much disruption in the HR scene, and technology has helped HR improve by leaps and bounds. At the same time, I think younger HR professionals today are worried what all this might mean for them and their careers. I want to help them navigate through their uncertainties, upskill, reskill and transform to become business partners that can provide unique value to their companies.

**HR can be a high-stress environment; you're dealing with a lot of people and sensitive issues. How do you manage your work while balancing your external commitments?**

Balance is always hard. It's not just my work and external commitments, there's also my family. It may seem counterintuitive to spend more time on myself when I don't have enough hours in a day, but I make it a point to always take care of myself first and stay aware of my own state of wellness. Physically, I keep a healthy diet, I exercise, and I take the time to dress up. Meanwhile, mentally I also take the time to celebrate my own achievements, no

matter how small they may be.

When I take good care of myself, I naturally feel better, and this gives me the energy to maintain a positive outlook throughout the day. This has a massive impact on the team around me. When I maintain a positive energy, my team is much more motivated and productive. We achieve more, and the stress levels are much lower. There will be challenging moments and unexpected issues, for sure, but we're also much more equipped to deal with them if we maintain a positive energy in the team.

With a team that is overall happier and less stressed, I then have more time for my family and external commitments. It's all linked together, and the easiest part of this cycle that I can control is how I take care of myself.

**Any other words of advice for women and young professionals?**

You have to take ownership of your own career – no one else is going to help you figure out what to do with your life and your career. It's alright to not know what you want right at the start but that doesn't mean that you should just go with the flow. You have to make the best of your opportunities to work towards figuring out what you want.

Don't pursue positions or money. There's always going to be a role that sounds grander or a position that pays

more – but are these going to connect into something meaningful for your career? Not necessarily. Instead, you may find yourself lost and confused as to what your next step will be.

What you need to do is to define what growth and learning means for you. Are you interested in picking up new technical skills, or meeting new people? Are you looking for more exposure to different cultures or jobs? By asking yourself these questions, you will have a general direction, even if you don't have your path clearly mapped out.

**You have to take ownership of your own career – no one else is going to help you figure out what to do with your life and your career.**



# Nurul Jihadah Hussain

## Founder

### The Codette Project

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**The Codette Project is a non-profit ground-up initiative to get more minority/Muslim women into technology in Singapore through events, workshops and other programmes to help them learn new skills and build networks. Nurul's journey of building a non-profit organisation began five years ago when she was presented with the opportunity to pitch for a social impact idea. Today, the non-profit is run by herself and 13 other volunteers who all hold full-time jobs.**

#### **Tell us why you started The Codette Project?**

I've always been passionate about creating positive impact within society, and when the opportunity to pitch a social impact idea came up, I jumped at it. It was initially a very different idea – I wanted to create a full-time boot-camp or intensive training programme that would last three to six months, which would empower women at risk, such as single or stay-at-home mothers, to go back to the workforce and find a full-time job.

However, after my team and I spoke to women from our community – the minority/Muslim community, we realised that we needed to pivot. There was a demand from the larger community for tech programmes, but what we had so far would not be relevant for them. A lot of the women in our community wanted more training and tech knowledge, but a boot-camp would not be practical. The idea would require

them to commit full-time, and they simply could not afford that in terms of time and money and my team, and I didn't have the technical expertise to carry out a full boot-camp.

As such, we realised that we had to change directions to serve the need we saw, and we have instead built The Codette Project based on three main pillars. The first is storytelling, where we encourage women to define what success means to them and show these stories of success from our community to the world. The second revolves around skills-building, and equipping them with the tools they need to tell that story. The third is about community-building, and giving them the support and network that they need to stay motivated.

### **In addition to being the founder of Codette, you also hold a full-time job. Why didn't you choose to go full-time with this?**

Part of it is due to practical reasons. Funding and allies can be hard to come by, and we have really learnt that the hard way. With us all holding full-time jobs, it means that all our funding can go towards our events and initiatives instead of our salaries, and that just gives us more flexibility.

More importantly, we are committed to building a community that will have a sustainable economic impact. When the team thought about the best way to do this, we realised that finding our own opportunities outside of Codette, and having our own jobs would actually be the most effective and sustainable way to do this. We're not only more resilient as a team because we don't depend on funding to keep ourselves going, we're also better at helping the women we're reaching out to because we're all individuals who are actually earning outside of Codette and creating our own economic contributions.

### **You're also newly married – how do you juggle a full-time job, Codette, and your personal life?**

I've just have to sacrifice certain things, to be honest. For example, I had to give up reading the daily news and social media because those took up too much of my time, and when I evaluated what I could do without, those were the first two things to go. Even so, I don't do

it perfectly. There are days and times where it's really exhausting and it's really hard to balance everything, but in the long-term, it all works out.

Having a team that I really trust and rely on at Codette helps a lot too. If there's a need for me to work all weekend at my full-time job, then I just tell them that it's going to be a rough week, and I need some support. Someone always steps up, and in a couple of weeks, I do the same for them.

This seasonality of life is central to the way that I lead my team because I understand that as women, as people, we take on so many roles – and all of them are important to me. I'm a wife, I'm a daughter, I'm a sister, I'm an employee, and I'm the founder of Codette, and I want all these identities to connect and co-exist in a way that doesn't conflict with each other. On a daily basis, it may be hard to see the balance, but in the long-term, this balance exists for me.

### **So what's next for you and Codette?**

We've seen a lot of progress in terms of creating empowering environments, and the next step is really about creating processes that allow for these environments to do their work. More than asking The Codette Project what we can do by ourselves, I think we need to challenge organisations to do better. How can organisations hire and pipeline talent that ensures a sustainable diverse group of strong candidates?

It's about going into the details and examining every step of the journey. For example, during recruitment, if there were 40% female/minority applicants, but only 2% of the people placed at the end were female/minority, then the issue may be with the screening and interview process. However, if there's only a small percentage of female applicants for the role in the first place – a much smaller percentage than what is available in the talent pool – then perhaps the issue is with the job description or the outreach by talent recruiters.

If organisations say that the talent pool doesn't even consist of that many women or people from minority backgrounds in the first place, then this is might be a question of how organisations are valuing individual experiences, how they are defining "relevant experience", as well as how organisations need to commit to long-term training programmes that allow those who have been excluded – for whatever reason – to play bigger roles in the industry.

**This seasonality of life is central to the way that I lead my team because I understand that as women, as people, we take on so many roles – and all of them are important to me.**

Rebecca Liu

**Vice President & General Manager, Greater China  
Clinical Innovations, LLC**

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**After beginning her career as a legal counsel, little did Rebecca Liu know that a trip to the USA to study for a MBA would change her career path. Today she has more than 10 years' experience working as a vice president in different organisations in the life science and clinical healthcare industry. She is still learning new technologies and tools and has a vision to bring their benefits to those in need and to improve healthcare globally.**

**Can you tell us how you reached your current position, and what has driven you on that journey?**

I graduated with a law qualification and began working as a legal counsel. I was very lucky the company I worked for sponsored me to study for a MBA at the University of Illinois in the US, giving me my first taste of business skills. As I approached graduation, I was offered an opportunity to work for a local US company specialising in ventilation equipment and control. That's where my career in business development and operation began.

In 2004, most Chinese people working in the US were choosing to stay there, but the company I was working for asked me to relocate back to China and help build up their first manufacturing site there. With this promotion to management I would be involved in bringing foreign technologies into the China market. That really meant something to me, so I said yes. I left the company in 2006

and joined a US company specialised in laboratories solution, I had already developed an interest and expertise in laboratory and healthcare, and also wanted to help more multinational companies to “copy exactly” in China.

Four years later, when minimal invasive technology was only just being introduced in China, I felt it was a personal privilege to be involved, and I joined one of the largest privately owned US medical device companies. I wasn't only helping a US company to develop its business in China, I was also playing the role of an industry advocate and influencer. I had opportunities to talk to health departments and authorities in the US and felt I was helping to make a change.

Currently I have a GM role at Clinical Innovations, a medical device company which focuses on maternal health and neonatal intensive care. I am helping to bring obstetrics technology and healthcare to mothers, newborn babies and

families in China, which is extremely meaningful and impactful to me as a woman.

**Can you share with us one of the decisions you have made that has had a big impact on your life, and what you have learned from it?**

Looking back, I think I have been lucky that at every turning point, I have made decisions that have suited me best. One of the biggest changes was to shift from the legal to the business field while flying to US for my MBA studies. My flight from Shanghai to the US was just after 9/11 and when it was cancelled, many of the people around me said I should abandon the trip and study because of safety concerns. I insisted I was going and took the first flight I could when flying resumed, changing my career for good.

That may sound like a risky decision at the time, but to me, embracing calculated risks will make you braver in making changes. It has also been a catalyst for making me more confident in my abilities. I am really glad that I didn't give up, otherwise I would never have achieved the things I have in my career.

**Many people think of life science and healthcare as a male-dominated industry. Do you agree?**

I do agree that traditionally medical device and life science companies, particularly at the leadership level,

have been more male-dominated. In the companies I have worked for, the number of women in leadership positions usually makes up less than 40% of management roles in Asia Pacific. However, I am seeing a trend of more women working in the industry and moving up, with many now in important roles at middle-to-senior level.

Particularly in obstetrics, the industry in which I am working now, I find women have a closer connection with and understanding of the end customers. Being a woman in a male-dominated working environment should not be intimidating. Women can be just as competent as their male counterparts in any task. On top of that, they tend to be more empathetic and congenial, which is very helpful in understanding and communicating with others. I believe women should always be mentored by women, and I am always looking to nurture and promote other women as leaders too.

**What tips do you have for women who want to thrive and make a positive change?**

Never stop learning and challenging yourself! It's very easy to stay in your comfort zone and avoid risks, but that won't help make positive change. I constantly challenge myself in my industry, skills, and leadership. People around me know that I love to learn new technologies and skills; I think that my company will always need

new concepts and tools for its future development.

So don't stop learning. The world is changing all the time, and we have to keep up. I always say the biggest competition we're facing now is not from our business rivals, but from new diseases. As a leader, I put myself forward as a pioneer to learn new skills, before asking my team to do the same and apply the knowledge they gained.

At the same time, don't overlook your personal needs or the importance of your family, who gives you a safe haven where you can relax. It's easy to forego time with family as you think you can get it back, but that's not always the case. You need to take a break and have some me-time, no matter how busy work might be.

Finally, find your passion and be persistent. Always stay true to your values, and stick at what you are doing if you believe you are making a positive impact!

**Never stop learning and challenging yourself. It's very easy to stay in your comfort zone and avoid risks, but that won't help make positive change. As a leader, I put myself forward as a pioneer to learn new skills.**

## Veronica Colondam

### Founder & Chief Executive Officer Yayasan Cinta Anak Bangsa (YCAB)

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In 1999, Veronica Colondam founded Yayasan Cinta Anak Bangsa (YCAB), a foundation which seeks to break generational poverty cycles through financial inclusion and education, especially for school dropouts. As someone who has dropped out of school herself, Veronica taps into her personal experience and belief to stay strong in the journey of creating positive societal change. Today, YCAB has reached out to over 3.5 million youths, trained more than 2 million of them via 51 learning centres, and created more than 9,000 jobs and businesses.

Photo courtesy of PT. Permodalan Nasional Madani.

#### What was your motivation behind starting YCAB?

When I was 18, my father suddenly passed away while I was preparing for my final exam in my third year of high school. That was traumatising – I had no time to grieve as I needed to focus on my examinations. Because of his sudden death, I could not go to university that year due to our financial circumstances.

Fast forward to my 26th birthday. On that particular day, I felt a strong calling to do something more than just live comfortably with my family of two young children, aged two and four. I realised that being a homemaker was good but it wasn't enough for me – I needed a stronger purpose.

These two experiences left me questioning my entire life. What had I done until that point, and what will I be doing for the remainder of my life? How do I want to be remembered?

After eighteen months of reflection, YCAB was founded. I wanted to make a difference and put into action my love for the world. That was why I decided to dedicate my life to building a foundation that can empower at-risk youths, and help them break out of the poverty cycle.

#### Over the years, YCAB has evolved into a social enterprise. Can you tell us more about that?

When YCAB was founded, we didn't start with being a social enterprise in mind – the concept of being a social enterprise didn't even exist then! As we entered our second year, we realised if we wanted to help more people, we needed to expand, and we knew the money we put aside for this mission wasn't enough.

At the same time, remaining financially independent was very important to us. YCAB's motto is to create self-sustainable,

self-reliant youths who can support themselves. To ask others to do that, we ourselves as an organisation must achieve that first.

So, less than a year since the foundation was born, we set up a company to raise the money we needed. I was quite naïve then, I thought we'd be able to raise the money quickly but it actually took eight years before the company made its first profit. Along the way, we also set up the second, third, fourth, and fifth subsidiary companies, and eventually, we were creating impact in a self-sustainable manner.

Years later, after I gained more experience in the non-profit world, I learnt about the concept of social entrepreneurship and resonated strongly with it. I thought it was a brilliant fit for our mission and how we operated our business, and we rebranded ourselves as a social enterprise.

### **How did you overcome all the challenges you had along the way?**

For me personally, what keeps me going is when I see the transformation in the lives of the people that we serve. Knowing we are creating change that matters is addictive. But everybody needs to know their limits as well. I once attended a global conference with dozens of other fellows who were award-winning social entrepreneurs from across the world. They all were

passionate about their mission and calling but so many of them were also starting to burn out.

This got me thinking, what can a social entrepreneur do to keep giving and doing good? I believe that even when you think you're living your calling, you cannot push yourself to the point of breaking. You need to take care of yourself, and love yourself, in order to be able to love others effectively and sustainably in the long-term. Many people give and give but don't take the time to care for themselves, but I do because that means I can recharge and be refreshed. And I make it a point to not feel guilty about it!

### **What are some other important lessons that you have learned in this journey?**

I'd like to specifically highlight the importance of innovation. Being innovative means that we can find solutions to tough problems. For example, the issue of helping at-risk youths become self-sustainable. It sounds very much like an education issue, doesn't it? However, we later realised that if his or her family isn't financially well-off enough, the child may not have enough money to travel to school. Or if he or she has siblings, they may have to stay at home to take care of them while the parents work. So, we have to think out of the box, and find ways of empowering the family economy as well.

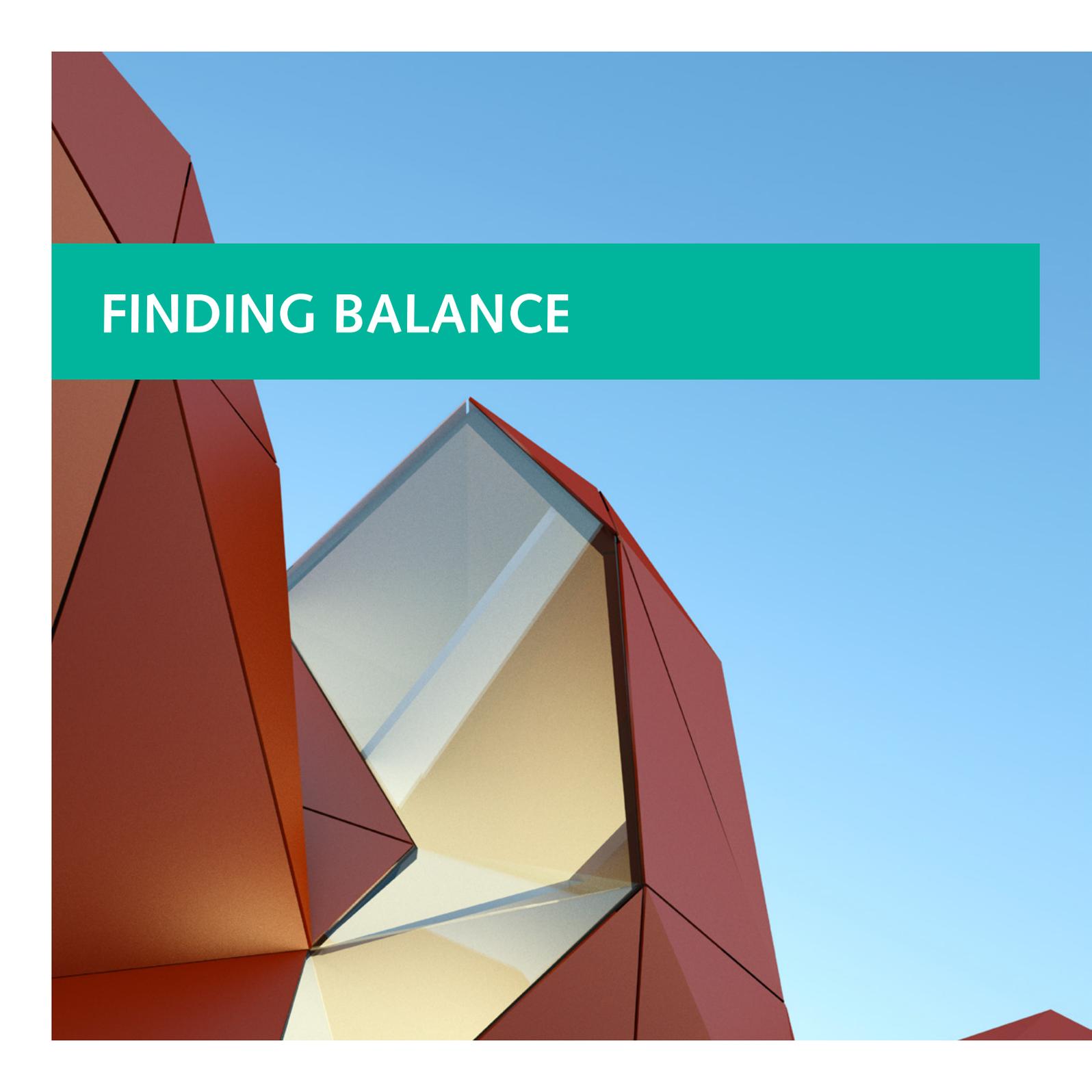
Innovation also helps us find ways to save time, so that we can keep learning and improving. I only have 24 hours a day, and I need to juggle work and my personal life. YCAB is about the same age as my 3 children – I always joke it's like my 3rd child, since I founded it after I had my second child – and part of the reason why I managed to cope with everything was because I was innovative about the resources I had.

Lastly, it's exciting and fun. No one wants to be doing the same thing day in, day out. It's boring. Innovation keeps me and my team going, it keeps us excited.

**Even when you think you're living your calling, you cannot push yourself to the point of breaking. You need to take care of yourself, and love yourself, in order to be able to love others effectively and sustainably in the long-term.**



# FINDING BALANCE

The image features a teal horizontal bar at the top containing the text 'FINDING BALANCE' in white, bold, sans-serif font. Below the bar is an abstract, low-poly geometric structure composed of various shades of brown, tan, and grey, set against a clear blue sky. The structure has sharp, angular edges and a complex, multi-faceted appearance, resembling a stylized building or a crystalline form.

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## Anabelle Co-Martinent Founder & Managing Director La Juiceria Sdn Bhd

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Parenthood would often deter most people from making risky decisions but this wasn't the case for Anabelle Co-Martinent, who just had a baby when she decided to quit her corporate role at Microsoft to explore how she could build her own brand. Today, she is the founder and managing director of the La Juiceria group of companies, which has grown to consist of La Juiceria, Super Saigon, The Honest Treats and HawkerHall – all while being a mother of two young children.

**You not only quit a stable job after you had your first child, you started a company quite shortly after you had your second! That's a lot of things to juggle, tell us about your journey?**

I've been in marketing roles for most of my career, and it has always been my dream to have my own Nokia or Microsoft – a brand that everyone would recognise. When I was in my twenties and early thirties, it was just a dream that I thought I would one day achieve. However, motherhood really put things into perspective, and gave me the focus I needed to put things into action. I knew if I wanted to create my own brand, I had to do something about it – particularly since my life is not just about me anymore.

So I took the bold step of quitting my job at Microsoft because I knew if I tried looking for something on the side, I wouldn't commit – I wouldn't have that sense of desperation. This started a two-year journey of me exploring a variety of different things to find something I was passionate about, including freelancing at a radio station and being a soft skills trainer. I eventually discovered cold-pressed juices when I was pregnant with my second child. I experimented with the juices, with my family and friends as guinea pigs, and decided to start my business.

### **Most people would be quite worried about starting a new challenge like this just after they have children.**

To me, it was, “If not now, then when?” When my children were older, and needed college money? Or when they’ve started working, and I’m older and perhaps not as driven?

It certainly wasn’t just a decision that I made overnight – it was years in the making. I knew that starting a business was a calling I had to at least try and answer. I also knew in the worst-case scenario, I would be able to start a new job search, and look for another marketing role in the corporate world. I’d moved from the Philippines to Singapore, then to Malaysia, and so I’ve had the experience of building my career in a completely new environment. I had every confidence that I would be able to pick myself up should being an entrepreneur not work out.

### **How do you balance being an entrepreneur on top of being a new mother?**

One way everyone is equal is that we all get only 24 hours a day – so it’s all about prioritising what’s important to us. With our priorities clear, it becomes much easier to tackle everything else.

Spending time with my children is very important to me. It’s something that I don’t want to sacrifice, so my weekends are very much for them. My

business partners understand that, and they give me the time and space on weekends for my children.

This brings me to my second point – having good people around you. I’ve surrounded myself with great business partners, an amazing team, and a strong support system. Not every day is going to be balanced and some days are going to be insane. That’s just part of building a business. However, I also get to take time off to recharge because I know I can rely on these people to help when I need time to myself or for my children. More than that, these fantastic people continually push me to do better; to improve myself. They inspire me to be innovative and try new things that I probably wouldn’t have thought of on my own.

### **Any other advice for mothers out there on how they can continue to pursue their dreams?**

I think a lot of women view motherhood as a point where they have to step back in their careers and focus more on their families. I take my hat off to every mother who has chosen to slow down their careers to commit to their families – I respect that decision and I think it’s very noble. What I just want to highlight is that this is a choice, and not necessarily something that needs to happen for every mother.

I have personally learnt so much from motherhood and that has made me so much better at what I do. I’ve had to learn to do things differently to make

better use of my more limited time, of course. However, having a young baby teaches you how to prioritise, how to adapt to new, unknown, and often scary situations, and how to try different things just to see what works. I think by applying all these skills to other aspects of our lives, mothers can continue working towards achieving both their career goals and personal dreams.

**One way everyone is equal is that we all get only 24 hours a day – so it’s all about prioritising what’s important to us. With our priorities clear, it becomes much easier to tackle everything else.**



# Cecelia Zhou

## Vice President & General Manager Trauson at Stryker

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Cecelia Zhou was born in China and moved to the United States with her family during her high school years. She relocated to China and Singapore 10 years ago. She has become an experienced leader in the Asia Pacific region and has demonstrated her professional skills in healthcare, mergers & acquisitions (M&A), entrepreneurship, venture capital and commercial strategy, working in the life science, medical device and FMCG industries. She joined Stryker six years ago and was promoted to her current position in 2018.

**You are a recognised M&A expert and have gained international exposure across different disciplines. What were your initial challenges and what has been your proudest moment?**

One of the great challenges has been my recent transition from a corporate M&A role to become General Manager of a newly acquired business, something that requires a lot of groundwork and management. When I was first offered this opportunity, I knew I had the skill set to succeed, but wasn't totally confident about taking it, as it was something I had not done before.

In the first two months I had to balance many different aspects of an underperformed business, from profit margin to cultural fit, and not to mention the team I manage grew from just a few people to more than a thousand.

I remember giving a speech at the annual dinner back in 2018: the floor was quiet, and the faces were polite but doubtful, probably wondering how this young leader, who's worked overseas, will succeed in managing a huge local manufacturing business in China. Two years later, I was back on stage to give another speech and you can't imagine how happy I was to see the whole audience chanting and clapping.

It's not just that we have achieved a positive profit margin, it's that my staff are very proud of the business and have a strong sense of belonging. If there's a moment that crystallises how I feel, it's that one. I've achieved revenue for the business, and I have managed to make a small impact on our people, bringing back their sense of pride and joy, making a cultural shift that will benefit the business in the long term.

**You mentioned your initial lack of experience when you were offered this new opportunity. How did you overcome this, and what have you learned from the experience?**

Although many women have the experience and skill sets to take up new challenges, we are typically more cautious about making promises and decisions on things we haven't done before compared to men. This caution is often interpreted as a lack of confidence.

I am fortunate that everyone around me, from top management to our clients, recognise my potential and believe in me. Currently more than 60% of the leadership team in my business is female and it is an experience I share with them all too. It is important that we have faith in ourselves and step out of our comfort zone to unlock our potential and take charge of our own development.

**I understand you have to work long hours and often have to travel on business. Have you ever struggled to balance the demands of your personal and professional life?**

I am fortunate to have a very supportive family. We made a decision together as a family to move back to Asia 10 years ago. Our daughter was only two years old back then, but we had committed to stay as a family and wanted this to be not just a new job, but an adventure

for the family together. I wouldn't have relocated if my husband didn't support this decision.

Finding work-life balance is easier said than done. It's very important to have a supportive family and at the same time to operate in a way that takes your priorities into account. For me, having quality time with my daughter and husband is just as important as doing well at work, even though I have to make some trade-offs with other leisure activities. My daughter will soon be 12 years old and I am glad that we have built a very close relationship – it's all worth it.

**From moving to Asia to taking up a business with a staff of more than a thousand, you've been making some big leaps. What advice would you give to other women, especially those early in their career?**

When I first started my career on Wall Street, I had no idea about what I wanted to pursue in the future. But I never limit my options. I think sometimes we make too many assumptions in life and believe that there's always "a right path to follow". To me, the right path is not the one most travelled, but one where I will always be curious about. I have seen women struggling to follow "a path of success" often defined by their parents or people around them, and any deviation from this path becomes a stress point. We should take more time

to find out what is the right path for oneself, take charge of our own lives, whether personal or professional.

There's wise advice from Elizabeth Gilbert that I agree with: don't worry about following your passion, follow your curiosity instead. She's not telling people to ditch their passion, but rather to ease off the pressure and explore something new from time to time, something that will spark your curiosity. Passion may soon fade, but curiosity will propel you to follow through. Try to learn from others about different perspectives, and don't become discouraged when you encounter difficulties and have to struggle. When you admire others' success, think about the paddling duck metaphor - successful people may seem effortless, but they are all making a lot of effort "under the surface".

**Sometimes we make too many assumptions in life and believe that there's always "a right path to follow". To me, the right path is not the one most travelled, but one where I will always be curious about.**



# Ha Nguyen

## Director of Partnership Business Management AIA Vietnam

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Ha Nguyen's dream to work in different parts of the world started when she was a management trainee, and becoming a single mother never deterred her from achieving her dream. She started from the ground as a relationship manager in a bank, and slowly worked her way up the ladder. In 2011, HSBC, sent her to Seoul as Chief Operating Officer (COO) for HSBC Fund Services (Korea) Ltd. to turn the company around, and she later moved to Malaysia to establish and lead risk teams there. She's now back in Vietnam, taking on a new challenge in insurance at AIA as its Director of Partnership Business Management.

### **Moving to different countries when you're a single mother must be tough. Can you tell us more about that?**

I consider having my daughter as my greatest achievement; she is at the centre of everything that I do. However, I've never let being a single mother stop me from having my own dreams as well. When I decide that I want something for my life, for myself and my daughter, I just go and do it, I don't overthink it.

When I am in other countries, I don't have my family to help look after my daughter but I have other resources available. I employ a helper to look after my daughter while I'm at work, and I don't let other people's perceptions of what a good mother is affect me. I'm there for my daughter whenever she needs me, but I don't set a certain number of hours to be with her each week. I don't want to add

unnecessary guilt to myself that way. My daughter and I are really close, and that's a result of me using the time that I do spend with her to build a strong connection.

### **Not letting other people's perception of what a good mother looks like make you feel guilty is great advice. Was it hard not to let this worry you?**

My mother has a huge impact on the way I bring up my daughter as well. When I was growing up, my mother would leave me and my siblings at home to go to the market to tend to her own business, and she would spend many hours there. When she was 60, she started another new business. She never had a lot of time for us but I've always felt supported and loved by my family, and she's a role model for me.

Similarly, I want to be a role model for my daughter. I want her to know that circumstances in life are just that – circumstances. It can be a challenge, or it can be an opportunity. It's how you handle the situation that counts. I've never viewed being a single mother as a challenge – in fact, I enjoy being single. I think that if I'm married, I would have less time for my daughter and my friends because I would have to dedicate time to my husband as well.

**You have a very positive view on life. Were there any challenges that you faced in your journey?**

Not with my daughter. However, the one biggest challenge I have faced – and have been unable to overcome through sheer will alone, is being Vietnamese. I love my country and I love my culture but when it comes to working overseas, being Vietnamese has some limitations. Getting a work visa for certain countries is incredibly tough, and that is one of the reasons why I left the banking industry. I was actually offered twice to move to work in a developed financial hub in Asia, but I couldn't get a work permit because of my nationality, and that was incredibly frustrating.

It took me a while to accept the situation because I had worked so hard for it, but I think the whole experience has given me new insights.

When one door closes another opens. I moved back to Vietnam, and made the switch to insurance. I had no prior experience in insurance, and I'm very grateful that AIA has given me this opportunity to learn and grow in this new role.

**Now that you're back in Vietnam, what do you hope to be able to achieve?**

Like I said, my daughter is at the centre of everything that I do, and I hope that I can be an example to the next generation of young women that she belongs to. I wish to inspire more young Vietnamese women to dream bigger. I think a lot of Vietnamese women believe that we will never be global leaders but that's not true. My experience in Korea is a good example. The corporate culture there tended to be more patriarchal, but I not only managed to get them to trust and respect me, I even turned the company into a profit-making business.

Even for Vietnamese women who aren't thinking of working overseas or internationally, I hope to inspire them to pursue their dreams. Even if the circumstances surrounding them may seem challenging, they should always be looking out for the positive side to it; for a way to turn it into an opportunity.

**I've never let being a single mother stop me from having my own dreams as well. When I decide that I want something for my life, for myself and my daughter, I just go and do it, I don't overthink it.**



# May Szeto

## Head of Human Resources, Asia Grosvenor

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▶ **May Szeto is an accomplished HR professional with almost 20 years' experience as a HR business partner, working in different industries in the region. Her specialities include change management, organisational development, HR business partnering, employee relations and HRIS implementation. Raised and educated in Hong Kong, she has worked through personal difficulties and career ups and downs to achieve success.**

### **You have definitely succeeded in establishing yourself as an experienced HR business partner and have led teams in different organisations. What do you consider your greatest achievements so far in your career?**

Many people would judge their achievements by the number of successful projects they have led, but for me it has been about finding the ideal balance between career progression and family life. I used to be a workaholic, devoting most of time to work before I had my own family. I have to find a way to balance everything without compromising my health, work and family.

When I joined Grosvenor four years ago, I was given an important mandate by our CEO to drive organisational changes for our Asian business. These changes included reward schemes, learning and development programmes, HR policies, and to develop a more cohesive and open culture. It was a big but exciting challenge for me. Being in a regional

role, I also had to spend 40% of my time travelling when my daughter was still only two years old. I find that planning ahead allows me to manage my time more effectively. Having a timetable that suits me usually helps to reduce stress to a great extent.

Since last year, I have been appointed to Grosvenor Asia's executive committee, which gives me broader responsibilities involving investment and operational decisions, and makes achieving the right personal balance more important than ever. Somehow the challenges I've faced have become my achievements through overcoming them.

### **You mentioned introducing changes to your company. Can you share with us what you have done to help staff facing similar situations to you?**

It has been a few years now since we implemented the change programme. From the incentive scheme, training

programme, company policies, reward and performance management to hiring practice, I've seen a big change in both culture and engagement. In fact, in our recent employee experience survey, the engagement level has shown an improvement of more than 30% compared to three years ago, which is amazing.

I've also introduced family-friendly policies, such as flexible working hours, extended parental leave, family care leave and "summer hours", which allows employees to adjust their working hours flexibly during the summer holiday period so they can be with their family. These new measures have been welcomed by both male and female staff in our company, across the region.

I think being an HR head also makes you a role model in the company, so I need to demonstrate the importance of work-life balance and promote mental well-being. Our team knows they can always talk to me when they face any difficulties.

**With multiple roles to fill in your life, do you find it difficult to wear so many different hats day-to-day? Can you tell us just how you manage your time?**

It's certainly not easy to divide time clearly, and taking calls during night time is one of the unavoidable things, especially if you work for a global company. But I actually enjoy all the hats I wear, and am grateful to be a daughter,

a parent and a business leader at the same time!

I think it takes time to find the pattern that suits you best. For me, I try to leave work on time and cater for my family first. I spend quality time with my child and then put my child to bed before I switch on my computer if I need to do so. I find this more effective than working long hours, and I definitely don't want to miss out on time with my family. I am grateful that my company offers flexibility, and that I have a supportive team who is always there to help. I am also very grateful that my husband and family are very supportive and always back me up. Sometimes I do struggle, but I always think positively. Having a kid does make you busier, but they also remind you that it's important to take a break and enjoy life in the moment!

In the future, I would also like to allocate more time to giving something back to society. I was raised in Hong Kong and I want to be a role model and mentor to young women. I recently joined a mentorship programme at Hong Kong Baptist University's HR faculty, and I encourage other women leaders to do the same and give up some personal time for the young female talent in Hong Kong.

**As a HR expert and female business leader, what recommendations and advice would you give to young female talent?**

The Asian education system teaches

us to be good at listening, and women are regarded as quiet and less creative. But this isn't our true nature. Never underestimate your own voice and don't think that because we're culturally more conservative, our opinion is less valued. I have seen many Asian women who have great insights, but dare not to speak up. Trust yourself and seize the opportunity to say what you think.

Also, as women, we sometimes have the misconception that in order to achieve the same success as our male counterparts, we have to be tougher or more assertive. I think it's important to appreciate and promote women's unique character, that we are compassionate and resilient. Work to your strengths and find a balance where you assert yourself without losing your individual qualities.

**It's important to appreciate and promote women's unique character, that we are compassionate and resilient. Work to your strengths and find a balance where you assert yourself without losing your individual qualities.**



# Vanee Gosiengfiao

## General Manager

### Sanofi Consumer Healthcare Philippines

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In 2013, Vanee was at the peak of her career, working in GSK Thailand as the General Manager of Consumer Healthcare, when her husband was diagnosed with liver cirrhosis. This news devastated her – her own father passed away from liver cirrhosis when she was two years old – and her children were only one and three then. Thanks to her mentors, sponsors, and friends, Vanee and her family managed to return to the Philippines, where she was better supported. Since moving back five years ago, Vanee has taken a professional coaching course, and co-founded a strategy and data science company, before going back to the corporate world.

**It's been six years since you first heard the news, and I'm glad your husband is doing better. Could you tell us more about how you felt when you heard about your husband's illness?**

I was shocked and incredibly scared! He was having health problems and we thought it had to do with his gall bladder, but it turned out to be liver cirrhosis, the very disease that took my father away from my family when I was young. We also found out earlier in the same year that my then 18-month-old son was autistic, so it was an incredibly stressful period for my family.

These events happened while I was only in my third year of taking on the General Manager, Consumer Healthcare role in Thailand, and I was just starting to build momentum implementing initiatives that would transform the team. It was everything that I'd been working towards in my life. But

when I found out about my husband's illness, I was ready to drop everything for my family. Liver cirrhosis is a particularly aggressive disease, and I knew we had to take action, or I'd lose my husband.

In many ways, I was blessed. When I shared my story with my mentors and contacts, they all offered to find me a job elsewhere, so I could get my husband the required quality healthcare. I eventually chose to return to the Philippines where we would be closer to our families. We've been back in the Philippines for six years, and thanks to our family and friends, we have been able to get him regular treatment in a familiar environment, and provide my son with the required specialist therapy for autism.

### **Given all these challenges, how do you juggle your career and your family?**

Even before my husband's diagnosis, he's been very supportive of my career. We first met in college and when we started working we came to the decision together that when we had children, one of us would stop working.

When that time eventually came, we evaluated both our situations, strengths, and weaknesses, and my husband decided that he would quit his job to care for the family full-time. He was better than me at household chores, changing nappies, and being a stay-at-home parent! I was doing well in my career, and he reassured me that he wanted to support me, and he wasn't concerned about traditional gender roles. He has really been an ally in empowering my career and my life, and I consider myself incredibly lucky to have him.

After his diagnosis, we returned to the Philippines where we had a more extensive support system, and that allowed me to go back to work. Luckily for us, both my husband and my son's conditions are much more stable now. My husband is still waiting for a donor but given how aggressive liver cirrhosis can be, I'm glad that his condition is stable.

### **Despite facing such a tough time in your personal life, you still went on to achieve new career milestones – what gave you the drive and motivation to do so?**

When I look back at my career and reflect on the things I have achieved, I've realised a common thread that kept me going was my purpose – enabling transformation. This purpose began when I was in Abbott, where I had the opportunity to help launch the adult nutritionals business. In my time there, we not only introduced the brand to the market, we even became the top provider of tube feeding in hospitals! That experience got me addicted to creating transformations.

My time at GSK also involved transformation, whether it was developing regional strategies and ways of working for oral care in South East Asia (SEA), or for the international brands. Knowing that my work helps me fulfil my purpose makes it easy and fun for me to keep going. When I find myself facing challenges, it can be daunting but also exciting to know that I can turn these challenges into opportunities.

This purpose also applies to transforming people; I enjoy being able to transform the lives of people, and that helps me greatly in my leadership. I'm naturally an introvert, and developing new relationships on a wider scale doesn't always come naturally but I'm motivated to become

a better leader and communicator because I want to create positive changes in my teams' lives.

### **Any lessons you would like to share with other women?**

I have three things I'd like to share: First, find a purpose that you want to pursue; Second, surround yourself with the right people and coaches, and you'll have support wherever you go, and for whatever challenges you face; Thirdly, go out there, try new things, and take risks – that's how we all learn!

### **Surround yourself with the right people and coaches, and you'll have support wherever you go, and for whatever challenges you face.**



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# CONTACT US

To find out more about creating a diverse and inclusive workforce or to discuss your recruitment needs, please contact your Robert Walters recruitment consultant or get in touch with any of our offices below:

## HONG KONG

20th Floor Nexxus Building  
41 Connaught Road Central  
Central, Hong Kong  
**t:** +852 2103 5300

## INDONESIA

World Trade Centre 3, 18th Floor  
Jl. Jend. Sudirman Kav. 29-31 Jakarta  
12920  
Indonesia  
**t:** +62 (21) 2965 1500

## MAINLAND CHINA

### Shanghai

2206-2207, 22nd Floor  
Park Place Office Tower  
No.1601 West Nanjing Road Shanghai  
200040  
China  
**t:** +86 21 5153 5888

## Shenzhen

Level 3, Tower 1  
Kerry Plaza  
No.1 Zhong Xin Si Road  
Futian District  
Shenzhen 518048  
China  
**t:** +86 755 3304 0350

## Suzhou

Room 1906, Block A  
Building #58, Suzhou Centre  
Suzhou Industrial Park  
Suzhou 215021  
Jiangsu Province  
China  
**t:** +86 512 6873 5888

## MALAYSIA

### Kuala Lumpur

Unit 35.02, Level 35 Mercu 2  
No. 3, Jalan Bangsar  
KL Eco City  
59200 Kuala Lumpur  
Malaysia  
**t:** +60 3 2303 7000

## Northern Region

**t:** +6010 931 9803

## PHILIPPINES

37/F Philamlife Tower  
8767 Paseo De Roxas  
Makati City 1226  
Philippines  
**t:** +63 2 8816 4972

## SINGAPORE

6 Battery Road  
#09-01 Floor  
Singapore  
049909  
**t:** +65 6228 0200

## TAIWAN

### Taipei

Room F, 10th Floor  
No.1 Songzhi Road  
Xin-yi District  
Taipei  
Taiwan  
**t:** +886 2 8758 0700

## THAILAND

### Bangkok

Q House Lumpini, 12th Floor, Unit  
1 South Sathorn Road  
Thungmahamek,  
Bangkok 10120  
Thailand  
**t:** +66 (0) 2 344 4800

### **Eastern Seaboard**

4/222, Harbor Office, Level 12, Room  
No.1260  
Sukhumvit Road, Moo 10,  
Thungsukhla, Sriracha,  
Chonburi 20230  
Thailand  
**t:** +66 (0) 33 030 780

### **VIETNAM**

Unit 1, Level 9, The Metropolitan  
235 Dong Khoi Street  
District 1  
Ho Chi Minh City  
Vietnam  
**t:** +84 28 3520 7900



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