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Opportunities: A Conversation with Gerard Chan of Symantec

Interviews and Profiles



The Asia Pacific region has experienced a rapid technological revolution over the last two decades. Gerard Chan, vice president of EMEA and Asia Pacific for Symantec, has played a crucial role in fostering Asia's in-house community amid the expansion. If you ask Chan about his legal career, he will tell you that his journey from firm to global in-house counsel was a result of "jumping at the opportunity."

Growing up in Penang, a well-known island state of Malaysia, Chan got to experience the country

transform into a globally recognized epicenter for the technology industry. Increasing efforts to globalize led to a change in perspective for Chan, whose parents were of the postcolonial generation and encouraged him to speak English at home.

“Looking back, the fact that English was my first language was a huge advantage in my life and prepared me well for my overseas education, and in my career thereafter,” he says.

However, when Chan enrolled at the University of Sydney, he envisioned a career in music. As a classically trained pianist, he was offered a place in the school’s music faculty. It was not until starting classes that he realized that his priorities and talents were elsewhere.

“I could not see myself competing with all of my classmates at the time. I didn’t actually know what I was going to do until the second year of university when I decided I would try law. I stuck with it, enjoyed it, and everything else is history,” he says.

After completing law school at the University of Sydney in 1985, Chan returned to Penang to start his practice at Lim Kean Siew and Co. Advocates and Solicitors. He would work at the firm for 15 years. The decision to come home to practice law was an easy one, as the draw of Malaysia’s booming technology industry was too enticing to ignore.

While at the firm, Intel would become one of Chan’s most high-profile clients, as technology companies began to expand into Penang to take advantage of its cheap labor, skilled workforce, and government incentives. Chan describes the state as the Silicon Valley of Malaysia.

It was through this relationship that Chan made the transition to in-house, as Intel would eventually offer him a job in 1999 to become the company’s senior counsel. Chan jumped at the opportunity.

“I was a bit curious,” he admits. “I think the biggest attraction for me was the technology, and the fact that I could work across multiple jurisdictions. My client would become my first boss and I really grew to understand what it meant to be a lawyer within a multinational company.”

The experience strengthened Chan’s management capabilities, and would ultimately further his interest in working with a multinational focus. After seven years with the company, however, he wanted more.

“I got itchy feet. I had been managing a group of lawyers across Asia, and decided the next step for me was to take a broader leadership role. There was a push for me internally to want more. The position at Symantec would become available at the right place, and the right time,” he says.

Chan moved to Singapore, where he would eventually become regional counsel for Symantec Asia Pacific in 2007. The company specializes in the storage, management, and protection of data on an international scale. Chan recalls seeing the then-CEO John Thompson speaking about his vision for the company shortly after he accepted the position. To Thompson, Symantec represented the perfect synergy between data storage and data security.

“You have privacy, which governs the way we share information. But it’s technology and security that affects how privacy is implemented. You need the two, working simultaneously, to effectively insure cybersecurity,” he says.

At Symantec, Chan found the multinational environment that he had always sought after. Oftentimes,

this meant getting a seat at the general counsel's table during meetings with the United States.

"I don't know many companies where the head of the region gets invited to multinational meetings with the general counsel on a regular basis. Having that visibility was powerful for my team. It felt like our voices were being heard," he says.

It would be through this desire to increase in-house visibility in the Asia Pacific region that would prompt him to help form the ACC Singapore Chapter in 2013.

"When the opportunity to help start a Singapore Chapter arose, I put my hand up. I got introduced to the first president [Jo Anne Schwendinger] and we launched the chapter. The decision served as a benefit to my team and to the benefit of all inhouse counsel in the region," he says.

As Chan describes it, his next step would come as an opportunity that arose "one fine day" to head the EMEA region of Symantec in 2013. The company had undergone a rapid reorganization of its legal staff, and a new leadership position had become available. Like with previous opportunities, the offer was too good to refuse.

To Chan, working in the EMEA region was a tangible change from working in the Asia Pacific region. As Symantec had a longer history in Europe, he found that he had the support of a mature and knowledgeable team of senior lawyers who had laid strong processes for how to engage with the legal team. In addition, Chan had to acclimate quickly to the standards of the European Union.

"In EMEA, I had to quickly get up-to-speed on key concepts of EU law that are applied more or less uniformly across the EU member states. In Asia, however, these legal concepts often vary between jurisdiction, and legal solutions have to be tailored to fit the needs of each specific region," he says.

It was not until last year, when Symantec separated from the software company Veritas that Chan found himself in his current position. With a depth of experience in Asia and a newfound understanding for EMEA, Chan was asked to take on the challenge of managing both regions. While strenuous at times, Chan underscores the importance of his new role.

"If anyone has an opportunity like that, they should grab it. It's challenging to work through time zones but it brings so much diversity together in a coherent way. This is the challenge that I set for myself. How can I bring two teams that are outside of the United States together," he says.

Through his career, Chan has never shied away from a challenge. From humble beginnings in Penang, to overseeing the global legal departments of two regions, he has consistently devoted himself to jumping at the next big opportunity. When asked what his next step would be, however, Chan emphasized his love for his current position, and his intention to stay put. With Symantec's recent acquisition of Blue Coat Systems, Chan believes that the company is well placed to enhance its leadership position and set the pace for cybersecurity innovation industry-wide.

"I've got plenty of more work to do," he says.

Getting To Know... Gerard Chan

WHAT BOOK ARE YOU CURRENTLY READING AND WHY?

Bill Bryson's *The Road to Little Dribbling*. I have always seen myself as an Anglophile. I love everything about England, and this book is quite funny. I've really enjoyed reading it. In fact, a few months ago I took a trip to the Lake District and followed some of the routes that he recommended in this book.

WHERE ARE YOU GOING FOR YOUR NEXT VACATION?

I would like to go back to Sydney because my law class is celebrating its 30-year anniversary. Unfortunately, because of work I cannot go. I am, however, planning a trip to Cinque Terre Italy in December. It's located in a spectacular portion of the Italian Riviera in the Liguria region of Italy. The town is a UNESCO World Heritage site.

WHAT'S YOUR FAVORITE FOOD?

My favorite food is local to the city of George Town in Penang. Peranakan food is one of the first fusion cuisines in the world, blending Malay, Chinese, and Indian flavors. It's roots date back to the mid-19th century but it's now being rediscovered globally. It's quite unlike anything else in the world. It's truly unforgettable.

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