



CASE STUDY: Zachary Wilson, AlfaTech

“Be willing to change, adapt, move, make decisions, take risks. Fail fast, but in a way that won’t kill you.”

TELL US MORE ABOUT YOUR COMPANY

AlfaTech was established in Singapore in 2010 as a satellite office of a US based company. In 2011 we went independent, but retained the name via an operating agreement with the original parent company. We specialise in turn-key design and build capital projects. Our clients include some of the very well-known household names in the marketplace. We like turn-key because there is a sole point of accountability to our customers and enables



us to ‘own’ the decisions, the customer and ultimately live up to the quality commitments that we make to our customers. We have other business models, but turn-key is really where we feel the most valuable. Since establishing that business we have diversified into several verticals in the built environment including electrical contracting, Internet of Things (IoT) sales and installation, facility management and real estate consulting. Our ideal customer is one that we help from site selection all the way through ongoing facility operation and eventual decommissioning. We pride ourselves in plain dealing, accountability, transparency, and aggressive problem solving. We are fairly flat as an organisation. Which allows a lot of free play for our project managers to make decisions on the fly. We have had the honour to work in these various capacities for Facebook, LinkedIn, Google, Hill Rom, Dow Jones and many other well-known companies. We have operational entities in China, Malaysia, Hong Kong and Singapore and have partner relationships in Thailand, Vietnam, Taiwan and India.

SHARE WITH US SOME OF THE CHALLENGES YOU FACED

Our biggest challenge is finding people who share our values. We are relentlessly committed to customer service, being the first responder for problems, and applying our own collective knowledge to provide solutions to clients. It seems to be a common thread among all the people I meet that finding, hiring and retaining good people is very difficult. Having never run a business before, we have made many hiring mistakes along the way. Usually this was the result of trying to short circuit the organic based growth and hard work that is demanded for healthy development, i.e. trying to find easy ways to solve issues. At some point you have to realise you can’t hire great people, you need to create those people.

Also being an American and only 28 years old when I moved to Singapore, many mistakes were made out of pure naiveté. I just assumed people generally were trustworthy and honest. Turns out there are a lot of people who would take advantage of the new kid on the block. We have had several phases and cycles of ‘partners’ that, over time, we realized were taking advantage of us. Those were painful and costly mistakes. I am sure there is still more cleaning that will need to be done, but we are a lot better at understanding risk and protecting ourselves.

We are also entrepreneurs at heart so we have traditionally reinvested all our earnings into new business units, training and new approaches to business. Not all of these investments have paid off so I guess they could be called mistakes, but we have continued to invest where we think we can gain advantage in the market, provide better service to customers, or solve problems. We have grown steadily and I think we owe that to the mentality that failing fast is better than stagnation or complacency.

Our latest addition is DVUCA, a full-service, technology agnostic, IoT company. We are very excited about this new setup and the potential to bring leading edge technology to our customers.

Another big challenge is that we are totally self-funded and have never sought or accepted financing of any kind. We often punch above our weight in the market serving global companies, and financing project progress has led to some very scary cash management situations. We have remained solvent and feel that having faith in our delivery model, our customers and our vision of what is right has proven to be a good platform. A lot of success is just being able to hang around long enough to develop a network and relationships of trust and then wait to capitalise—but it is a long, frustrating and sometimes scary waiting game. Many or even most of our direct competitors are more than ten times our size, so we just win it with consistency. One guy at a hundred meetings sometimes beats the company with a hundred guys at one meeting.

WERE THERE ANY COLLABORATIONS AND PARTNERSHIPS THAT HELPED YOU ACHIEVE YOUR SUCCESS?

We partnered early on with a very established local firm that provides real estate services including brokerage and other services. These services are complimentary to us and have led to some tangible financial benefits, but more it was just the camaraderie of not being alone when I first started up. Our partnerships have been challenging at times and probably would have been structured differently if we had to do it again, but they were important at the time and remain a source of strength. We continue to look for collaborations and partners that share our values. Shared values as a business is the most fundamental ingredient for a beneficial partnership or collaboration. At present we are in talks with a potential merger partner. The whole reason for the discussion is shared values. The rest is details. We feel that the values are truly the business model and the business we undertake is less important. We are in customer service and creative problem-solving business—we just happen to build buildings. But partnerships need to have clear lines of authority and the buck needs to stop with our customer relationship. Once we have committed, it doesn't matter who our partner is—our reputation is now on the line and nothing can fix a broken reputation. We are always open for mutually beneficial partnerships and collaborations, but good ones are hard to find.

LEARNING TIPS FOR SMEs

Be willing to change, adapt, move, make decisions, take risks. Fail fast, but in a way that won't kill you. Also everything will take twice as long to develop and cost twice as much as what you think. It takes a long time, with no easy answer. Hang in there! Also remember to ask for favours. People who have been employees their whole career or are duty minded sometimes find this hard to do; it's like they have to earn everything. Well, we all need help. We all need favours. We all need someone to take a chance on us when we are starting out. They said that John F. Kennedy was a master at asking favours and that was one of his key success factors. Once someone does you a favour, they are now invested in your success and will naturally want to see you succeed. Also you don't get what you don't ask for. Be honest, know your limitations, but make the big ask.

SHARE YOUR FAVOURITE QUOTE WITH US

Not everyone is an entrepreneur. Don't do this unless everything else makes you sick. Regardless, do something you love. We spend most of our waking hours working so try to take joy in it. If you decide to be an entrepreneur, be reconciled with your fate, you might fail and that is okay. Where would you be if you didn't try? I was taking an inventory of my most important customers and I realized I am not building projects for big companies, I am building them because I made commitments to people. Those people are my friends, and I can't let them down.

WHY DID YOU CHOOSE ASIA AND SINGAPORE?

Singapore is a natural focal point for any Asian business (besides China of course). The free flow of ideas, communities, different cultures, etc creates a vibrant and connected marketplace. It allows for quick cultivation of new business ideas and access to many markets beyond the shores of Singapore. Also it is a safe and respected nation which follows and adheres to the rule of law which helps bridge the gap between Asian business practices and the Western world. On a personal side, my wife is also Singaporean and we met in graduate school, so setting up in Singapore had some built-in pull factor for my family.

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Asia
Business
Trade
Association

41A Ann Siang Road, Singapore 069717
info@asiabusiness.trade
+65 6536 3414
www.asiabusiness.trade