

# Winning in the New Workplace: New Business Expectations — Insights from CEOs in Asia

## HOW LEADING COMPANIES ARE POSITIONING THEMSELVES FOR SUCCESS IN THE NEW NORMAL

**A**cross the globe, the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated key business trends that have been gathering momentum over the last decade. The range of issues leaders have needed to manage has steadily broadened to include advancing digital transformation road maps, upskilling employees so they can thrive in a data-driven future, and seeking innovative new business models for creating value. The past 18 months have been particularly intense, pushing leaders to make decisions in all these areas, even if they have little previous experience – and to make them fast.

How are these shifts playing out in Asia? How are companies in this diverse region seeking to reset for long-term growth in what will likely remain a more volatile context after the pandemic? And what new skills and capabilities do leaders need to succeed in this new era of value creation?

To answer these questions, Lim-Loges & Masters recently sought the views of some of Asia's most senior business leaders. Our interviewees included CEOs and experts from global companies across sectors as diverse as apparel, agribusiness, automotive, beauty, food and beverage, healthcare, nutrition and more. This paper captures their key insights.



## Seizing new growth opportunities

As lockdowns became the new normal, most leaders' immediate response was to push ahead with digitalisation to help their teams embrace more flexible 'work anywhere' approaches and connect virtually with customers, suppliers and other stakeholders.

BMW Group rapidly recalibrated its sales channels to enable strong online vehicle sales. "When the first lockdown hit Malaysia in March 2020 and our dealerships closed, we pulled together a taskforce of marketing, sales and IT team members and managed to implement an online shop in a record 34 days – a process that would normally have taken at least six months," said Harald Hoelzl, Managing Director and CEO.

"Our online platform gives people the flexibility to apply and get financing pre-approval in real time. Customers love the convenience and ease of that approach and the shop continues to be highly successful."



**With healthcare practitioners – our customers – increasingly 'going digital' and seeking to purchase more online, we've had to rapidly improve our capabilities to follow the customer where they are"**

**Paul Basson  
General Manager – URGO Group  
Vietnam**

Similarly, in Vietnam, the pandemic accelerated a shift to e-commerce for international healthcare company URGO Group. In turn, this is spurring the development of new products and services.

"With healthcare practitioners, our customers were increasingly 'going digital' and seeking to purchase more online, we've had to rapidly improve our capabilities to follow the customers where they are," said General Manager Paul Basson

"That has involved delivering new services based on virtual technology such as webinars to explain how our products may be right for any treatment, as well as developing new digital diagnostic tools. Previously, diagnosis depended mostly on in-person visits to a doctor or pharmacist, so when health services adopt such tools, it can allow them to transform the patient-doctor experience."



Fig 1: The pandemic is accelerating Southeast Asia's digital economy

Source: Southeast Asia, The Home For Digital Transformation, Facebook Business and Bain & Company, 2021



## Rethinking core business approaches

The pandemic has also required leaders to embrace new technologies as part of a wider rethink of other core business approaches. In China, for example, global agricultural seed company DuPont Pioneer has increased its use of social media channels to market products to the nation's digitally savvy consumers.



"Before the pandemic, we'd typically give on-site demonstrations to growers and other prospective customers, helping them make informed seed variety choices through live crop trials," said DuPont Pioneer's ex-Country Manager Liqun Kou.

"We're now using social media platforms such as WeChat as a primary outreach channel, conducting livestream demonstrations and engaging with farmers virtually. We're also upping our use of TikTok influencer marketing, where we provide promotional content to influencers and through them, connect with our target audience."

Global nutrition group Glanbia trialled a Google Glass-type face-based computing system to help dispersed R&D teams collaborate under lockdown conditions.

"We equipped a colleague with the device and supporting technology so that he could go into our customer's factory in Japan and take part in a live trial of a new production line," explained David Townsend, Vice President Commercial – Asia Pacific.

"In the past, for cost reasons we would only have been able to have a single person attend such a trial. But this way we had multiple teams in different countries attend online, viewing the trial through our colleague's eyeglass camera system and being able to contribute. We launched the product successfully within about three weeks and now plan to use the same highly efficient method in a number of other markets."



**In the past, for cost reasons we would only have been able to have a single person attend [an R&D] trial, but this way we had multiple teams in different countries attend online, viewing the trial through our colleague's eyeglass camera system and being able to contribute."**

**David Townsend  
Vice President, Commercial – Glanbia Asia Pacific  
China**





# Addressing supply chain disruption

At the same time, leaders have had to address the critical issue of disruption to global supply chains.

As the CNBC / HIS Markit chart below indicates, many international companies sourcing goods from low-cost manufacturing hubs in Southeast Asia, for example, have faced unprecedented challenges, with factory activity shrinking across the region due to ongoing virus outbreaks, lockdowns and output suspensions.

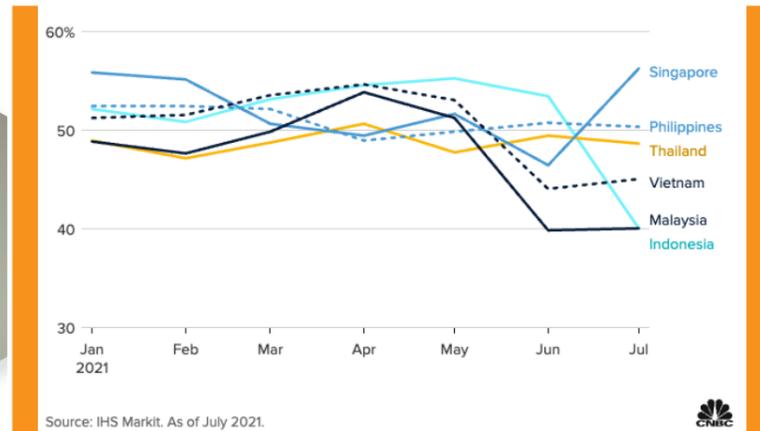


Fig 2: The state of manufacturing in ASEAN

A reading above 50 indicates expansion, while below 50 indicates contraction

Leaders described how in some cases, an exodus of migrant workers since the beginning of the pandemic is also leading to labour shortages, compounding supply chain headaches for larger firms. Low immunisation levels in some countries and a shortage of vaccines have further exacerbated the challenges. Vietnam, for instance, had fully inoculated less than 3 percent of its around 98 million people by August 2021. The country, which originally opted for a containment policy and did not rush to procure vaccines, is now racing to secure more doses.

In China, some leaders have managed to mitigate disruptions by replacing sourcing capability locally or shifting production to other parts of their global supply chain.

“Wherever we can, we’re seeking to manufacture locally and also replace sourcing capability from within Asia and particularly China, rather than externally,” said Townsend. “And where we can’t do that, we’re adopting agile solutions. For example, we have one product market that comes out of the United States (US) and into India – a relatively fixed supply chain. Recently, we’ve been able to rapidly switch supply sources over to our European factories and then back to the US, once Europe’s sources were no longer needed. It’s a challenging process operationally, but we’ve found it vital to leverage that advantage international firms do have of a global footprint and capabilities.”

In other cases, the disruptions are prompting a longer-term review of supply chains. “I do think there is going to be greater diversification in some areas. Some reshoring is bound to happen for critical parts of certain value chains,” said Gerard Raymond, President at Meiyume Group, a global beauty solutions company. “But I don’t think firms will move permanently away from global value chains. Asia will remain an attractive destination given its favourable labour market dynamics, trade policies and rising regional consumer demand – and China, in particular, will continue to be a very important powerhouse.”



Asia will remain an attractive destination given its favourable labour market dynamics, trade policies and rising regional consumer demand – and China, in particular, will continue to be a very important powerhouse.”

Gerard Raymond  
President – Meiyume  
Hong Kong



# Reconfiguring operations

As companies work to seize new growth opportunities during the economic volatility caused by the pandemic, leaders have made significant operational changes. That has involved quickly pivoting to equip people with the skills and tools to work remotely, for example, and operate with less oversight. However, this has not always been a straightforward process in a region as diverse as Asia, where significant gaps in infrastructure exist.

“Like many of our counterparts whose regional HQs are based in Singapore, we cannot take it for granted that the operating conditions for our businesses in the wider region are as conducive as they are here,” said Aaron Boey, Group CEO of leading traditional Chinese medicine company Eu Yan Sang. “You can’t assume that where everyone is living is wired up with fibre-optic broadband, for instance, or that people have high-speed data access. We’ve just needed to do the best we can to find novel and innovative solutions to minimise operational disruptions.”



Companies have also needed to adopt new organisational forms, such as agile and virtual teams, to ensure their people could more easily respond to new opportunities. Take the example of Syngenta, the leading global provider of agricultural science and technology. Recently, it realised that the current environment was changing the way its internal stakeholders needed to engage with each other to deliver a great customer experience.

In response, Syngenta’s Asia Pacific seeds business quickly set up small cross-functional virtual teams drawn from the customer-facing parts of the business – including sales, marketing, product management and supply chain management. Empowering people in agile ways of working and equipping them to make decisions independently has proved to be a highly efficient way for the organisation to figure out how much product a grower might need and how to get it to them fast, working with its channel partners.

James Kane, Managing Director – Malaysia and Singapore for global snacking company, Mondelez International, had a similar response. “When the pandemic hit, we realised that increased collaboration across functions was essential in enabling rapid innovation and a resilient supply chain. That’s now standard practice,” he said. “It empowers our teams to solve complex issues together as they keep flexing and evolving. This is vital when things are continuously changing.”



## Strengthening organisational cultures

Optimising operations has brought challenges, not least the cost of investing in new technologies during a time of great uncertainty. Other issues include the need to rapidly shift to virtual workforce training and development approaches, and guarding against diminished employee productivity and wellbeing where remote work becomes the norm.

In response, many leaders are paying more attention to strengthening their organisational culture. As some described it, that can help to ensure a balance between productivity and wellbeing, treating employees with empathy while holding them accountable for achieving business objectives.

“From the start, the crisis has obliged leaders to delegate and reinforce the involvement of the entire team,” said Laurent Wilsdorf, CEO, Limagrain Asia Pacific. “That means trust has become very important – at every level. For example, I haven’t seen my boss in person for 15 months. I haven’t seen my board members for almost two years now, and I am managing people in six countries that I’ve never met, except via virtual technology. I think deepening that trust and earning it by continuing to do the right thing for our people will remain a critical leadership requirement in the next normal.”



K O Chia, Family Office Advisor and venture capitalist in China, put it this way: “It’s about empowering people to be their best, which means giving people the freedom to manoeuvre, to define their input and output, within the context of what the business is trying to achieve.”

**From the start, the crisis has obliged leaders to delegate and reinforce the involvement of the entire team. That means trust has become very important – at every level.**  
*Laurent Wilsdorf  
CEO – Limagrain Asia Pacific  
Thailand.*



## Realigning strategies to pandemic times

Given all these shifts and complexities, it’s perhaps no surprise that many leaders are now choosing to identify pandemic resilience as a new source of competitive advantage.

In the words of Meiyume’s Raymond: “The pandemic forced us to confront some core issues, including really defining what our value add is as a business. For us, it remains creating a superior customer experience. So now, our ability to achieve that even despite the challenges of the new normal is how we define our competitive advantage.”

For many leaders, being able to build competitive advantage in this way revolves around continuing to attract and retain the right talent, and deepening trust, passion and commitment among teams. That approach is even more important in the light of employees leaving the workforce or switching jobs because they have felt unsupported by their employers during the pandemic – a global trend that some economists have dubbed [the great resignation](#).

Combatting this trend involves continuing to invest time and resources in helping people manage the stress of managing the demands of work and home life. “The pandemic has shown how important it is to demonstrate our values to employees,” said Vivek Mehta, CEO at MAS Brands, India’s leading intimate apparel and sportswear manufacturer. “That’s why we’re continuing to offer resources on how to manage work-life balance, we’re organising seminars on mental health and much more. It’s vital we stay connected to our people so they don’t feel that they’re just a face showing up on a laptop – they mean more to us and we care for them.”

As some leaders are discovering, the ability to offer people and their teams the greatest flexibility to work is aiding this approach.



**We are continuing to build a more flexible workforce by enabling distributed ways of working on global projects across borders. This has proven to be a key differentiating factor for us as an employer brand in retaining top talent.”**

*Jonas Trindler  
CEO – Zühlke  
Singapore*

“Winning skilled talent will be an ongoing challenge for many in this global economy,” said Jonas Trindler, CEO Asia of global innovation service provider Zühlke Group. “And given the country-specific travel restrictions, achieving international mobility for talent to relocate between Asia and Europe is even trickier. We are continuing to build a more flexible workforce by enabling distributed ways of working on global projects across borders. This has proven to be a key differentiating factor for us as an employer brand in retaining top talent.”

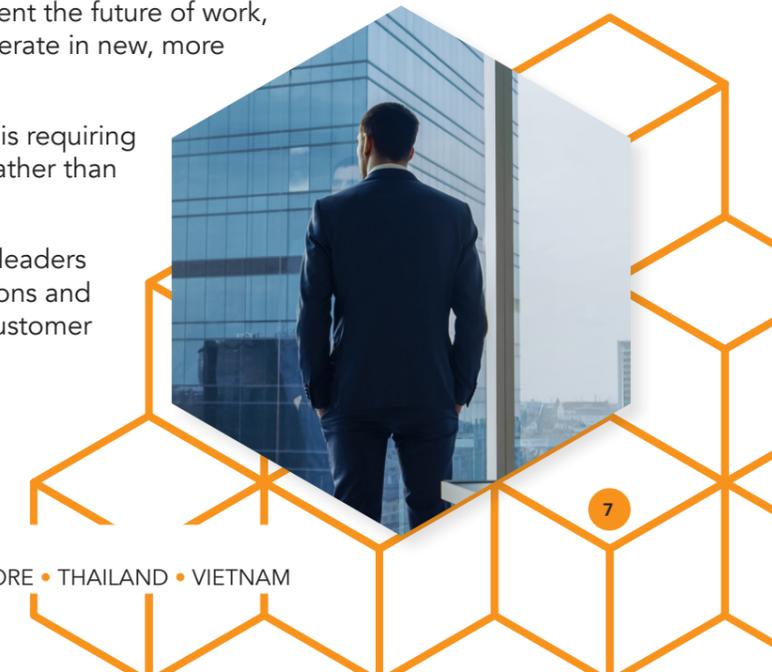


## Redefining the leadership agenda

As our respondents highlighted, the pandemic is changing the Asian business landscape through its impact on global markets, operations and supply chains. At the same time, it is acting as a catalyst to reinvent the future of work, opening up opportunities for companies to operate in new, more innovative ways.

Growing a global business in this environment is requiring shifts in leadership behaviours and mindsets, rather than relying solely on existing strengths.

Our interviewees identified three key changes leaders can make to help them deepen team connections and maintain retention rates, deliver outstanding customer experiences and drive growth.



## Three Key Changes

**1 Hone abilities to embrace change.** As a first step, leaders must hone their ability to continuously adapt to changing conditions. Sharpening their critical decision-making skills will allow them to continually revisit their organisations' strategic vision to ensure they can create value in a way that is relevant in the future.

**2 Shift to a collaborative focus.** Second, leaders need to shift to a 'we' focus, working together across functions with others who have different backgrounds and ways of thinking, and collaborating and co-creating in innovative ways to solve clients' challenges

Part of this shift involves eradicating the expectation that leaders are invincible beings with all the answers and instead acknowledging vulnerabilities. Being upfront and transparent about fears and concerns can allow leaders to strengthen meaningful relationships with colleagues across the organisation.

**3 Infuse the company culture with new purpose.** Third, leaders should rebuild the culture of their company in a way that emphasises the organisation's global mission, values and higher purpose. A well-defined purpose can deepen trust with investors as well as the workforce, reinforcing a sense of inclusion and belonging and encouraging employees to stay energised and motivated to deliver results.

**Leaders who can embrace these shifts will be better positioned to future-proof their companies and help them become the champions of the post-pandemic age.**



**Find out more here about how Lim-Loges & Masters can help companies manage change.**



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Mr Paul Basson  
General Manager  
URGO Group  
Vietnam

Mr Aaron Boey  
Group CEO  
Eu Yan Sang  
Singapore

Mr K O Chia  
Family Office Advisor and venture capitalist  
Hong Kong

Mr Hardeep Grewal  
Head, Field Crops, Asia Pacific Region  
Syngenta  
Singapore

Mr Harald Hölzl  
Managing Director and CEO  
BMW Group  
Malaysia

Mr James Kane  
Managing Director  
Mondelez International  
Malaysia and Singapore

Mr Liqun Kou  
Country Manager (Previous)  
DuPont Pioneer  
Field Seeds  
China

Mr Vivek Mehta  
CEO  
MAS Brands  
India

Mr Gerard Raymond  
Global President  
Meiyume (Member of Fung Group)  
Hong Kong

Mr David Townsend  
Vice President, Commercial  
Glanbia Asia Pacific  
China

Mr Jonas Trindler  
CEO Asia  
Zühlke Group  
Singapore

Mr Laurent Wilsdorf  
CEO Limagrain Asia Pacific  
Limagrain Field Seeds  
Thailand

