

SINGAPORE'S TOP IN-HOUSE TEAMS

BY ASIAN LEGAL BUSINESS



As a hub for the Southeast Asian region, Singapore is home to companies with business interests across the ASEAN and beyond. In-house teams in the country, as a result, need to have a mindset that extends beyond the city-state's borders, and thus need to be able to tackle a host of regulatory and compliance challenges in various jurisdictions. ALB's list of Singapore's top in-house teams for 2019 showcases some outstanding teams that have stood out in their innovative approaches, as well as in the ways they have added value to the overall business.

Singapore's position within the broader Southeast Asian region is a unique one: Within a grouping of ten countries, it stands out not only through its higher GDP and quality of living, but also for its transparency and lack of red tape that make a business-friendly destination. It is also more international than its neighbours, making it a magnet for expats and multinational businesses. As a result, companies from around the world have made the country their regional hub, but Singapore's own economic growth has meant that there is no shortage of domestic giants either.

In-house teams in Singapore, therefore, generally cover a lot more than just the city-state, with many corporate

counsel overseeing the Southeast Asian region, and sometimes beyond that as well. As a result, the best ones have an international mindset, being aware of laws and policies in a host of countries that could impact their company's operations. Then, of course, there is the increasing burden of regulatory compliance that companies globally face, something that in-house counsel need to stay constantly updated on. And finally, with shrinking budgets and having to do less with more, these teams need to make the absolute most of limited resources while acting as trusted business advisors to the company.

In the ALB Singapore Top 15 In-house Team 2019, we highlight some of the best teams that exhibit all these qualities and more. They stand out through their innovative approaches, problem-solving abilities, but most importantly in the way that they add value to the business.

MORE WITH LESS

One aspect that is common to the best in-house teams in Singapore is the ability to make the most of limited resources, usually taking very innovative approaches to doing so. Take, for example, the Singapore-based legal team of Schneider Electric, a multinational company specialising in energy management and automation, which currently has three members. Led by GC Paul Fredrick, the team is a strong proponent of technology to assist with their heavy workload. "Innovative technology-enabled tools such as DocuSign, Contract Quote Authorization, Box, IntraLinks, Salesforce (Bridge Front Office), an internal collaboration site for Schneider Electric Legal globally, and an in-house review system are all used effectively to assist in the review and approval process to advance a document at each stage," the team says. "With such technology, record-keeping is done efficiently and comprehensively, which saves time during audits and when

THE LIST

Aggreko

Airbnb

Amazon

BW Group

Eastern Pacific Shipping

Equinix Asia Pacific

Far East Organization

GLP

Grab

Lazada South East Asia

Lazada eLogistics Group

Louis Dreyfus

Morgan Stanley

Schneider Electric

Standard Chartered Bank

Trax

Telstra

UBS

The list was based on self-submissions, as well as accolades received at the ALB SE Asia Law Awards 2019.

colleagues need to retrieve information and agreements."

"The legal team also continues to implement processes and systems that improve our effectiveness and working relationship with the numerous business units we serve," the Schneider Electric legal team adds. "Starting with a Contracts Review Request Form, these processes and systems have streamlined communications and enabled a larger quantity of transactions and business to progress smoothly."

Likewise, the six-member Singapore legal team of Australian telecom company Telstra says that it is at the forefront of change and innovation within the company. "We strive for new ways of working, leveraging new technology and agile methodologies for example – with focus on efficiency and 'delivering differently,'" the team says.

"To improve business support, we have reimagined our legal support model to improve efficiency and drive consistency," the Telstra in-house team adds. "From October 2018, our team has deployed a group-wide triage platform called Engage Legal, which operates the legal team's single front door through which our clients across different business units can engage the appropriate legal team and access FAQs, approvals matrices, self-help tools or automated tools – including our new product availability tool described above – they need. The platform also acts as a form of attrition of requests to legal, providing guidance on where legal advice is not required, as well as directing clients to the 'right' place – for example where finance team should alternatively be engaged. To support the launch of Engage Legal, the Singapore legal team conducted a review of our incoming work types to design a decision tree and gating questions to ensure that work relevant to our team was routed to the appropriate automation tools or a lawyer as appropriate."

The team says that this process allows it to focus on higher value and complex work. "Apart from helping us to allocate our resources more efficiently, funnelling all legal requests through Engage Legal also has the added benefit of allowing legal counsel an equal opportunity to engage in a variety of work based on the requests that come through the platform, rather than be pigeon-holed in an area of specialisation," the Telstra legal team says. "Lastly, the data collected on Engage Legal will also be valuable in allowing us to identify trends, areas which we can deliver training on and other automation opportunities. This would allow us to continually add value to the legal support we provide our clients based on their changing needs."

With the variety and quantity of work that in-house counsel encounter daily, they can hardly afford to specialise in a niche practice area. This is something that the legal team at Trax, a Singaporean technology company providing image recognition solutions to the retail industry, understands. "Given the diverse range of issues that the legal team handles every day and the need for having direct access to senior management to provide timely advice on both legal and business matters, our legal counsels are not pigeon-holed into handling specific scopes of work," it says. "We believe that the exposure, accessibility and visibility of the role are unique features of the legal team and keep our legal counsels highly motivated and invested in the continuing success of Trax."

Additionally, Adi Oxland, general counsel at Trax, believes that constant education is empowering and actively supports the team in developing both professionally and personally. "To that extent, the regional legal counsels are encouraged to enrol and participate in seminars and courses, whether relating to legal, the retail industry or otherwise, to keep abreast of developments.

Knowledge and experience, both positive and negative, are openly discussed so that the team can learn from each other and apply oneself to everyday work, the team says. "The result of this is evident – each regional legal counsel is highly accountable to Trax's internal stakeholders and is able to work independently in a demanding and fast-paced environment where priorities are constantly evolving."

ADDING VALUE

The best in-house teams are the ones that go beyond just offering legal advice to becoming a trusted business adviser. The two-member Singapore legal team at Amazon (Kindle Digital) works to ensure that business moves at the pace it sets itself without tripping regulatory wires or causing a poor customer experience. "We manage risk mitigation without compromising on the quality of the end product delivered to the customer or the bar set by our business teams," says the team. "We have helped business take a long-term view to set up for regulations that are currently being drafted or tabled for India. In parallel, we work to ensure that when new laws come into place we are able to keep our products and services on the shelf as we comply with regulations."

The team adds that it is focused on the customer experience and helping define the customer for the business when it needs a risk assessment of sensitivities related to content launches. "We help business take fast moving decisions with minimum impact on business while keeping in mind our customer. In doing so we have to keep in mind the vast cultural and political landscape of India to ensure a positive experience for all," the team says. "Additionally, we also work with other stakeholders to take input where needed to ensure our decisions are checked, tempered and consistent in direction."

At Trax, the legal team strives to

maintain open channels of communication with internal stakeholders. "By doing so, the team is not only able to quickly iron out and reflect on day-to-day concerns that various internal stakeholders face, but also to understand the business drivers to proactively see around corners and help the business navigate risks before they occur, it says.

An example of a challenge that the legal team helped overcome was leading the process of streamlining and consolidating the Statement of Work (SOW) template that Trax uses for all its customer engagements. "The release of the new SOW template represents months of work involving people from departments across the company, resulting in a document that is much more logically structured and more closely aligned to what Trax sells and how it delivers. Additionally, the new template has vastly improved the speed at which the document is filled out, reducing the need for any bureaucratic strings of approvals before the SOW can be executed," the team says.

The six-member Louis Dreyfus Company (LDC) legal team in Singapore says that it has been enmeshed in delivering business goals, primarily by not limiting itself to legal review once transactions have been closed. "Examples of this are aplenty – General Counsel Massimiliano Talli has actively introduced the LDC Food Innovation vertical to potential customers; Erika Taghizadeh works closely with the FX traders and the Compliance department to prepare for impending regulatory challenges, instead of waiting to implement the changes once imposed; Devottam Sengupta has been working with the Structured Trade Finance vertical in developing new structures and country strategies to expand the business; and Avnish Shah has been working closely with developing systems and processes to streamline contract execution for the trading desks."

The team adds that the main challenges it faces come from the leanness of the team compared with number of business goals to be achieved. "For example, earlier this year, Hong Teong Goh worked on closing three M&A projects simultaneously in countries as disparate as China, Malaysia and Australia, while also supporting various internal reorganisation projects," it notes.

At Singapore-headquartered logistics company GLP, General Counsel Mark Tan leads the four-member team, and is also a member of GLP's Executive Committee). "Mark is a trusted advisor to the board. He manages not only the Group Legal function but also the Singapore Office. His approach, which he has inculcated throughout his team, deftly balances legal protections and regulatory compliance with GLP's commercial needs. Each member of the team brings decisiveness, commercial thinking and strategic decision making to the table. These qualities are highly valued by their colleagues in the business teams and their advisors," the team says. "On transactions, the legal team asks the right questions, are flexible and creative in problem-solving, but will stand their ground where they believe the legal risks are too high. As a result, they are highly valued and respected by the business team."

The team adds that it is also highly adept at managing many different internal stakeholders, filtering their needs and requirements. "These requirements are communicated externally with a single voice," the GLP legal team says. "This makes interactions with external parties such as outside counsel much more efficient in terms of time and cost for the company."

RAISING PROFILE

On many occasions, in-house teams can find it difficult to properly demonstrate the value of their contributions to the

overall business. Not the teams on this list. "Given the team's responsiveness and willingness to adapt, the business stakeholders also have grown to appreciate the team, and business buy-in is no longer a major concern," says the team at LDC. "The businesses and traders trust the team's judgement on legal strategy, external spend and hiring. The team in Singapore does not have to work hard to convince that legal advice is meant to mitigate business risks, not to slow or close down the business. This trust has been hard-won, and it has been repaid by the legal team being cognisant of its responsibility in being solution oriented and constructive."

The team at Trax says that as with any profit-driven company, there is always a rush to sign customer contracts without carrying out the necessary review and approval process: "In order to help our internal stakeholders to understand the importance of having all contracts thoroughly reviewed, the legal team expends considerable time and effort as part of the onboarding and regular training process to explain the legal risks in common transactions."

It adds that an example of how the legal team is involved in advising both of legal and commercial matters is illustrated through the weekly one-on-one discussions that each legal counsel has with his or her respective regional managing director. Through such open channels of communication, the team can be kept apprised of, as well as to update the internal stakeholders on the progress of all matters in the company, thereby creating transparency, improving accountability and forging trust with the business," the team notes. "We are proud to say that most of our employees understand what a 'limitation of liability' clause is and how it works."

To drive engagement with the business, the Singapore legal team at Telstra has allocated members as "business partners" for key client

stakeholders in the company's business in South Asia: "Our lawyers have regular catch ups with their clients to provide a personal contact point outside the Engage Legal tool as well as gather valuable intelligence about roadblocks, escalation items and pipeline for new matters to ensure that we manage capacity and resourcing effectively."

It also distributes a monthly newsletter called "Legal Bits and Bytes" containing information on regulatory updates, legal efficiency and automation initiatives and common tips and tricks about finding useful information on customer negotiations and other commonly asked legal questions. "This newsletter was a Singapore innovation that was originally intended to be sent to our Singapore clients but due to popular demand and interest we now send this newsletter to almost 1000 recipients across Telstra's business in Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, India and Hong Kong," the team says.

At Amazon, the team says it understands that business has a different perspective that stems from divergent goals at times. "Business at Amazon is focused on getting our exciting new products and services out to the customer quickly, while at times regulatory checks from a legal perspective need thoughtful consideration," it adds. "We work with our business to outline the risks and rewards with our approach and pushback when we feel that the steps we take would enhance the customer experience. At Amazon, as customer obsession is one of our core tenets, and we use this to convince business of the importance of our function. While they may not understand where we come from given the complexities of legal challenges we face at times, we get business on board by speaking in the language of the customer and how ultimately our products and services can be stably and reliably launched with checks and balances built in." 