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## IT'S SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST AMONG LOCAL SMES

*MINT KANG looks at three homegrown companies  
which have implemented successful health programmes*

**The Business Times, 23 January 2009** - SMALL and medium-sized enterprises, or SMEs, are the lifeblood of Singapore's economy. They provide jobs for more than half of the country's workforce. Whatever affects the staff of SMEs affects a large proportion of the population - and health in particular is a concern these days, as the workforce ages.

But all too often, the SMEs themselves have other priorities. A 2005 survey by the Ministry of Manpower revealed that the primary concern of SMEs is business survival, and for good reason. SMEs are subject to challenges that larger companies can shrug off. These include limited resources, a lack of time, competition for manpower, even the greater importance that man-hours assume when a company has few staff.

Figures from the National Workplace Health Programme Survey 2006 corroborate this - about 50 per cent of SMEs have a workplace health programme in place, compared to nearly 80 per cent of those companies with over 500 staff.

Some SMEs have managed to buck the trend, however. In this last part of a three-part series on workplace health, we look at how three homegrown companies have overcome the challenges facing many SMEs, and the benefits they have derived as a result.

### **SPINN keeps the cutting edge**

The creative industry is a tough one, with its irregular hours and mental and emotional stresses which often lead to talented personnel dropping out due to sheer exhaustion. Leading video production company SPINN, creator of the last two National Day videos, has found a way to beat the burnout, however - through its workplace health and work-life balance initiatives.

Initiated in 2003, SPINN's silver award-winning workplace health programme was inspired after the company carried out a project for the Health Promotion Board and, in the course of working on the project, came into contact with information on workplace health and work-life programmes.

It was an eye-opener for SPINN's management, which had been under the impression that a workplace health programme involved costly in-house facilities such as the gyms set up by large companies.

But in reality, a workplace health programme also involves activities which need not be expensive. 'We didn't think it was something we could afford,' says Daniel Yew, CEO of SPINN. 'But once we looked at (HPB's health programmes), we realised it was doable.'

Besides health screenings and health talks on evergreen topics such as stress management, healthy eating and smoking cessation, the programme contains a wide variety of physical activities.

The most popular ones include aerobics, pilates and kickboxing classes, subsidised by the company. They are tailored to cater to SPINN's thirty-odd staff, the majority of whom are in their twenties to early thirties - young, dynamic people eager for variety and willing to try anything new. The programme is also constantly adapted to whatever resources are on hand.

For instance, staff members are enrolled in nearby gyms, giving them the benefit of the facilities without requiring a costly investment in space and equipment, while the location of SPINN's office in Peck Seah Street, just below a belly dancing studio, has given them the opportunity to incorporate belly dancing into the programme.

The various classes and workouts were an instant hit from day one. 'When it first started, everyone was interested in everything,' says Pamela Ang, head of post production.

Besides the novelty factor, mutual encouragement also helped to increase the programme's takeup rate immensely. 'The push factor is in having a group of colleagues coming and encouraging you to join them,' says Yurini Suryanto, deputy director of business development, and for some, peer support provides a chance to take up the healthy lifestyle they had previously not been able to adopt.

Ms Ang, for instance, had been interested in joining a gym but put the idea off when she found that none of her friends wanted to accompany her; so when her colleagues urged her to go to the gym with them, it was a perfect opportunity.

The same push applied to attending health talks, with up to 70 per cent of staff members participating in 2007.

Another push comes from a corporate culture which is highly accepting of work-life balance. Weekly schedules are arranged so as to leave free time for the various activities, and members of the management happily participate, joining the staff in the various classes and sharing in the fun.

Equipment for the activities is even provided by the company - Ms Suryanto recalls being taken aback when, shortly after she joined SPINN, her boss came up and presented her with her own personal yoga mat.

Physical fitness is often the focus of activities such as gym workouts, kickboxing or pilates. But in the case of SPINN's young and already fit staff, physical fitness is less of an issue than mental wellness - not keeping late hours, relaxing and de-stressing after a long hard day at work.

'We have to give people work-life balance, because if we don't, we'll lose them,' Mr Yew says simply. 'Not because they're unhappy with us, but because they'll burn out.'

### **Work-life balance**

The popularity of stress management talks testifies to this, and Ms Suryanto, who has been with SPINN for five years, agrees; she attributes her stay to the company's strong focus on health and work-life balance. The comparatively long tenure of many of SPINN's staff is only the most basic of the programme's benefits, however. Talent attraction and retention is a constant issue for SMEs, and SPINN's workplace health programme has given the company an obvious edge in this area.

'People don't expect an SME to have a workplace health programme,' explains Mr Yew - making SPINN's commitment to workplace health a great factor in the company's favour.

For a small company, particularly one in the creative sector, profitability and market position can often be linked directly to the quality of the workforce. SPINN's figures for the last five or six years show a 340 per cent increase in both top-line revenue and gross profit, compared to a 200 per cent increase in operating costs.

The investment required to achieve this growth? An average annual workplace health budget of \$2,500 or so.

'I am sure our initiatives - our health programme, the whole philosophy of work-life balance - all contributed to that growth over the last six years,' Mr Yew says, and while the exact returns on the \$2,500 outlay may not be directly quantifiable in terms of the company's profitability, they have certainly manifested in health indicators such as high blood cholesterol, one ailment whose incidence among staff members has been falling since 2006.

Sometimes, the programme's impact can be strikingly clear in a far more personal way than the numbers show.

Mr Foh Chit Yee, the founder of the company, suffers from high blood pressure and was not particularly active physically.

But after the inception of SPINN's workplace health programme, he too began to take up regular gym workouts and other activities.

Today, he is fitter, healthier, and his blood pressure is in check. With the fortunes of a small company often linked very closely to the well-being of its founder, this is possibly the programme's most valuable result to date.

'It's not just about running a health programme,' Mr Yew says; 'it's also about the company having a responsibility to teach people about healthy living'. And when the company's own founder and president benefits from the exercise of that responsibility, practically any investment in the programme can be justified.

*This is the last of a three-part weekly series brought to you by the Health Promotion Board.*

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## **About SPINN**

SPINN is a leading creative video production company which specializes in producing videos for sales, marketing and corporate needs. SPINN consistently delivers high quality work with service excellence, making it the preferred creative provider amongst leading companies and organizations seeking to communicate their marketing and corporate messages in an effective and compelling manner. SPINN's creative videos help brand companies, close sales, launch events, raise funds and recruit talent.

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