



# PORT OF CALL

Ruben Gnanalingam, CEO of Westports Malaysia in Port Klang gives insights to his vision and life with his father who has been credited for the growth of one of the world's busiest container terminals.

BY GRACE LAI

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KID CHAN

Situated in Pulau Indah, Westports Malaysia which makes up one half of Port Klang, started in 1994 as Kelang Multi Terminal by Ruben's father, Tan Sri Gnanalingam who has played an instrumental role in making it Malaysia's largest privately owned port. One of 11 major terminals along the country's seafloor along the Straits of Malacca, it has since been recognized for its revolutionary concepts and has become one of the top five ports in the world in terms of productivity. The success of Westports has put the Gnanalingam family at No. 24 on Forbe's, Malaysia's 40 richest list, with a net worth of US\$ 360 million.

Ruben Emir Gnanalingam, CEO of Westports Malaysia in Port Klang has been operationally involved as executive director of the Westports since 2006. An Eton and London School of Economics graduate, Ruben counts other new generation entrepreneurs like Air-Asia's Tony Fernandes as close friends and joined him in a -minority stake in the Queens Park Rangers (QPR) club of football's Premier League last year. He is also the co-owner of the Westports Kuala Lumpur Dragons basketball team, which participates in the Asean Basketball League.

Besides his professional engagements, Ruben is also involved with many business and industry related groups, such as the Harvard Business School Alumni Club Malaysia, Entrepreneurs' Organization (EO) and the Kuala Lumpur Business Club Malaysia.

**Why do you choose to work in Westports and how do you continue to make it a growing business? To what do you attribute this feat?**

I actually joined the business in 2005 when the company was 11 years old. I

only took over as a CEO in 2010. I believe Westports is actually a very exciting business with potential as it has a great location, fantastic productivity and a wonderful workforce. Our tremendous growth over the past 18 years is mainly attributed to these facts. The container logistics market continues to grow worldwide and in South East Asia, and this trend is expected to continue for the foreseeable future. Globalization as in increase in wealth worldwide will only spur this on further.

**What are some factors or secrets to your secrets?**

I believe what makes a good CEO is someone who is extremely adaptable to the needs of the company and also to the various stages of growth for that company. So if I am deemed to be successful I guess my secret is to be able to adapt to different situations to help the company forward. I have a fantastic team with me at Westports and all the success that we have is mostly due to this strong team that supports me in our daily operations.

**Were you groomed for this or did you end up in this business "by chance"?**

Westports is a family business. The family ended up in this business by chance, but to a certain extent, I was definitely being groomed for this role from the time we entered this business. So I guess it is a mixture of luck and planning that I have ended as CEO of Westports Malaysia.

My dad and I decided that the best way to do this was to have a five year plan during which I would take over department by department until I eventually took over the managing of all of the departments in 2010. The smooth transition also allowed the stakeholders



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Westports' vast containers

time to get comfortable with me. We took into account all stakeholders including customers, shareholders, directors, vendors, government departments and most importantly my co-workers.

**What were some of your most difficult times & what lessons did you learn?**

The most difficult time for Westports was in 2009 during the financial crisis. For the first time in Westports history our volume actually declined year-on-year. That was actually a blessing in disguise as the many years of growth that preceded 2009 allowed us to take certain things for granted. As a result when 2009 came about, we were able to look back and take some corrective actions to areas we were overlooking. This led to a lot of cost savings by stream lining operations and trying to derive higher efficiency and utilization in all our activities. We are

definitely better off today because of this period in our history. The world is probably going to go through many crises in future and having experienced one definitely leaves me with better experience.

**What were the key turning points in your life that you believe were the most important for being so successful in your business?**

For me family comes first, so I suppose the turning points in my life have to be my wedding day and also the days my two sons were born. My dad always says that “he has been working for me since the day I was born”. I suppose I am working for my children and family as well. So what drives me to be successful in business is to make sure I give my children the freedom to make their own choices in life and the ability to decide their own destiny. The education that I had both formally and informally also helped

in allowing me to make the right decisions for the company and chart the strategy which suits its future growth

**Who is the biggest influence in your life? In business, did you have a mentor?**

My father is the biggest influence in my life, besides my wife and two kids. He has been my mentor when it comes to business and also life. He has taught me practically everything I know and I am glad that I am still constantly learning from him.

The most important thing that my dad has taught me in business is that people are your most important assets. Westports will not be what it is today if we didn't have the staff and culture to drive this business to operational excellence. Both he and my mom also guided me personally to make sure I am balanced and not take anything to any extremes. However if I have to decide who places

the higher influence in my life these days, my bosses will definitely have to be my wife and two kids.

**What do you see are the core of Westports? What makes Westports different?**

The core of Westports is definitely the people. Anyone can build the same wharf. Anyone can buy the same cranes. All you need for those is capital. It is however not so easy to build the same culture and to have people just as motivated to perform at that level of consistency. This I believe is the secret of Westports. To be fair, our location is also strategic. The Straits of Malacca is still the busiest trade route in the entire world.

Our key traits are customer focus and insistence on technological advancement and these have helped propel us forward. We are constantly trying out new things to innovate and make things better. We



do not believe in legacies and insist on adapting and changing constantly to suit our customer's, staff's and shareholder's needs. At Westports we believe that the customer is Queen and the King is instead the staff. As CEO, I must take care of the King to make sure the King takes care of the Queen.

**Tell us about growing up and taking on this role from dad. What are some memorable lessons/moment with your father?**

His lessons? Being passionate is important but, being rationale is equally important. Being emotional does not help anyone in business. Be very picky whenever trust is involved. Trust really should not have a role in business. It's an emotion that is shared between friends. In business, you share agreements and contracts. The inability to distinguish between the two can sometimes get very good business people in very messy situations. The legal side and financial side of the business are extremely important keys to any successful business. Being able to sell something is great but never enough.

When I was growing up, my dad was never really very strict with us about anything. He governed me and my siblings via what I call "the fear of losing your freedom". He allowed us to do pretty much everything we wanted but we always knew at the back of our minds that once we did not deliver, his rules will soon be implemented. As a result we always made sure we deliver as we really enjoyed our freedom.

**Expansion plans for Westports?**

We currently have 3.7km of container berths and 43 quay cranes. Come January we are going to add another 300m of berth length and another 4 quay cranes. By 2014 we will also be adding more berth length and quay cranes. Once these phases of expansions are done, we will have a total of 4.6km of container berth space and 54 quay cranes. This should give us a capacity of about 10m TEUs, which will allow us to expand our business accordingly. Beyond 2014, we still have ample capacity for expansion based on demand factors in the business.

**Personal goal for this year?**

The target is to achieve 7m TEUs of containers, 10m tonnes of bulk cargo and 200,000 vehicles for 2012. This target looks achievable and I definitely going to try to push to get there by end of the year. On a personal note, I am still hoping to get a hole-in-one someday. For my sports teams, I hope the Dragons continue to challenge as we have always been in the ABL and for QPR, I would be a very happy man if we just perform better than we did last season.

**Lastly, why QPR?**

Tony (Fernandes) and I have always been huge football fans all our lives. We looked at many clubs in England. The fact that it is based in London certainly helps too. Loftus Road is one of the best atmospheres to watch a game in and the fans definitely played a large role in helping us make our minds up. We went through a lot last season and have not started this season on the best note but we have no regrets whatsoever. It is the right club for us. ▲