QUEK KENG YONG

LINKEDIN

INTERVIEW DONE BY KHOO JORDON



Keng Yong is a dedicated professional specialising in operations and supply chain. With a degree from NUS and over a year of experience, he currently thrives as a procurement manager at Longtech International. Keng Yong's diverse background encompasses roles as the Supply Chain Manager at Ezee and participation in the Management Associate Programme at SMRT. His invaluable skills and knowledge, honed during pivotal internships at Gametize and Singtel as a Segment Marketing Intern, are integral to his current success.

CAN YOU INTRODUCE YOURSELF AND HOW YOU WOULD LIKE TO BE KNOWN TO THE NUS READERS?

My name is Keng Yong and you can know me as one of the culprits behind the skyrocketing HDB rentals for the past 2-3 years. During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, while working in the public transport industry, I was faced with the challenge of relocating non-local bus captains from foreign worker dormitories. To address this issue, I led a project to secure 500 HDB flats at once, primarily in the vicinity of the bus interchanges where they worked. This undertaking had an impact on the rental market, leading to an increase in prices. This project was a significant undertaking that I had the opportunity to be a part of.

Currently, I am involved in setting up a furniture supply chain in Indonesia for Costway, an e-commerce company that sells furniture and other products in the USA, Europe, and Australia. Although Costway may not be as well-known as Amazon, we have a sizable presence in the market, and some of our products are also sold on Amazon and Walmart.

Within my professional network, I am known for my expertise in sourcing, procurement, supply chain management, and continuous improvement, particularly in the context of the Kaizen philosophy.

WHAT WAS YOUR EXPERIENCE IN NUS LIKE, IN TERMS OF CAMPUS LIFE AND HOW DID YOU BALANCE IT WITH YOUR ACADEMICS?

Firstly, I believe that the process of learning is just as important as the end result, as even with hard work, many individuals will still excel. Therefore, it's crucial to enjoy the journey along the way. Throughout my time in university, I stayed in the College of Alice and Peter Tan for two years and then moved to Prince George's Park residences. During this time, I actively participated in numerous residence activities. As a business student residing in a residential college, I found that the outgoing nature of people around me helped me make many lifelong friends. These people are generally very friendly, and despite going on separate paths after university, we still keep in touch with each other from time to time. I also made friends through group projects, which were quite intensive, leading the whole group to stay in a common room in the

residence to work on our reports and slides. As you enter the workforce, you will eventually begin to miss these relationships because they are not as common in the professional world.

From an academic perspective, the first-year and level 1000 modules mainly cover fundamental concepts, which are essential for laying the groundwork for more advanced modules. It's not necessary to stress too much about excelling in these courses as they serve as preparation for future modules. The primary objective is to gain an understanding of the concepts covered and be able to apply them effectively when completing projects or reports in the future.

CAN YOU TELL US MORE ABOUT YOUR CURRENT ROLE AND WHAT A TYPICAL DAY IS LIKE FOR YOU?

In my current role as a procurement manager, I collaborate with factories and suppliers in Southeast Asia to fulfil the demands of our ecommerce customers in the US, Europe, and Australia. A typical day is a lot like us buying kopi from a local stall. Firstly, we obtain quotations for the desired product, much like reading the prices on a signboard at the drinks stall. Secondly, we decide on the product specifications, much like choosing between Kopi O or Kopi C. Prior to placing the order, we seek review and approval from senior management to ensure that the purchase aligns with the company's goals. However, if proper judgement is exercised, the process should run smoothly with no objections. Finally, we place the order, which is not as straightforward as collecting coffee from the stall owner.

It involves determining payment terms, logistics, and quality control checks. Given the influx of numerous quotations, this process involves extensive communication and administrative work.

Every few months, I will also travel to Indonesia to meet with both new and existing suppliers. During these trips, I check on production and ensure that the goods we ordered meet our specifications and quality standards. This also allows us to gain a better understanding of the Indonesian industry, which can be quite complex. In some cases, we need to go beyond our direct suppliers and visit their own suppliers, which requires travel to rural villages in the country. This is quite different from procurement in Singapore, as the travel involved in Indonesia can be quite time-consuming.

WHAT MADE YOU DECIDE TO PURSUE THE SUPPLY CHAIN SPECIALISATION IN UNIVERSITY INSTEAD OF THE OTHER SPECIALISATIONS?

I realised that I was good in introductory classes and played to my strengths in excel and problem-solving related to supply chain issues. However, I came to learn that in the actual work environment, technical skills such as excel structuring and optimization are not used as frequently, perhaps only once or twice a year. Instead, soft skills are more crucial, emphasising the importance of interpersonal skills. Therefore, I strongly suggest that students should allocate more time participating in extracurricular activities and joining student committees during their university years.

YOU MENTIONED THAT YOU PLAYED TO YOUR STRENGTHS AND CHOSE TO SPECIALISE IN SUPPLY CHAIN, SO WHAT ARE SOME STRENGTHS THAT ARE IMPORTANT TO HAVE AS SUPPLY CHAIN MANAGERS?

That's a good question. Firstly, it's crucial to have a solid understanding of the fundamentals, such as inventory forecasting and safety stock calculations, to navigate the early stages of most interviews. Secondly, resilience is key because the real world can be vastly different from the scenarios taught in school, and unforeseen obstacles may arise frequently. For example, you won't truly understand the magnitude of the bullwhip effect until it occurs in real life. Additionally, you must be able to communicate well in supply chain management, as you work with multiple stakeholders, including suppliers and internal customers. Clear communication is crucial to ensuring everyone is on the same page and informed.

Furthermore, to differentiate yourself from other candidates, you must enjoy problem-solving and be enthusiastic and inquisitive about your work. In order to effectively work with stakeholders who often have varying goals and perspectives, it is essential to understand their point of view and guide them towards the desired direction. To achieve this without formal authority, it is necessary to gain their trust and demonstrate a genuine interest in their well-being. This can be accomplished by putting yourself in their shoes and being curious about them. In a nutshell, developing a sense of curiosity about people can greatly assist in cultivating smoother interpersonal relationships.

WHAT ARE SOME INTERNSHIPS THAT YOU HAD IN THE PAST, AND HOW DID IT PREPARE YOU FOR YOUR CURRENT ROLE?

In terms of my internship experiences, my first opportunity was with a startup company that distributed their own B2B software via a SaaS model. During my time there, I worked in business development, and this experience was invaluable for me in learning how to work in an office environment, as well as the intricacies of the startup scene in Singapore. For my second internship, I worked with Singtel in event marketing, which exposed me to the workings of a large corporation. This was a significant experience for me as it was my first time working in a large company, and I gained an understanding of the systems, unspoken rules, and office politics that are present in such environments.

These experiences were essential and applicable to my first full-time job as a management trainee with SMRT. My time with Singtel taught me how to work in a large corporation, while my time with the startup provided me with experience in handling challenging situations, as start-ups require individuals to take on multiple responsibilities and work at a fast pace. Overall, both experiences enabled me to gain skills and knowledge that I would not have been able to obtain in a single setting.

HOW WAS THE TRANSITION FROM DOING INTERNSHIPS AND STUDYING IN GENERAL TO WORKING FULL TIME?

One big thing would definitely be that there is less free time. As a university student, I had more opportunities to

participate in various school activities or events, but now time feels a lot more precious, and there is less opportunity for leisure activities.

Additionally, progression in university is typically more linear, with clear year-to-year progression, whereas in the working world, there is less structure, and career progression can vary greatly among individuals. In university, achieving success is often more straightforward, as there are clear guidelines for getting good grades, and professors are always available to provide guidance. However, in the working world, success can depend on various factors, and there may not always be clear guidance available. It cannot be assumed that promotions will come every two or three years, and other factors can affect career progression in the real world.

WHAT ARE SOME GOOD TECHNICAL SKILLS TO HAVE IN ORDER TO SECURE A SUPPLY CHAIN RELATED INTERNSHIP?

As a graduate who has returned most of my knowledge to my professors, I believe that it is good to continuously refresh your knowledge. Fortunately, there are numerous online educational resources and platforms available for free, such as online lessons on inventory management and forecasting. It may also be beneficial to learn programming skills, as it can enable one to automate tasks in Excel or run data analytics scripts, saving valuable time. In general, having programming knowledge can be advantageous in many job fields. I would say that my supply chain specialisation has indeed provided a solid foundation and taught me all the necessary fundamental concepts.

WITH COVID-19 DISRUPTING THE GLOBAL SUPPLY CHAIN AND SINGAPORE BEING PARTICULARLY VULNERABLE TO DISRUPTIONS IN INTERNATIONAL NETWORKS, HOW WILL THIS AFFECT A CAREER IN THIS FIELD?

The COVID-19 pandemic has definitely resulted in a lot more job opportunities in the supply chain field. Many companies have recognized the vulnerabilities within their supply chains, with numerous production lines coming to a halt. This realisation has emphasised the significance of building resilience and redundancy within supply chains, and subsequently, has generated numerous job opportunities within procurement, inventory planning, and related supply chain professions. Overall, the pandemic has heightened recognition of the critical role played by supply chain professionals.

HOW WAS THE TRANSITION FROM DOING INTERNSHIPS AND STUDYING IN GENERAL TO WORKING FULL TIME?

In summary, it is crucial to have a comprehensive understanding of the supply chain industry, including all its functions. Even if you are interested in procurement, it is still necessary to learn about logistics and inventory management. Therefore, I suggest three effective ways to enhance your knowledge and skills in the field.

Firstly, networking with industry seniors and alumni on LinkedIn is a good way to gain insights and advice. You can offer to buy them coffee or have a brief call to learn from their experiences. This also helps to develop your interpersonal skills, which are vital in the workplace where

communication with colleagues and superiors is essential.

Secondly, select internships and jobs carefully to maximise your learning opportunities. Large companies that excel in supply chain management and are prominent for it are great places to start. Additionally, even if you are not able to secure roles in such big companies, do look for companies with senior leaders that are focused on supply chain management. Having a highly positioned supply chain leader would show that they put a lot of emphasis on their supply chain, and you would be able to receive valuable learning opportunities from them.

Lastly, it is important to have good bosses who are willing to teach and guide you, identify areas for improvement, and offer opportunities. As a former management trainee at SMRT, I was also grateful to have a boss who provided me with various projects and rotations to broaden my knowledge and skills.