SEAN LING WEI TSI



Assistant Vice President, Investment Group – Portfolio Development at Temasek

Bachelor of Business Administration – Marketing & Finance (2016)

Done by: Guo Lijing, NUS BBA Year 2

Sean was very involved in school activities where he led the NUS Students' Business Club and NUS Case Consulting Group, while also being a member of NUS Investment Banking Club. Ranging from the 7 case competitions he entered as a student to his participation in the Student Exchange Programme at the University of Mannheim, Sean had an exceptionally enriching university journey.

With his experiences from internships in companies like DBS Bank, Standard Chartered Bank and Bank of America Merrill Lynch, Sean made a brave venture into the consulting industry after his graduation. He worked across various industries and countries at Kearney and Temasek, including a current secondment to Sembcorp Marine.

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INTERVIEW

Knowing that this book will be distributed among the NUS Business School Community, how would you want yourself to be known to the readers?

I personally don't think that there is anything special that I deserve to be known for, but I would love to be known as a proud alumnus of NUS Business School; as someone who has really enjoyed his time, has gotten and learnt a lot from my seniors, alumni and staff, and who wants to pass it on.

What was your motivation behind obtaining a BBA degree and how was your experience in school (In terms of campus life, enrichment etc.)?

I had just completed my A Levels, gotten my results and enlisted to NS. I wasn't sure what to do at that point in time, but thankfully I landed a position with NUS Business School.

I didn't know what Business School was going to be like, but I decided to make the most of it, and suffice to say, I enjoyed my time and I'm happy with how it all played out. In Year 1, I did NUS Business Club, I did Rag and Flag, I made many great friends along the way. In Year 2, I continued with NUS Business Club and I started taking more active steps in my career, participating in case competitions and thinking about what I wanted to do. I got set on my career a little bit late, with my first internship in Year 3 Sem 2, after I got back from my exchange.

As I did a couple of banking internships, I thought I was going to enter the banking industry. However, the market was tough for banking during my final summer. As a result, I took the chance to pivot into management consulting, leveraging on my internship experience and track record in case competitions. Afterwards, I graduated from NUS Business School with a great job with Kearney, and I always look back on my days in NUS Business School quite fondly.

With reference to your change in career direction from banking and finance to consulting, why did you specifically choose to enter the consulting industry, instead of industries such as marketing (which was your other specialisation)?

To be honest, I did not really see myself as a good marketer and I think my internships in finance and my track record in case competitions gave me a good idea of what consulting is, while equipping me with the right competencies to become a management consultant. It turned out to be a good choice in the end and I'm very happy as to how my career in consulting started off.

What was your motivation behind obtaining a BBA degree and how was your experience in school (In terms of campus life, enrichment etc.)?

As part of the Portfolio Development team within the Investment Group, we partner with our portfolio companies to drive sustainable returns. Every day is very dynamic for me as the work we do has elements of both consulting and corporate finance, and my experiences as a consultant and my internships in investment banking have prepared me for this role.

I am currently seconded to a portfolio company called Sembcorp Marine and currently working on supporting the board and management in various strategic initiatives. Day to day work is very dynamic: from meetings with advisors, board and senior management to working on various strategic initiatives, no two days are exactly the same. It is a lot of incredible exposure directly at the senior level.

For someone fresh out of college, 5 years into my career, seeing the way these leaders think up close is a great way to learn. It is also humbling to think that my work helps to inform, steer and guide decisions for a blue-chip company. Apart from that, the culture and the colleagues are great. Even in my Temasek team, my teammates were very intelligent, yet humble. There is a flat hierarchy with my voice being respected even as a junior.

How did your past internships in banks such as DBS / Standard Chartered / Bank of America prepare you for your role in Temasek?

Hard skills such as excel modelling and logical thinking were very critical, and in terms of soft skills, stakeholder management as well as working in an extremely dynamic, service-oriented industry helped me to prepare for my role. In addition, the long hours in internships helped prepare me for the rigour of my role in Temasek.

With reference to your change in career direction from banking and finance to consulting, why did you specifically choose to enter the consulting industry, instead of industries such as marketing (which was your other specialisation)?

Two things, the right message and communicating it in the right way.

The right message involves understanding the audience, knowing what they want, and giving them the data that answers that question. Crystalise key insights for the management and tell them what the 'so-whats' are. In school, you may be used to showing workings and the conclusion afterwards, but most corporate presentations are to senior people who want answers, so you have to present your conclusion first. You wouldn't want to get to the nitty-gritty details unless they have specific questions around it.

The other half of that is knowing how to sell the message correctly, and that is confidence, which stems from your personality and from knowing your materials. Grasping the data and understanding the issue gives you the basis for your argument and builds confidence, which helps you prepare for critical presentations.

With your vast experience in different roles and big companies, what do you think are some important characteristics students or fresh graduates should acquire when they embark on their internships and jobs?

Two things, the right message and communicating it in the right way. I think internships are a way for you to get experience and to prepare yourselves for the working world. An internship is a great proxy for what you can expect in a work environment. It is not only a way for you to learn and develop as a person, but also build your credibility and experience as a candidate.

No matter how your internship turns out, you will always have learnt something from it. That said, going into an internship, stay hungry and stay humble. You should be putting yourself out there and learning as much as you can. Don't overstretch and don't try to do everything on your own. You're not meant to do everything without support; rely on cover from senior colleagues who are able to coach and guide you.

Something I've consistently heard and experienced is that an intern or fresh analyst in a bank or consulting firm is always value-destructive for the first 6 to 12 months. As you are a fresh graduate, what you bring to the team will not be skills or competencies. You're most probably inexperienced and you're more likely to mess up, hence it could be easier for a senior to do it rather than coach you to do it.

However, fall forward on your experience; you are there to learn and develop; if you invest a lot of time on the ropes early on, you create more value in the next stage of the role or even your next career.

In terms of hard skills, I think that can be trained. There are two levels to that: one is aptitude and another is your actual competency. Competency can be trained while aptitude cannot necessarily be trained. Competency is something you hone and develop at the side. For example, you can always pick up excel modelling but for aptitude, there is a certain innate capability that someone has and that cannot really be trained at a job. That would probably be formed through education and all the hard work you put in during your early stages of your life.

Have you faced any difficulties or struggles in school or career that you believe have greatly helped you to grow as a person?

I would be lying if I said my job was easy. There have been times when I'm up at 3 a.m. wondering, "Why am I doing this? I could be doing a 9-to-5 job." I have been up at Mochtar Riady Building at 5 a.m., practising my presentations. After having a heavy night of supper with my friends, I could be back in the hall doing my assignments, or even in the office.

These have all been a formative part of me, especially my failures, be it in case competitions, studies or at work. They've helped build resilience and form my attitude. I think one thing that really helped was – as cliché as it sounds – a positive outlook. I'm always the kind of guy who would say, "It's okay, it is what it is. How can I be better prepared for the next time?"

The truth is sometimes you don't get a next chance; you don't get the next shot but that still adds to you as a person. For example, if you lose a pitch, that's it. You may not be able to redo it, but you will be better prepared for the next pitch.

For students who wish to find internships during winter breaks but are unable to do so, what activities do you recommend for them to embark on if they wish to brush up on their portfolio during that short break?

That has always been a question for me as well. I don't think it is fair for me to say what everyone should do because everyone has a different idea of what matters most to them, and everyone has a different career journey. There is no one-size fits all, prescriptive guideline.

If you can't get an internship, you could be picking up skills that could be additive to you as a career, e.g. coding. You could be picking up experiences as well which may not add directly to your career but develop you as a person, e.g. pottery, music. Again, it's very cliché and trite. Just because you invested time into something other than your career it doesn't mean it is time wasted. It also doesn't mean that it is inapplicable to your career. I heard of a friend who did magic, and that was a great talking point in interviews and at the workplace.

Time that is invested in things aside from school is not necessarily wasted and even if you're doing nothing, for some people, that could be a good break for their mental health as well which is very important. Ultimately, if you're happy with what you have done during the break, it doesn't really matter.

Do you have any other final advice for the fresh graduates or current students (with respect to finding their internships, school life, academics etc.)?

I can't pretend to imagine how tough it must be for students now, as I felt that NUS was tough enough without a pandemic; I didn't have to deal with not having any social interactions; not having to travel; not having a lot of opportunities. Something I hear often from seniors and alumni is that "It always gets better, don't worry." As a student, when you hear this, I guess your first reaction would be: "What are you talking about? I absolutely have to worry about it, this is my future."

As strange as it sounds, things do work out. Not to say that you shouldn't worry about it, but they work out in the end precisely because you worry about it. This sounds like pseudo-wisdom, but it does make a difference. The fact that you're putting thoughts about this; that you're putting yourself out there, you're feeling some pressure; means that you're in the right space, you've got the right motivation behind you and that will eventually position you well.

I want to highlight that as you are continuously putting yourself out there and continuing to develop and as you land on a path, you will find your happiness. I think that peoples' yardstick of success evolves over the years. For some people, it could always be monetary, and that is perfectly fine. Some people like 9-to-5 jobs, as they might want to be more family oriented. However, these things do shift over time, so even if you may be worried and unhappy now, your yardstick of success shifts and eventually you will find that little zone of happiness.

Things work out in the end precisely because you're thinking about it and worrying a little about it now. All the best to everyone right now; it is not an easy time, but these things do pass.