



FINDING PURPOSE IN WORK

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MR ALVIN POH, who runs a coaching business and the Super Scaling brand.

Mr Alvin Poh started coaching entrepreneurs last December and now has 22 clients and a team of four people helping him run the business. ST PHOTO: TIMOTHY DAVID

Me&MyMoney

At 33, he sold his firm for \$30m; now he helps others scale up

Alvin Poh focuses on helping firms grow through his coaching business and Super Scaling brand



Prisca Ang

Former chief executive Alvin Poh faced several hurdles while trying to get his freelance Web design business up and running when he started it in 2002.

"We couldn't do any fund raising to help our business and for months and years, we had little to no income," says Mr Poh, who used to head Vodien Internet Solutions.

He started the company with a friend to generate extra income when he was 17 and studying at Temasek Polytechnic. It eventually grew into a Web hosting business that had 35,000 clients and 150 staff when Mr Poh and his business partner Jervis Lee sold it to an Australian technology firm in 2017.

The deal was valued at \$30 million and Mr Poh, 33 at the time, became a millionaire many times over.

He now focuses on helping companies grow through his coaching business and Super Scaling brand, which includes an entrepreneurship community and a book published this month.

In it, Mr Poh shares his past experiences of growing his own company and also advises businesses on how they can systematically scale up using the 5E Scale Engine – a framework he developed that covers areas such as hiring and customer engagement.

A common gripe entrepreneurs

have is with attracting and retaining "A-star players", says Mr Poh, who is not married.

"I show my clients the thought processes behind structuring a logical sequence of steps so that I can attract A-star players to join my business, retain them, and enable them to perform at a high level in a team," he adds.

Mr Poh started coaching individual entrepreneurs last December and now has 22 clients and a team of four people helping him run the business.

He also plans to grow the Super Scaling brand further.

"I feel that one of the problems in entrepreneurship is that there's no real structured process, unlike more theoretical fields like medicine or law," says Mr Poh, adding that many of his clients have encountered the same fundamental business issues that can be addressed in a structured way.

He graduated with a bachelor's degree in information systems management from Singapore Management University and a master's in information technology (e-business) from Carnegie Mellon University in the United States.

"The thing that I really want to explore is changing the education aspect of entrepreneurship. I hope to find a better way of teaching and mentoring entrepreneurs."

Q What's in your personal portfolio?

A I invest in private companies usually with angel investments or even venture capital investments. These make up one-fifth of my portfolio. I don't have investments in my clients.

I also have equities but they are managed by my bank. They account for 40 per cent of my portfolio and have produced returns of 11 per cent over the past year.

Thirty per cent of my portfolio is in bonds, which have given a 5 per cent return over the past year.

Q What are your immediate investment plans?

A I'm in the capital markets with a focus on equity and bond funds.

I do have tactical trades on specific instruments at the right times, but with only a much smaller percentage – 10 per cent – of my portfolio.

Q How did you get interested in investing?

A I decided to explore investing when I was 18 because I believe that money is a tool that can be put to work. I thought that while I was working on my career, I should have funds invested to generate returns as well.

Q Describe your investing strategy.

A I am conservative with the major-

ity of my portfolio, and aggressive with the remainder because I feel that with higher risks come higher rewards.

Q How are you planning for retirement?

A I tried retiring when I was 34 years old after my company got acquired. This was retirement in the sense of doing anything I desired that was not work-related.

But I found that I started becoming listless and aimless. I tried picking up hobbies such as surfing, wakeboarding, wakesurfing, snowboarding, travel vlogging and longboarding – nothing really kept my attention for very long.

I have found that a much better form of retirement for me is when I still maintain a career, while having more free time to explore passions on the side.

This means that I won't ever stop working, but rather, find work that is meaningful and purposeful.

Q What else is in your financial plan?

A I am single right now, so I don't have a very high expenditure. I expect my expenditure to increase proportionately if I do have a family. With all expenses, I project an annual living expenditure of \$85,000 for myself, potential spouse and dependants such as my parents.

Best and worst bets

Q What has been your biggest investing mistake?

A I trusted my banks and invested in derivatives without fully understanding them or the market.

That was a big mistake. I invested in an oil derivative in around 2019 which basically imploded and I lost US\$300,000 (S\$408,000) from that.

I've since learnt to never dele-

gate responsibility to people whose interests don't align with yours.

Q And your best investment?

A These are usually the outsized gains from tactical investments, such as in cryptocurrencies or inverse products in black swan events such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

However, they are tactical in nature, so I'd rather concentrate on

my long-term plan of diversified products such as funds and indexes that give me an annualised return of 5 per cent to 9 per cent.

My best investments happen when I follow a plan and know exactly when to take profits – if within the plan – or when to exit if the plan dictates that. These days, I never invest in anything without first having a proper plan in place.

Prisca Ang

One of the things that I really want to do is to ensure that my future family is financially stable as I didn't have a very stable financial background growing up.

When I can, I want to take care of that in areas such as retirement funds, insurance policies and Central Provident Fund top-ups. That is my priority in terms of family planning.

Q Moneywise, what were your growing-up years like?

A I grew up in a six-member household living in a four-room flat, so there was a lot of sharing. I have two younger siblings – a brother and a sister – and I also lived with my paternal grandmother. My mum is a clinical assistant and my dad is a private-hire vehicle driver.

Money was tight when I was growing up. If anything, it allowed me to gain a better appreciation of the value of money. It is a tool – money can't bring you happiness but it can allow for basic things that can make us more comfortable.

It also allows for investments into quite a few things – for example, businesses need to consider capital for things such as office space, marketing and hiring staff.

Q Home is now...

A I'm renting a two-bedroom condo apartment in Newton. I have been moving from place to place every one or two years. I love the lifestyle because I get to experience different neighbourhoods.

Q I drive...

A I own a Yamaha R3 motorcycle. I used to drive my dream car, a Lamborghini Gallardo.

But I have to say that the two happiest days with that car was the day I bought it and the day I sold it. There are so many harsh realities to owning a supercar that no one really tells you about.

The turning point was when I was driving home one day and one of my tyres burst. I had to wait at the side of the road during peak hour for a tow truck to come. I even got laughed at by a motorcyclist who rode past me – I guess it's not every day you see a Lamborghini breaking down at the side of the road.

After I sold my car, I became a minimalist for a few years, living only with stuff that could fit into my backpack, and I used that to travel around the world.

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