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This is the first part of our exclusive sit-down interview with Ninja Van founder and CEO Lai Chang Wen. He talks candidly about his employees, the sharing economy, the company's rapid rise to prominence, and much more.

Do check in again for part two of the story, which will be out on April 23.

"Chatty" is not exactly the first word that comes to mind when one first meets Lai Chang Wen, the 30-year-old founder and CEO of "digital logistics" company Ninja Van.

If anything, the entrepreneur – one of Forbes Asia's 30 Under 30 for the manufacturing and energy sector in 2016 – might appear cautious or shy at first. But don't judge him on that alone. Throughout our meeting, he conducts himself respectfully and professionally, often conscious of what is expected of him.

Standing under the scorching sun fully decked out in a blazer and jeans for a 30-minute photoshoot, he readily takes his position for every shot, never once showing any signs of discomfort.

Lai is the first to admit that he's not the world's most talkative person. "My employees would tell you that I answer their questions in under five seconds," he shares.

But that's testament to the kind of person he is – an unpretentious straight shooter. He is honest throughout this interview, even telling me he thinks the gig economy is a "nonsensical story" that is being repeated to jobseekers everywhere.

"Do you really care if you are a part-time or full-time worker? At the end of the day it's about how much money is in your bank account right?"

"We don't like to beat around the bush and talk nonsense. We could very easily position ourselves and our drivers as part of the sharing economy, but it's not the story we want to tell."

Rather, Lai says the company is upfront with new joiners and candidates about what they can expect from a job there.

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“We never tell them that this is an easy job, or a job where they get paid a lot of money. What we tell them is that we will grow them, give them autonomy and impactful work, and that they will leave the company better people,” he says.

His brand of candour is, in many ways, refreshing for someone with his background– he attended top schools in Singapore like Raffles Institution, Raffles Junior College and then the Singapore Management University, and was a derivatives trader for a short time at the prestigious Barclays Investment Bank.

But the corporate life was not for Lai. What he craves is a sense of purpose, and a chance to make a real impact on the world. He did not want to live with regrets, and instead, wanted to “risk it all” while he still could – a trait that had rubbed off on him from his father, who had worked in a multinational for many years.

“Frankly, I would be making more money as a banker.

“Don’t get me wrong, I would be lying if I said wealth is not important, but fulfilment is more important to me,” says Lai.



This desire and drive for entrepreneurship and problem-solving has seen Ninja Van become one of the most widely-used delivery services in Southeast Asia today. In 2014, the same year the company was established, Lai and his team of co-founders channelled their passion into the business by reinventing the traditional parcel-sorting process through the utilisation of mobile scanning technology.

This tool, alongside technology to calculate advantageous delivery routes, helped to speed up the entire delivery process. This allowed Ninja Van to become one of the first logistics companies in Singapore to offer a next-day delivery option.

Surprisingly, Lai does not view his pursuits as precarious. In fact, he refers to his current career path as “generally very safe”.

Risky or not, Lai’s decision to become an entrepreneur, seems to have paid off handsomely.

In January 2018, Ninja Van concluded what it called a “successful” Series C funding round. It was reported that the maturing company raised some US\$87 million in this third stage. If this is true, this would make it the second largest amount ever raised in one round in Southeast Asia.

True to form, Lai is not letting the achievement get to his head.

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“At Ninja, we try not to be starry-eyed. It’s about keeping our heads down, focusing on the work at hand, building a sustainable business, being proud of what we do, and working alongside equally competent colleagues – those things are a lot more important,” he says.

Capitalising on the e-commerce boom

Ninja Van emerged in 2014 at the height of the e-commerce boom. What was one of your main challenges then?

One of the early challenges was we didn’t know anything about the industry. We had to learn from scratch, be very humble, speak to drivers from other companies and learn how everything works. There was also a tendency to overthink things, and think that we can overoptimise and always be smarter than the rest. So humility is very important. Sometimes, the age-old tradition could be the right tradition, so don’t try to overdo anything.

Just two years later, you were turning in a profit. Was it talent, hard work, or luck that led you there?

Luck is probably what got us onto this path. Maximising every opportunity, learning as quickly as you can, and adapting as quickly as you can is the other part. Of course, having the right group of people who are equally motivated, and also contributing their own parts – I think those are just as important as luck, hard work, and talent.

You were one of the first to automate supply chain management here in Southeast Asia. Would you say that was a contributing factor to your rapid growth?

Well, I wouldn’t say it’s “automation”. I would say it’s digitalisation.

Automation is automating an action, but digitalisation is really about making sure that information is readily available. So I think that was the crux of it all, because you can be very efficient and cheap and good, but if you cannot provide visibility to e-commerce clients, then you lose the point.

We came in at the right time when e-commerce was growing rapidly, and you can say that for this market, what is really important is to have visibility not just when consumers discover a product or when you shop online, but also when the actual product is being shipped to them. So there was a very big, black hole initially, and that was the problem we tried to solve. Since then, many others have caught up, but that was what gave us a head start.

Earlier this year, you reportedly secured one of the largest fundraising amounts ever in Southeast Asia. What does this mean to you?

Well, I don’t think it’s a done deal yet. We still have a lot more to do in Southeast Asia. It has shown early signs of becoming a success, but it’s definitely not a success yet. With the Series C funding, we have seen that the larger you get, and the more stakeholders you have, it becomes less about just working hard and trying to build the business. It becomes more about how do you manage your stakeholders and ensure that this remains a sustainable organisation.

At last count, excluding drivers, we have about 1,800 employees. So we’re starting to realise that the direction you set, the workplace culture you have, the sustainability of the company, isn’t just about pride or money or success. It’s actually the daily bread of a lot of people, so you must carry a certain sense of responsibility such that you grow the company in a way that people’s jobs and livelihoods are preserved as well



On the company's talent management strategies

Today you have thousands of employees across Southeast Asia. When did you start to implement an HR strategy?

To be honest, I don't think there was ever a point when we said let's professionalise it or structure it. It was very gradual. We've always had an inkling of where we should go next. I think the best way to do it is to know the black and the white, to know the extreme ends of every management style, and of every kind of culture you want in the company. That opens up your eyes to how things can be done, but it doesn't necessarily mean they should be done that way.

You also realise that the organisation cannot just sit back and pray that managers do the right things. The organisation should be bigger than the individuals. That's why one of our key pillars for this year is people sustainability. We don't want to say let's just hire and fire, and that we can hire a thousand people. But what are we going to do after that? How are we going to grow and groom them? Let's hire the right people at the right speed, but let's deliver on our promise to them the same way we deliver our promise to customers.

So one of the things we're working on right now is growth – how do we engage workers and provide them with the right learning and growth opportunities – that's easy to say, but hard to do.

At this stage of your development, how does Ninja Van appeal to jobseekers?

We promise fair pay but harder work, which I know doesn't sound like a very fair deal. But what we do in return is we say we will grow you, we will give you autonomy, and make sure that your work is impactful. I think we deliver on a lot of these promises.

During recruitment or when people have joined, we never tell them that this is an easy job, or a job where they will get paid a lot of money to do very little work. But we hope that when they walk away one day after a couple of years or however long their tenure was, that they actually became a better person, and they learned more during their time here.

Drivers form a significant part of your workforce. What is your talent management approach for this group of workers?

Blue-collared jobs can sometimes come across as somewhat boring or monotonous. What we try to do is give them more purpose and a sense of identity in what they are doing. That's why the brand makes a difference – we want them to be proud that they are a "Ninja". When we gather and we see 50 vans in the carpark, we get a sense of pride. It is this sense of pride that makes people a lot more loyal.

At the end of the day, the salary also has to be fair. These are the general tenets we promise to new hires, or at least try to.

On beating disruption

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As a disruptor yourself, how do you plan to stay disruption-proof?

I don't think I can ever give you a complete answer there. But in terms of people, we don't just hire from within the logistics industry, we hire from all fields.

We believe that a lot of fundamental thinking is transferable across industries, and that actually the wider you see, the more cross-functional you are. In terms of mindset, don't put the blinders on and don't think you're always right. Be open and have a very objective mindset about whether something is really for the better or for the worst.

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