

## FEATURE

# TOWKAYTALK: EN ROUTE TO THE FUTURE

A dialogue with Eric Soh, Chief Executive Officer of Samwoh Corporation by *GERALDINE LEE*



In 2008, Samwoh saw its first RMC plant at 51 Kranji Crescent

THE  
MINDS AND  
HANDS BEHIND  
OUR NATION'S  
INFRASTRUCTURE.

**PEOPLE AND INNOVATION AT HEART.** A knack for building infrastructure, ideas and its people, Samwoh Corporation's bold march into green construction and diversification into various complementary industries makes it the game changer it is today.

A casual chat with Mr Eric Soh, Chief Executive Officer of Samwoh Corporation, takes us into the world of rocks and sand as he openly shares the Samwoh strategy and his personal beliefs.

Samwoh's Ready Mix Concrete, delivered by trucks fully equipped with GPS capabilities



**Q: Take us through your daily morning routine at work.**

**Eric:** I always have my coffee fix before I head out for work. Once I get into the office though, it gets really busy - my schedule is usually packed.

The first thing I do at my work desk is to go through my emails. I then take the chance to talk to one or two staff from each division a day, listening and garnering feedback from them, understanding their work, their progress or if they are facing any troubles.

Communication and having our ear to the ground is something we emphasize here in Samwoh.

**Q: Communication is key, as you've aptly put it. With so many business units, coordination must pose quite a challenge for you. How do you keep abreast of latest updates?**

**Eric:** With the technology of today, I am able to keep tabs on multiple business units and their ongoing projects using mobile applications like Whatsapp. I receive updates via a group chat comprising our business unit heads.

However, while I am in the loop, I avoid interfering wherever possible, so as to encourage a sense of ownership and accountability amongst our staff.

**Q: In your opinion, how has the construction industry evolved over the years?**

**Eric:** In the short 17 years that I have been in the industry, things have moved a lot. The construction

industry has evolved from what used to be a labour intensive field. Government and authority requirements and specifications have increased since.

The industry as a whole thus needs to rev up to match these changing demands, from noise pollution control to environmental concerns.

As compared to the past where we are easily able to tap on natural resources for our needs, industry players now have to keep sustainability in mind, to look at ways to innovate, find alternatives and increase productivity.

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**Q: What about an extrapolation based on your insights? Could you give us a peek into the construction industry in future?**

**Eric:** I believe that the construction industry as a whole is unlikely to face any dire issues till about year 2025 and beyond.

The government’s foresight and long term planning will continue to fuel the industry. There are quite a few ongoing infrastructure projects and plans that sustain the demand - the new Thomson MRT line, the

North-South Expressway, the shipyard at Tuas, the new Terminal 5 development in Changi and potential room for land reclamation.

**Q: What are some unique challenges that Samwoh faces in today’s highly competitive landscape?**

**Eric:** I would have to say that the reshaping of the company’s brand is a challenge that we enjoy working on. While Samwoh brands itself as a solutions provider, we also see a need to change the perceived image of a construction site as dirty. We hope to leave our guests with a refreshing image of a construction company that is always clean, green and ever-ready for change.

With that came along our exhibition hall, public relations effort and the adopting of new business practices and building design to ensure a clean and tidy premise. This move was first initiated in 2000, when the Company went through a change in generation management.

Today, I am very proud to say that our guests often share with us about the unique feel that Samwoh exudes during their visit. It is this difference that gives us a sense of honour and accomplishment.

**Q: Being the least cost producer is key to securing tenders. Could you share with us Samwoh’s secret formula to keeping costs low?**

**Eric:** We like to ask ourselves questions like, “What are we best



Eric Soh,  
Chief Executive  
Officer of Samwoh  
Corporation

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Eric explaining the  
importance of  
synergy in  
Samwoh



in?”, or “What is our core competency?”

It is essential to us that the projects we tender for bring value to Samwoh’s core capabilities. Following which we ask “Where can I get the lowest cost of supply from?”

In Samwoh’s case, innovation is our secret to being the least cost producer, accompanied with efficiency and a strategic location.

Our wide array of services play a huge role in reducing costs in the stream of activities required for projects. That being said, you also need good partners to prop you up in areas which you lack expertise in.

**Q: In your opinion, what are some best business practices?**

**Eric:** I think that it is necessary to always be on your feet and to create high synergy within your business.

I liken Samwoh’s business model to an ecosystem, with core components that value add to each other.

Our research and development efforts accentuate our expertise and capabilities in the industry we are in, giving us an edge.

Still, there is no “best” practice that would be applicable to all businesses. It is in finding your niche to build your capabilities around and preparing yourself for unexpected situations, that you achieve greater heights.

**Q: What is your personal philosophy in running Samwoh?**

**Eric:** In whatever you do, you will first need to know yourself, your products and your services.

I started in Samwoh from the ground up, working hard to gain my co-workers’ respect.

Samwoh is always on the lookout talents to grow. Our people are very important to us - we believe in treating each other with sincerity, building people and a sense of ownership.

Samwoh is like a big family to us. Just as some families run themselves like a business, I like to run Samwoh as a family.

**Q: Tell us more about your people - how do you attract and retain them?**

**Eric:** Talents are not easy to find and keep. Not many in our field possess the talents that we do.

Our R&D unit is backed by a dedicated team of PhDs and MBA professionals for whom we make a point to keep bringing in new technology to experiment and challenge themselves with.

We also send our staff overseas to observe what is new and available in the market. There is a lot more to construction that the layman thinks - Japan even has a university purely dedicated to construction research.

The sense of ownership and pride in the company are the main reasons why our staffs choose to stay in the Samwoh family.

**Q: Samwoh dabbles quite a bit in research and development. Are you onto protecting your innovations and breakthroughs?**

**Eric:** We are in talks for protecting our intellectual property (IP) but at the end of the day, I feel that protecting our people is much more important than protecting our IP. Samwoh’s people are its biggest asset.

While we do not dismiss the importance of IP protection, there is a distinction between people who innovate and people who execute. Without the former, we would not even have our IPs to start with.

**Q: What do you think makes you successful?**

**Eric:** I am not successful – or at least, not yet.

I think that success is something to be left for others to judge. I am not here because I am good, but because of my people. I am just carrying the limelight for them.

Perhaps if I can effectively handover my job to my staff and

they can bring Samwoh to greater heights, then I would consider myself successful.

**Q: A “rock-solid” construction group, Samwoh is definitely an inspiration to many in the industry. Perhaps you could give us an inkling of what next to anticipate from the company?**

**Eric:** Well, there is always the expansion of our business, but that would require the right mix and people.

The construction industry will be here for the next 10 years and we need to brace ourselves for the upcoming challenges of increasing costs and talent shortage.

Hence sustaining our current performance would be at the top of our minds, along with the ambition of further contributing to the larger community with our research and outreach efforts.

The Samwoh Research and Development Centre is equipped with state-of-the-art facilities for testing and evaluation of civil engineering materials



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