

The art of Right Place, Right Time

Interview by Eric Collins

Jim Thompson, Chairman of Crown Worldwide Group, member of the College International Advisory Board and with a long association with CityU, has been at the helm of a global relocation and records management business headquartered in Hong Kong for more than 50 years. Here he talks about starting out as an entrepreneur, how new technology can improve customer relations, and whether Hong Kong is still a place to do business.

Can you tell us a little bit about how you started out in business?

I went to college in San Jose State in California and I majored in aeronautical engineering because at that particular time that was a hot field to get into. The intention was for me to go into the aircraft industry or perhaps become a pilot. But I had travelled to Asia, was still not settled and I had this burning desire to learn more about the history of Japan in particular. So, I took a small low paying job in a packing company in Yokohama just to survive and intended to stay a year or two. As it turned out I liked the job, found it fulfilling, and I was in a foreign country. After a year-and-a-half the company was cutting back and I found myself unemployed in Japan. So I did a crazy thing. With very little money I said to a few Japanese friends, let's see if we can start a packing company. I started on a real shoestring and got it going. It was all hand to mouth in the beginning, there was no excess capital or outside investors. Year after year we improved the volume of business, and we were getting a bit of a reputation and that's how I got going.

Why did you come to Hong Kong?

I met an American gentleman and he said he had some business for one of the major companies, Caterpillar, in Hong Kong. I had already been to Hong Kong, found it fascinating and thought about expanding there. But this fellow's business was a catalyst. We went over, talked to companies that we knew, and they said "Yep, there are no good packers in this town." That was all we wanted to hear. We figured "let's invest a little money and

start something." So that was in 1970, but I remained in Japan for a few years. The reason I came to Hong Kong was that in 1978 my business partner chose to sell out of our business and I bought his interests. We had organized our financial centre with accounting and administrative corporate activities in Hong Kong, so I knew at that point that I had to move here to oversee all that. I was a little apprehensive but when I got here I found Hong Kong was this most amazing open city, much more so than Japan. It felt like this was the right place at the right time. I really enjoyed the atmosphere and Hong Kong has been our headquarters ever since.

How have things changed in the last 50 years?

Well in terms of doing business they haven't changed so much and this is something I tell overseas people all the time because they often have negative perceptions of Hong Kong. The basis of doing business here is a very hard-working energetic population to draw on for staff, and the relative lack of government bureaucracy. There is some of course but that allows you to do a lot more things more easily when you make your investments in this town. Also, I found it was truly nationality-blind here. We are all treated as corporate entities just as Hong Kong corporations so there's no benefits to the local corporations.

In this digital age, why has records management been a growth area for you?

Well, traditionally there have been a lot of regulations and legal requirements in different countries to keep





“A company that is prepared to listen creates an atmosphere of innovation”

records for a certain time, so there was always a need to store those documents. Especially in Hong Kong, as a financial and accounting centre, organisations generate a lot of paper. On the other hand, office rental rates are so high that people don't want to keep all those extra boxes in their expensive offices. When we started we had to sell the concept of outsourcing that aspect, and also the fact that all records are retrievable. Then with digitalisation, an expanse of new information was created which meant another big volume of business and documents. So even if only a little of that new expanded information system ending up on paper, it meant more business for us. In the future, if hard copy declines then whatever the next iteration of storage, we will pick up on it and be in that field as well.

How about the relocation business? Have you seen volumes increase in the last few years?

Yes - and I'm talking globally now - unsettled situations cause people to move. It could be a revolution, an economic crisis, a medical crisis or whatever. So, believe it or not, 2022 was the best year in the history of our company. A lot of people left Hong Kong to go to different places but some only temporarily. Some came back. Also, any gaps in young people leaving to find their life in other countries are being filled by people coming in from China or other places. So, relocation generally is going to be around for a long time.

What new technology is coming into your company?

In some countries, customers are a long way away from our operational point. It used to be an expense to get somebody out to a property and prepare a quote for what was only potential business. Nowadays we just ask customers to take their smart phone, link up with our software, and walk around their house, open the cupboards so we can see everything we need to know to quote on the shipment. No need to spend money on an expensive salesman to travel there. When I first heard

of this technology I thought that we would lose out on not talking to the customers face-to-face. But it turns out you can do all that on video and the customers are actually happy with it: a win-win situation. Digitalisation does not diminish your ability to show that you are a quality company.

In terms of robotics we have just built a warehouse at Tianjin. I think people are seeing that the technology processes are going well in China. We have an automated racking for records, something we haven't done anywhere else. The technology is such that you just need one or two people and they can move these boxes and racks to any location in the building. And it's all Chinese-made infrastructure.

Are universities in Hong Kong producing the kinds of graduates that you need?

I'm impressed with the graduates. I do a lot of personal mentoring with students and work with various Hong

Kong business schools, and I think they're turning out some great graduates. Once they've had that education they should be qualified to do a lot of different things in the business world or in other fields. I use myself as an example – an engineering student who never actually used engineering, but the education I got allowed me to see that I could do a lot of different things. Most businesses are going to re-educate entrants on how the company works, so as long as you've got the basics of business you should be able to fit into many different types of business.

“Once you start it's like getting on the back of a wild bucking horse”



Do you recruit people straight from school and then develop them?

Yes, we are something of a blue-collar business with a lot of operational jobs that don't necessarily require a university education. I've always felt that any employee who has the determination can get ahead in a company. College graduates that we hire have to recognise that there are people that may want it more than they do, and I think companies recognise that too. So just a warning to the college graduates – there's no free ticket after that diploma! My father was a great example. He needed to work for his family as his dad was not around so he didn't get a formal education and yet he went on to make a career and became a senior naval officer, and then went into business and did quite well.

Do you look to your people to innovate?

I think innovation is an interesting word, but the reality is that people can come forward with ideas just from being in the workplace. A company that is prepared to listen creates an atmosphere of innovation, and possibly a change in the way things are done. There are so many incredibly successful people who were dropouts from university and set up a business, so if you can find people with these kinds of minds, they can contribute a lot to the success and development of the company.

Is entrepreneurship a good option for people who are graduating nowadays in Hong Kong?

A lot of people tell me, "I want to work for myself." But once you start it's like getting on the back of a wild bucking horse. So, getting through certainly the initial years you have to have a lot of stamina and determination and tell yourself: "I'm going to do this. No one's going to stop me," and try not to be distracted. Of course, it's always possible to over-extend yourself and the whole thing collapses. We in our company use a term called controlled growth. You have to have the determination and patience to stay with the project. Overall, yes, I do think that Hong Kong is a good place to be an entrepreneur.

For an entrepreneur, is the ability to adapt quickly a significant quality?

Yes, and I think this is a Hong Kong quality too. When conditions change, people just say "OK what are the new rules? We'll play by them and still make money." People don't sit around and complain, they just get on with it.

For a company you also have to be adaptable – if there's a new competitor in town you have to figure out how you can sell against it. I think we've been pretty good at it. There're a few places we ended up having to close a business because we hung on too long without success, but generally speaking, yes adaptability is a key quality of entrepreneurial activity.

“Asia is going to be a really productive and dynamic part of the world”

How important is contributing to the community?

I've always thought if you make a success of your business, you owe something back to the community and it's a great way to be respected in the whole environment. Giving is also a great thing to have as a part of the culture of the company. I am in a position to give the green light to our staff to go out and fund raise money either locally or for a bigger cause and the reaction is amazing. I feel that if you give a Christmas present to someone in your family, the person receiving it is going to say thank you for this, but you're going to get a lot of pleasure having created that happiness in the person. And that applies to all giving as far as I'm concerned.

“If you make a success of your business, you owe something back to the community”

It's one thing to say "Look I have this much money." That's nice, but this feeling of being able to help another cause or human or whatever, that's nicer. I will say I think Hong Kong is a very generous community. A lot of big wealthy companies have foundations and it's just part of their whole business operation. We've done a lot where we've had to ask others for money or support for a good cause and they're very good about it.

Now there's a new emphasis in Environment, Social and Governance...

It's much broader than Corporate Social Responsibility because it includes the company's relationship with the environment. One of the things that is happening is that institutional investors are looking beyond the bottom line, looking at ESG. They ask: Are we using electric vehicles? Are we putting solar panels on our houses? Are we minimising the use of paper or excess material? All of these things can be measured nowadays so companies are being rated on these types of things.

Do you have any special advice for our graduating students?

I think one of the things for students generally is to try to get internships, particularly overseas, during their education period. It really does help put the academic work into a practical perspective. As far as graduates are concerned, once they've got that degree they're ready to hit the world and they should be flexible in terms of what kind of role they play from then on. There is so much to learn every single day about

how the system works outside the academic world. A lot of graduates work so hard at an interview for a particular job. I would say don't be too fussy about the job you want. I want to say, take a role that you're happy with and look forward to it. The reality is that you don't know how you'll like it until you've actually experienced it.

Is Hong Kong still the place to do business?

This is my 60th year in Asia. During this time, I experienced the end of the Vietnam War, the death of Mao, and then the era of Deng Xiao Ping who was, I believe, one of the most significant leaders in Asia in the last 100 years. He created an environment of peace in Asia. There have been skirmishes but overall peace. In that context anyone who uses the term *Asian Century* is probably right. I think it's shifted from pre-Second World War Europe, to post-war America, and now Asia. I'm not only talking about China, but all of Southeast Asia including India and even Australia. Look at it in a broad sense and Asia is going to be a really productive and dynamic part of the world. So, what I say to graduates is "You are in the right place at the right time."

