

**ADEMCO SECURITY GROUP**

# Transforming for a more secure future

Long before industry disruption became a buzzword, Ademco was already changing the status quo. Its initiatives included doing away with hard-copy paperwork and bringing in an autonomous security robot.

**O**VER the last four decades, Ademco Security Group has been a pioneer in Singapore's security sector in many ways.

It launched a 24-hour central monitoring system in 1985, and installed the first alarms in Housing and Development Board (HDB) lifts during that decade. In 2003, it introduced the country's first internet protocol-based alarm transmission system, and last year, it brought in an autonomous patrol robot.

Yet despite being at the cutting edge in these areas, Ademco did not find it easy to make a modest internal change – moving from hard-copy reports to a fully digital system in 2010.

In transforming a firm, “the human factor is probably the biggest challenge”, says Ademco group managing director Toby Koh. “You’re going to have the naysayers.”

#### INDUSTRY LEADER, INTERNAL RELUCTANCE

Ademco was incorporated in Singapore in 1977 as the regional headquarters of Ademco USA. The Singapore entity’s first managing director T C Koh – Mr Koh’s father – bought out the firm in 1985.

Long before industry disruption became a buzzword, Ademco was already changing the status quo.

In the early 1980s, Singapore’s fire service handled its own calls. But in 1985, Ademco stepped in with the idea of providing fire alarm monitoring system services.

The privatisation of this service – which had to be approved by Parliament – allowed the fire service to focus on fighting fires.

Today, Ademco has over half the local market in fire alarm monitoring. It also monitors alarms for a wide variety of other facilities, from banks to warehouses.

Making this possible is the firm’s 24-hour central

monitoring and command centre in Outram, which includes an in-house data centre.

In the specially-cooled area, rows of data receivers and servers hum away. To prevent its operations from being disrupted in a case of power failure, Ademco has its own generator, housed in a purpose-built room.

The firm also has a separate data centre and disaster recovery centre, located in the east of the island.

In contrast to this high-tech set-up, however, is the story of its internal transformation in 2010.

Previously, hard-copy paperwork was central to Ademco’s operations.

When employees attended to an alarm call, for instance, a report would have to be filled out and the client would have to sign off.

Back in the office, the information would then have to be manually entered into Ademco’s computer system.

For the sake of greater efficiency, things had to change. On the surface, this seemed simple. There was no need to develop new solutions.

Instead, Ademco just had to adopt off-the-shelf customer relationship management software and equip the operations team with tablets.

Yet such changes are easier said than done. For a start, the upfront cost can be daunting, particularly for an SME.

“You’ve got to be prepared to invest,” says Mr Koh. And not everyone at the management level may be prepared, especially if the traditional methods have been working thus far.

“You have those who are a bit more old-school,” he admits. But in the face of resistance, he “basically forced it through”, convinced that the change would be good for Ademco.



Thankfully, the frontline staff – technicians and engineers – were much keener on the idea.

“It helps them,” he points out. “They don’t have to come back to the office to file reports, they can just send it in from the site.”

And as a bonus, the move meant that Ademco could do its bit for the environment, saving an estimated 40 to 50 “20-foot trees” each year, Mr Koh adds.

Similarly, Ademco’s overseas expansion journey

started out in a tentative, almost reluctant fashion.

“There wasn’t really that thought: ‘Let’s go out of Singapore.’ We were actually led by our customers,” recalls Mr Koh.

When clients went abroad, they would often request for Ademco’s services in their overseas locations too.

Initially, Ademco fulfilled these on an ad hoc project basis, finding partners in the relevant countries for each project. Then, some clients said they needed

Ademco group MD Toby Koh overseeing the operations at the control room. The company has expanded to Indonesia, India, China and Vietnam, and wants its overseas presence to account for more than half of annual revenue by 2020.

BT PHOTO: SYAMIL SAPARI

Ademco to have a formal entity on the ground in order to award projects.

So in 2010, Ademco finally made the leap and incorporated in Malaysia and the Philippines.

Since then, it has expanded to Indonesia, India, China – in a joint venture with a local player – and in 2018, Vietnam.

And in a departure from its initial reluctance, the aim now is for Ademco's overseas presence to account for more than half of annual revenue by 2020.

In 2015, Ademco's progress was recognised when the firm was named one of the winners of the Enterprise 50 awards.

Organised by *The Business Times* and KPMG, the annual awards honour Singapore's 50 most enterprising privately-held local companies.

#### **SECURING THE FUTURE**

Originally led overseas by its clients, Ademco is now waiting for customers to catch up on other fronts.

In 2017, the firm brought in an autonomous security robot that can conduct patrols on its own. Rented out on a "robot-as-a-service" basis, the four-wheeled contraption is particularly suited for patrols that take place in unmanned areas or during late hours, says Mr Koh.

Yet deployment has been "very limited" so far, with most runs having been done as a proof-of-concept, he admits.

Given Singapore's shortage of security officers, he hopes that this will change.

Much has been said about improving the skills and working conditions of guards, he notes.

Yet the nature of the job has not changed fundamentally: "So long as people – property owners and manag-

ers – still deploy security guards in the same old fashion, there's not going to be any improvement."

Rather than spending their time on mundane patrols, guards should be freed up to do "higher value-added work" such as investigating alerts, he argues.

The basic patrolling can be done by robots instead. Indeed, with the appropriate sensors and software, a robot can arguably do a better job than a human at night, when facing low light conditions, says Mr Koh.

Nor do robots suffer fatigue. And although automated, they do not go on "autopilot" – simply going through the motions – the way a tired or bored human guard might.

While waiting for robot patrols to catch on, Ademco continues to lead its clients forward in other ways. The firm sees itself as offering not just security solutions, but also an overall boost to their clients' operational efficiency, says Mr Koh.

He relates the example of a client in the manufacturing industry, which Ademco was supplying with smartcards for security access.

When Mr Koh visited the factory premises in Indonesia, he was invited to have lunch in the company canteen.

There, he noticed that the workers were using paper coupons to redeem their canteen meals. There was even a wall of paper punchcards which the workers used to clock in and out.

Surprised by the persistence of these manual systems, he offered to incorporate these functions into the smartcards instead.

In the canteen, the resulting digital trail would make it easier to audit staff meals, and save the need for printing and cutting paper coupons.

Similarly, staff monitoring would be more efficient and greener without the need for paper punchcards. "It's not just about security, it's how we can value-add to their whole operations," sums up Mr Koh.

#### **WEALTH OF POSSIBILITIES**

He sees a wealth of possibilities for Ademco's capabilities to be applied in other industries. Hotels could use facial recognition, for instance, to help greet returning guests by name and thus improve their experience.

This holistic approach is one of the factors contributing to Ademco's client retention rate of over 90 per cent, adds Mr Koh.

For Ademco, transformation is not just about becoming a better security services provider, but also going beyond security, he says: "It's about finding the right solution for clients."

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– Ademco group managing director Toby Koh



## **Going digital has improved efficiency of Ademco staff**

WHEN Maung Maung Ye Htut started working for Ademco in 2007, it was much more of an "analog" world.

As a service technician, he would go down to sites to address issues. Back then, closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras were still "simple analog cameras", unconnected to the internet, he recalls: "When we needed to change one, we just took it out and changed it."

Technology has since moved on. With CCTV networks now connected and online, today's service technicians require both electrical engineering skills and IT know-how, he says.

Yet in other aspects, the job has become easier.

Says the 40-year-old, who is now a team leader: "I've seen a lot of improvements and changes."

In the past, "everything was manually documented". Service reports were handwritten, with three carbon copies made of each one.

In 2010, Ademco switched to using handheld tablets for signing off on and submitting service reports. "Previously you might forget to bring down the documentation, or paperwork would get lost," he notes.

With the tablets synced to Ademco's internal system, reports are now automatically received by the relevant department.

Customer service manager Kristen Lim, 48, joined the firm in 2014, after it had already made the leap to an integrated digital system.

She is happy with the efficiency of the cloud-based software. The customer service team handles service calls, putting them in a shared calendar – which gives Mr Maung Maung Ye Htut's team an

overview of what needs to be addressed, as well as the relevant details.

Without this, customer service staff would have had to call the service team to relay such information. Says Ms Lim: "I could have spent 15 minutes on the phone just trying to tell him what was going on."

It is easy for her to field questions from customers on the spot, since she can retrieve information from the system immediately.

The system's history log also allows recurring problems to be spotted early, she adds.

For Zailan bin Zohri, 30, moving from his previous workplace to Ademco in 2016 was like travelling through time. "Ademco is much more advanced," he says. "I was very surprised by this new environment change."

In his previous job elsewhere in the security industry, the conditions were reminiscent of Ademco a decade ago: handwritten reports, carbon copies, and physical files.

"We had piles of documents to store," he recalls. In contrast, his job processes at Ademco are paperless.

Another benefit of the firm's digital system is the clarity it provides, he adds.

As part of Ademco's banking team, Mr Zailan attends to alerts such as suspicious activity near ATMs. In his previous job, the alerts they received were unrevealing: "You would have to check A to Z when you go down just to figure out what's wrong."

In contrast, at Ademco, his team receives "exact and precise fault calls" which specify the problem.

"We go down and settle the issue, that's it," he says with a smile.

Mr Koh (second from right) with (from left) customer service manager Kristen Lim, Zailan bin Zohri from the banking team, and team leader Maung Maung Ye Htut.  
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