

# COMMITTED to SUCCESS

By Nirmala Ramoo

Ask 10 young accounting graduates what their career choice is and chances are 9 out of 10 will not list internal auditing as their pursuit. Traditionally seen as the least glamorous branch of the accountancy profession, internal auditing is perceived to be a difficult vocation by many. That may be the general perception but not so for Wee Hock Kee, the proud recipient of the 2001 award for Internal Auditor of the Year. Wee's passion for his job was evident when AKAUNTAN NASIONAL interviewed him recently. "I was fated to be in this profession as I am very 'passionate' about my job", said Wee.

Now, how many people have you come across who can claim to have a passion for their jobs? Small wonder then that at the relatively young age of 36, Wee was sought by AstraZeneca Plc (AstraZeneca), one of the top healthcare companies in the world, to set up its internal audit division for the Asia Pacific region. Quite an achievement considering the fact that AstraZeneca is a world class company, a 'darling stock' in the London Stock Exchange with an annual turnover of US\$18 billion. His excellent credentials coupled with his exuberance for the profession convinced his prospective employers to allow him to set up AstraZeneca's regional audit division in the Klang Valley despite the fact that the company's regional office is based in Singapore. As regional audit director, a position he has held for the past four years, Wee oversees the internal audit functions in Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, India, Indochina, Singapore, the Philippines, Australia, New Zealand and most recently South Africa. With only eight members in his team, how does he get the job done?

"Size is no longer an issue", said Wee. Apparently staffing does not play a very important role in terms of numbers now in the internal audit profession as the profession

In an exclusive interview with *Akauntan Nasional*, Wee Hock Kee, 2001's recipient of the Internal Auditor of the Year award, explains why internal auditing is the profession of choice for him.



Wee Hock Kee ... delivering the corporate governance and control agenda

has moved away from the traditional sort of compliance base. "We look at high level controls. We look at the business risk in an organisation", he added. In explaining the strongly embedded internal control culture in AstraZeneca, he said the audit team worked very closely with the company's external auditors as an assurance provider to management. "As control drivers, we help management to develop the first line of control by training their internal control compliance executives and managers to take responsibility to discharge the first line of control. We have done a lot in terms of educating line managers from the internal audit perspective by conducting awareness programmes and corporate governance workshops. We now have a very matured control environment where managers take full ownership over their line of control. They work very closely with us in delivering the corporate governance and control agenda in AstraZeneca", said Wee. Obviously the audit team at AstraZeneca is on the right track as the company recently won the CFO Europe Award in the Risk Management category, in addition to earn-

ing a listing on both the London based Footsie Four Good Index and the US Dow Jones World Sustainability Index which list companies that have attained a high level of transparency, social accountability and disclosure.

Wee started his career with Fraser & Neave as an internal audit trainee and within 12 months was made a full-fledged internal auditor, a feat that usually takes between three to four years. ICI, which was then a global leader in the manufacturing industry, saw Wee's potential and enticed him with the opportunity to audit the company's Asia-Pacific division. He was given the unenviable task of setting up the internal audit department in Japan, a country known for its aversion to the functions of an internal audit department. Despite the obvious difficulties culturally and in winning public acceptance, Wee took to his job with gusto and his perseverance prevailed. "I think I did very well in making a major breakthrough in terms of gaining acceptance in Japan", he said with obvious pride. Indeed, within three years of joining ICI, he



went on to notch another feather in his cap. As quality manager for the internal audit department, Wee was instrumental in the department achieving the ISO 9002, a rarity in the internal audit circle.

Guinness Anchor beckoned with a plum opening for Head of Audit. As usual, Wee's trademark enthusiasm and passion shone through and internal auditing became a key function in the company. *"My strength, apart from technical skills, is coming in, setting up the internal audit department and raising the profile of the department. You need to sell the importance of the internal audit function to management"*, he explained. Carrying this philosophy into his next job with Singapore based Cycle and Carriage Ltd, Wee who was stationed in Kuala Lumpur managed to win back a lost contract within months of joining the company. *"My predecessor was doing a policeman's job and in the process a lot of people were not too happy. What I did was to move away from this image and play the role of a business partner with management"*, he said. Obviously, this tactic worked well, as internal audit became a highly visible function in the company. *"I get a lot of satisfaction from being able to raise the profile of the internal audit department within an organisation to one with high visibility"*, said Wee.

From the world of multinationals, Wee next forayed into a totally new area, to work for a Malaysian entrepreneur, first as an internal auditor and then as his special assistant. *"Unlike multinationals which are highly regimented and regulated, here I had to learn to manage the ambiguities. This experience was invaluable to me"*, Wee said in describing his three-year experience with the company. However, the world of multinationals was his destiny and when AstraZeneca presented an irresistible challenge to Wee, he seized the opportunity to work with one of the top pharmaceutical companies in the world. Astra was a well

known pharmaceutical company in Sweden with over 40 years of experience when, in the early 1990's, it merged with Zeneca, formerly ICI, to forge a formidable partnership that has gone on to become a multi-billion dollar enterprise today.

In describing the contributing factors to his achievements to date, Wee said a thorough knowledge of the business is an important attribute for a successful internal



Wee receiving the coveted award from the Auditor-General, YBhg Dato' Dr. Hadenan Abdul Jalil

auditor. *"You cannot pretend to know the nature of an organisation's business if you want to audit a company successfully. To know a business well, one must go into the market to learn."* As the business area demands very high output in terms of audit report, internal auditing is not confined merely to the compliance and assurance process but also the business mastery part. In pointing out the shortcomings of many internal auditors, he said many times due to a lack of business knowledge the audit recommendations given by auditors are merely a repetition of their audit findings. *"To know a market, one must be prepared to roll up the sleeves and move into the market place together with the sales people to understand the ethical issues at hand"*, he stressed. Another fundamental factor for a successful internal auditor is to master strong soft skills when dealing with people. *"One has to take into account emotional and sometimes political sensitivities in order to gain the auditee's trust and to avoid stepping on the wrong toes"*, he cautioned. Of course when called in to do an investigation, it is a different ball game altogether.

*"In an investigation, there is no such thing as a business partner. When you have to hit, you must hit. So, a good auditor must be able to play a dual role, when required, with equal ease"*, said Wee.

His advice to upcoming accountants — *"Make internal auditing your first choice in your career as this profession gives you a tremendous opportunity to learn. In addition, you have visibility as you get to interact with*

*senior management — a good opportunity for upward career movement."* With the new wave of corporate governance and the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange's listing requirement on internal audit, Wee is confident the profession has a bright future. *"What we need is top internal audit professionals in order to raise the standard of the profession."*

Despite holding a high profile job that requires him to be abroad

on a regular basis, Wee, who is a former member of the Board of Governors of the Institute of Internal Auditors Malaysia (IIAM), is keen to be actively involved in the development of the profession in the country. *"I would like to be invited back to the Board of Governors of IIAM as this will enable me to share my international exposure in this field through dialogues with young upcoming internal audit practitioners. I would also like to talk to university students to explain both the challenges and the excellent opportunities for them within the profession"*, he offered.

The future looks bright for this father of two strapping young boys aged 10 and 13. As part of AstraZeneca's global group internal audit management team, Wee's visibility to the top management is undeniable. *"AstraZeneca has a high regard for people and believes in developing people with high potential. They recognise you"*, he said, referring to the fact that AstraZeneca is looking for a suitable upward position for him within the organisation in recognition of the high level of performance he has demonstrated these past four years. **AN**