

Humans and technology should stand on the same side of the fence

Feinmetall Singapore shows a company's transformative journey towards Industry 4.0 does not have to leave its employees behind

By Haelin Han, Lee Xin Yu and Loo Kee Jeng

DOES digital transformation always have to come at the expense of employees?

As Feinmetall Singapore Pte Ltd shows, a company's transformative journey towards Industry 4.0 does not have to leave its employees behind.

Set up in 2007 as a German-Singapore joint venture precision engineering SME with only five employees, Feinmetall is now a leading provider of contact solutions in Singapore with 60 employees. It offers turnkey solutions for the design, manufacture and repair of wafer probe cards for the semiconductor industry.

Since 2012, growth has been in double-digits and the company shows no sign of slowing down.

Feinmetall's general manager Sam Chee Wah attributes this rapid growth to two big factors – continual innovation and commitment to its employees.

Breaking new grounds

As a company, Feinmetall does not shy away from investments or risks.

Within a decade of its incorporation, the company had invested over S\$1.5 million to develop its capacity and capabilities.

In 2017 it took a huge leap forward when it opened its new S\$6 million state-of-the-art manufacturing facility in the Marsiling Industrial Estate, the first of its kind among SMEs in the semiconductor industry.

The 6,700 sq ft Feinmetall Digital Manufacturing Facility (DMF) adopts technology solutions under the Model Factory @ SIMTech.

A key feature of the DMF is the Manufacturing Control Tower™ (MCTM) dashboard, which allows Feinmetall to inspect and control the entire production floor from a single control room.

In essence, the new facility is a culmination of Feinmetall's continual efforts to deepen its engineering capabilities and an embodiment of its risk-taking spirit that continues to set new standards for the local precision engineering industry.

Despite all of this, Feinmetall knows better than to dive head-first into expensive IT infrastructure as



While most companies view automation as synonymous with staff cuts, Feinmetall sees it as a golden opportunity to retrain and upgrade its workers. As general manager Sam Chee Wah (above) puts it, the employees' passion is Feinmetall's success. PHOTO: FEINMETALL SINGAPORE

the primary driver of innovation.

"We don't jump into expensive solutions first," said Mr Sam. "We don't want to build a museum."

Instead, Feinmetall is guided by a few principles that focus on delivering a smoother, cost-effective implementation of technology.

For a start, the company only invests in equipment or machinery if it is truly relevant and beneficial to the business.

It also believes that processes should be standardised, and complexities eliminated prior to a digital transformation.

While many technological companies may see value in continually introducing new platforms and systems to their businesses, Feinmetall understands that the simplification of processes can help its business become more agile, flexible and cost-efficient – both in terms of technological spending and time.

Humans in focus

On its website, Feinmetall cracks a little pun: "Good contacts are important to us. This doesn't only apply to our products, but especially for our

employees."

Feinmetall has established a culture which respects and empowers employees as innovative, passionate individuals and not just as a number in the system.

The company is all for providing employees with opportunities for career progression.

Most of its management staff have worked their way from the ground up and have a great sense of loyalty to the company.

It also has an ongoing partnership with Nanyang Polytechnic and employs several of its diploma gradu-



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ates every year.

With initiatives such as allowing employees pursuing part-time degrees to shift their working hours forward so that they can make it in time for their night classes, diploma graduates enjoy the assurance that should they wish to further their education at some point in the future, they will have the company's full support to do so.

It's all in the details

Feinmetall pays attention to details: on the production floor, all its employees are required to dress in standardised lab coats and footwear, regardless of role and rank.

While its production floor is technically not a clean room, it is made to replicate one – even having an air shower as its entrance – as this instils a sense of pride and professionalism in the workplace.

Another small yet significant detail lies in its microscopes, equipment extensively used in precision companies.

Unlike conventional ones, Feinmetall's microscopes have eyepieces that are parallel, not perpendicular, to the ground, so that users can maintain an upright sitting position and avoid neck strain.

A small modification like this goes a long way and demonstrates the company's commitment to its employees' health and well-being.

Collaboration, not competition

While most may view automation as synonymous with staff cuts, Feinmetall shows that humans and technology can and must stand on the same side of the fence.

To Mr Sam, true digital transformation cannot be achieved just by splurging on the fanciest equipment – they have to be accompanied by improved processes and complete employee buy-in.

For a start, employees must believe that any new technological device or machinery the company introduces can help them do their jobs better. Otherwise, digitisation of the workplace is just going to create a severe case of information overload, overwhelming employees and resulting in employee resistance to any new digital initiatives. Technology is intended to make lives easier; it should not contribute to a more negative employee experience.

Feinmetall sees its employees as the company's bedrock, and the digital wave as a golden opportunity to retrain and upgrade them so that they can command higher wages and derive a greater sense of fulfilment in their work.

This also raises the company's productivity to the next level.

As Mr Sam puts it, the employees' passion is indeed Feinmetall's success.

Forging ahead

With the DMF set to support its future-ready expansion plans, Feinmetall continues to pave the way for the semiconductor industry by continually keeping up with global trends, seeking public-private partnerships to deepen its capabilities, and investing in its employees' career and self-development.

Feinmetall's journey towards Industry 4.0 conveys a clear message: seek growth together as a company, embracing change and transformation to weather the challenges of tomorrow.