

# Overcoming the odds to drive change



NVPC's 3 initiatives – Collaborate for Good, Champions of Good and Company of Good Fellowship – have helped businesses amplify their social impact. **BY VIVIEN ANG**

**W**HEN Carolin Barr, founder of social enterprise susGain, was still an employee working in the Central Business District, she was “horrified” at the amount of plastic packaging she would see in the pantry after lunch. “My colleague and I decided to bring our own reuseables and, slowly, we managed to transform the office culture. Even the newcomers were told to bring a tupperware for takeaways during their initiation,” she said with a laugh. Their project caught on, and other colleagues would seek them out to talk about sustainability issues. “One thing led to another and before we knew it, we were giving talks in the office on the topic. And I thought to myself, “Why is this issue – for example, how to dispose of e-waste – not general knowledge?”

Barr realised that there was an intention-action gap which is noticeable in poor recycling rates and low consumer demand for sustainable products and services, and decided to plug the space with susGain, a company that helps connect the different eco- and socially-conscious stakeholders in Singapore. “This intention-action gap is particularly wide among Gen Z, even though they are often lauded as the most environmentally conscious generation. This is also shown in OCBC’s FY 2021 Climate Index, as 75 per cent of Gen Z’s cite inconvenience as the top reason that they do not adopt green practices.”

Hence, susGain, set up in Feb 2020 by Barr and her husband, is meant to be a network aggregator which connects different stakeholders to drive the change towards a more sustainable nation. Its app is meant to make sustainable living more accessible and fun. With the susGain rewards app, eco-friendly actions and purchases translate into points, cashback and donations to local charities.

Currently, the firm has onboarded more than 200 local businesses, and 12 local charities, among others. Future plans include larger scale events collaborations and a maiden fundraising round to launch susGain in 1-2 cities across the region.

Barr credits the Collaborate for Good initiative – which facilitates partnerships between organisations



**Muhammad Fadhil (far left), a special-needs artist from Arts@Metta, showcasing his artwork titled *Birds of Paradise*, with a CAG employee.**

PHOTO: CHANGI AIRPORT GROUP

to create social impact – by the National Volunteer & Philanthropy Centre’s (NVPC) Company of Good as the platform that helped propel the social enterprise onto a larger stage.

“We joined them in May 2021 – after we spent the first year building the app and company – and it has not only introduced us to the corporates that we have since been working with, but also gave us the confidence to run these types of projects successfully.”

One of the common challenges faced as a startup is how to get noticed by organisations who are looking to run sustainability-related employee engagement programmes, said Barr. “Hence, Collaborate for Good has helped us showcase the work susGain does to their broad community of partners and corporates which have an aligned mission of doing good. In turn, this brought us attention from some multinationals, which we now call our clients.”

Two other initiatives from NVPC are Champions of Good and Company of Good Fellowship.

## Pivoting to virtual

Champions of Good was launched in 2017 as a national recognition initiative by Company of Good. It recognises organisations – such as Changi Airport Group (CAG) – that are exemplary in doing good and have also been a multiplier by engaging their partners and stakeholders on a collaborative journey.

When the pandemic threw a spanner in the works of the company’s usual in-person corporate social responsibility (CSR) programmes, CAG pivoted to virtual ones for the disadvantaged youths and co-developed a virtual telemedicine programme with Metta School

and Raffles Medical Group to help students with special needs gain more confidence when seeking medical treatment. In addition, the Art is Everywhere and Art Empowerment programmes were curated and conducted amid the pandemic for special-needs artists from Metta Welfare Association (MWA) with the aim of helping them gain exposure and build confidence.

The project was an employee-advocated idea by Daniel Foo. The senior manager of design management and art custodian at CAG takes care of the airport’s art collection, and both programmes culminated in a virtual art fair in December 2021, which was attended by more than 100 colleagues and brought in more than S\$4,000 sales for MWA from the 1.5-hour event.

On being a Champion, Ivy Choo, head of Changi Foundation – the philanthropic arm of CAG – said: “Being in this space provides learning proximity to learn from like-minded organisations. It also energises us to do better as there are always positive CSR vibes within this community. Our challenge is to continue to stay relevant so that our CSR offerings can better complement that of our charity partners. The disruption brought about by Covid is a good example of how staying relevant can be a long-running challenge, and now, as we move into the endemic phase, one question on our mind is whether virtual volunteering will stay . . .

“We still see value for it despite the slow return to in-person volunteering and will be running our volunteering programmes as a hybrid of virtual programmes and in-person volunteering. Another challenge is to continue to galvanise our airport partners in CSR collaborations while being mindful of their business circumstances.”

## Disengaged with the ecosystem

For Kelvin Ong, being a part of the Company of Good Fellowship – which allows Fellows to learn leadership skills to catalyse change for business and society – has allowed him to further fine-tune the CSR initiative at his workplace. The head of business development at Micrographics Data said that the company’s inclusive hiring started from over 30 years back by the founder and managing director, Samuel Ong.

“I believe that each of us just needs an opportunity and time to shine. Persons with disabilities, just like everyone else, have hidden talents that just need an empathetic environment and people to believe in them to excel. However, with limited resources, there was only so much full-time inclusive hiring we could do and once we filled up the positions, we became disengaged with the ecosystem, which limited our impact.”

However, ever since joining the Fellowship in 2021, Ong realised that this need not be the case. The entire initiative, which included modules such as Theory of Change, gave rise to the company’s programme on inclusive hiring via internship all year round. “In doing so, we will be constantly engaged with the ecosystem and impacting different people throughout the year.” He added that obstacles faced when he first joined the initiative included the headwinds of business challenges and frequent questions of whether it was the right timing.

“However, I believe doing good is good for the company as customers, staff, partners and vendors can be influenced to do the same. We need a more empathic and gracious society, and it starts from ourselves.”

“The Fellowship has opened doors on the many ways that we can do good either on an individual or organisation. It also allowed participants to learn from others about their giving practices, challenges faced, and potential collaborations among the Fellows,” Ong added.

“Our current inclusive hiring process is an outcome of the Fellowship, and we hope our organisation can be a soft launching pad for the young differently talented to build their confidence and harness their skill sets – especially the soft skills that will propel them forward to their full potential in their future careers.”

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