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Learning, Landing, and Localising Through Technology

BIPO

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Unfolding BIPO's Beginnings

In the early 2000s to the 2010s, the landscape of human resource (HR) management was still bogged down by manual processes. Every task, from payroll processing to leave approvals and data analysis, relied heavily on tedious email exchanges and cumbersome Excel sheets.

Back then, Mr. Michael Chen, the founder and CEO of BIPO (Asia) Pte Ltd, BIPO Service Shanghai Limited and BIPO Service North Asia Limited, was already a veteran in the HR and legal industries. His HR journey began with roles as a legal supervisor in a state-owned company and later as the head of the HR team in an American-owned firm in China.

Over time, Mr. Chen grew increasingly frustrated with the shackles of these outdated practices. He witnessed first-hand how HR professionals were constrained by menial tasks which deterred them from unlocking their true potential. The seeds of change were sown in his mind - an idea to revolutionise HR management through automation, freeing professionals to focus on more impactful and higher value work.

Figure 1. BIPO's Chief Executive Officer, Mr Michael Chen.

Determined to breathe life into this vision, Mr. Chen left his well-paying job and embarked on an entrepreneurial journey. This marked the birth of BIPO. With the aim to help companies navigate the complexity of global people management, BIPO has grown over the years with Mr. Chen and his team's dedication. Today, it has a total of 42 offices serving over 160 markets spanning across Southeast Asia, Europe, America, and Africa.

Featuring No.14[1] of the SBF Company Case Study Series, this case study details how BIPO went international and became a guiding light to support other companies embarking on internationalisation with their talent management needs. BIPO's story is an inspiration of how companies can tap on the power of technology and innovation to revolutionise HR management to develop customised solutions that can serve the unique needs of clients globally.

BIPO's Journey to The World

Figure 2. BIPO's office and reception area.

In the heart of bustling Shanghai, Mr. Chen led a team of skilful information technology experts and laid the cornerstone for BIPO. Together, their early days were marked by tireless endeavour to develop the pioneer version of BIPO's HR management and payroll systems aimed at integrating technology to improve the efficiency of HR processes. The team automated transactional functions such as attendance, employee lifecycle management, leave management, and expense reimbursement.
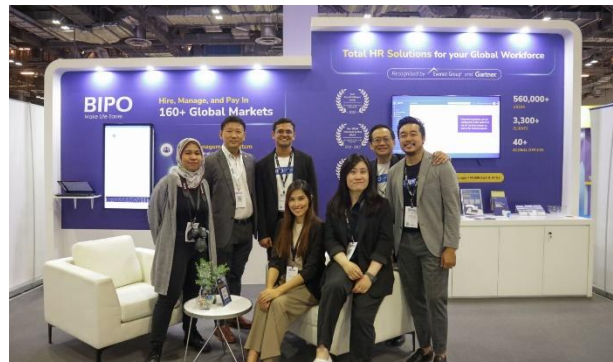
On the back of strategic marketing initiatives, BIPO's global footprints expanded. After setting up in Shanghai, they continued their next venture into Hong Kong and Taiwan after receiving service demands.

Subsequently, after witnessing the successes of fellow multinational companies which have chosen Singapore as their headquarters

Figure 3. BIPO's team at HR Tech Festival 2024 in Singapore.

and enticed by Singapore's pro-business ecosystem, BIPO recognised the vast potential and opportunities that this little island could offer. Consequently, it made a strategic decision to establish its headquarters and innovation hub in bustling Singapore. This strategic move is a key milestone in BIPO's story and provided a platform to extend its reach across the ASEAN region and eventually into other continents.

Learning and Landing through Market Research and Phased Entry

When selecting sites for international expansion, BIPO prioritises thorough market research to identify markets with strong demand for HR solutions. Their competitor analysis revealed that although the global HR landscape was saturated by established Western providers with strong branding and reputations, there was a notable gap: few large Asian-based HR companies offered comparable international reach or tailored services to meet the distinct HR needs of the Asian market. With a population that accounts for nearly 60% of the world's population and

home to some of the largest global economies – including China and India – BIPO recognised a significant growth opportunity in this underserved market.

Recognising this gap, BIPO set its vision to be a Singapore-based global payroll and people solutions provider with Asia at its core and central pillar of BIPO's global operations, supporting its expansion into 23 Asian markets.

Figure 4. BIPO's grand opening in Vietnam.

For expansion into markets, BIPO evaluates key criteria including market size, growth potential, regulatory environment and cultural compatibility. It then adopted a phased entry strategy, beginning with the Southeast Asian markets such as Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand, and Malaysia. After achieving successful penetration in Southeast Asia, BIPO would then incrementally extend its presence into other regions, allowing the company to manage resources effectively and to tailor its strategies to diverse market conditions.

"We will expand our global network continuously, but step by step."

- *Mr Michael Chen, CEO*

Figure 4. BIPO's Vietnam team.

Currently, BIPO is actively expanding across every continent - including Europe, North America, Latin America (LATAM), Africa, and the Middle East - by selectively building their own local capabilities. For example, in the case of LATAM, a thorough review of BIPO's existing business portfolio revealed a significant opportunity, and this

provided the impetus for BIPO to set up its local capability there.

The selection of markets was also driven by their strategic significance. These include markets such as Mexico, Colombia, Chile, Brazil, and Argentina. Investments were dedicated to enhancing local capabilities within these regions to support expansion and growth.

Additionally, BIPO actively partners with European and American companies to facilitate their entries into Asian markets, while also supporting Asian and Singapore-based companies in expanding their operations internationally.

Localisation through Process and Product Customisation

Figure 5. BIPO's Hong Kong team.

BIPO's internationalisation expansion is also rooted in its commitment to adapt and innovate its processes and products in response to diverse global markets. BIPO understands that when companies venture into new markets, one of the key challenges is understanding, navigating and complying to the in-market regulations and laws in different aspects of its business. In the area of human resource, these challenges include understanding and complying to the local regulatory requirements, laws and policies, managing payments in different currencies, and fulfilling administrative tasks such as visa applications and tax filings. Often, companies lack expertise in these areas, resulting in a steep learning curve and consequently, draining considerable resources unless there is access to guidance from local experts.

To bridge this gap, BIPO adopted a strategy centred on the building of local teams of sales, marketing, and customer support professionals to provide personalised service and support for its customers in different markets. One of its significant offerings is targeted HR advisory and compliance service, delivered via its in-country HR and payroll experts with in-depth understanding of local labour laws and regulations.

BIPO also localised its HR management solutions to the unique regulatory requirements, labour laws, cultural preferences, and business practices of different markets. It includes designing country-specific benefit packages, language localisation, adapting and localising software

interfaces, incorporating region-specific features such as local payroll and taxation modules, and ensuring that its products comply with local regulations. In the technical aspect, BIPO also invested heavily to ensure that its IT infrastructure and data security measures in different markets can meet the regulatory requirements and data privacy standards of each market.

The company's global payroll outsourcing solution enables seamless, paperless payroll management with multi-currency support, ensuring that businesses can manage their payroll processes digitally from anywhere in the world. By managing the entire process, BIPO ensures compliance with local regulations, supported by the presence of in-country payroll experts, allowing businesses to focus on their global expansion while reducing administrative burdens.

Harnessing Technology and Continuous Product Innovation

At the heart of BIPO's internationalisation strategy also lies a deep commitment to leveraging technology as a catalyst of growth. Since its inception, BIPO has continuously reinvested in its digital infrastructures and innovation to support its expansion into new markets.

The strategic establishment of Research and Development (R&D) centres in both Singapore and Shanghai also propelled BIPO's internationalisation journey. Through rigorous experimentations and research, the Singapore R&D team developed BIPO's integrated HR management solution termed "2.0 of BIPO's HR solution". This all-in-one HR Management System (HRMS) automates and streamlines all administrative processes into an integrated single platform while adapting to the dynamic requirements of different markets. A key milestone in BIPO's history, it represented the success of its R&D's efforts and underscores its strategic intent to lead in the international HR technology arena.

Efficiency and Real-Time Insights for Global Workforce Management

BIPO's success in internationalisation is also built on the strength of its HR offerings that harnessed the power of emerging technologies to support global growth. More specifically, BIPO recognised the immense potential of artificial intelligence (AI), big data and cloud computing to streamline HR operations and develop scalable solutions for companies managing international workforces. AI-driven features like facial recognition and biometric clock-ins enhance operational efficiency, while automated workflows simplify HR tasks and ensure consistency across borders. These innovations enable businesses to manage complex HR processes more effectively, regardless of the market they operate in.

BIPO's Athena BI platform further supports businesses by providing real-time insights into workforce trends, payroll expenses, and compliance risks, enabling informed decision-making during internationalisation. By continuously evolving its technology, BIPO not only empowers its clients to scale globally but also strengthens its position as a leader in international HR solutions.

Figure 6. BIPO's Taiwan team at an event on the impact of Artificial Intelligence on Global HR management.

Investment in Talents: Core of its Digital Strategy

Today, its technological capabilities have expanded from its initial technology core team in China, with an additional IT team in Singapore and other IT centres in Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur and Shanghai.

At the core of its rapid technology capability expansion plan, Mr Michael Chen views BIPO's relentless pursuit to scout and recruit the best digital talents, and its priority placed on digital-talent cultivation, as the backbone of its digital capability. Its IT team is sizable, numbering around 200 IT professionals.

The team has played critical roles at different milestones of BIPO's history by continuously innovating and developing new generations of tech-enabled HR solutions. For instance, the team recognised that although the HR management systems from other brands are more globalised and established than BIPO's, generic functions may still need to be tweaked to adapt to the unique needs of different markets. Recognising this, BIPO's IT team worked tirelessly to develop and design BIPO's system to include features that can reflect regional nuances, inject regional flexibility, and create localised user experiences for its clients. Its success in building an integrated yet versatile HR platform successfully met the gap in the market and reflected BIPO's vision to create customised solutions.

Building Local Capabilities in New Markets

Reflecting on its journey, CEO Mr Michael Chen identified navigating cultural differences as the biggest challenge that BIPO faced when operating in many diverse global markets. Another significant challenge was managing a vast network of global operations and ensuring alignment of the company's mission, vision, and strategy across these markets.

Figure 7. BIPO's key management team at an event.

By building strong local teams in these markets, and collaborating internally with their Asian and European teams, the ease of doing business in these new markets increased tremendously. In these local offices, BIPO predominantly hires locals to manage operations, though it also recognises the importance of assigning and relocating existing employees from Singapore and other countries, particularly to support the initial phase of capability building. Existing staff were also sent on short-term assignments to support the local teams after they have reached a more mature stage.

Moreover, having an effective key management team has been crucial to BIPO's ability to manage its global operations successfully. A systematic approach, combined with strategic partnerships across BIPO's global offices is the key strategy for BIPO in managing the complexities of its expansive business network.

Tapping on Networks to Unlock Opportunities

BIPO also understood the importance of tapping on strategic partnerships and support to help it to navigate the complexities of entering new overseas markets. As such, other key market entry strategies include working with BIPO's key business partners to identify business opportunities and grow the business, before moving on to form their local teams, networks, and capabilities. In addition, BIPO participated extensively in activities organised by trade and industry associations, such as the overseas market workshops organised by the Singapore Business Federation (SBF) to learn key lessons on operating in different markets and navigating regulatory complexities. For example, BIPO's Founder, Mr Michael Chen, personally took part in the mission trips to South Africa and Kenya to gain first-hand

experience of navigating the unique business landscape, gaining access to the networks, and exploring business opportunities.

Epilogue

Figure 9. BIPO's CEO Mr. Michael Chen and staff.

Looking back at BIPO's journey, Mr Chen emphasized the importance of leveraging technology in automating and streamlining processes for businesses to better deliver their value to clients. For companies aiming to internationalise, particularly SMEs with limited revenue streams, attracting top talent—including locals and Singaporeans willing to relocate—it can be a significant challenge, especially during the early stages. In addition, reluctance to venture into new markets often stems from personal preferences and the fierce competition for skilled talent. In this context, Mr Chen emphasised the importance of clear, compelling communication to position the company as an attractive employer. Companies must effectively communicate their strategic plans and long-term commitments to new markets to win over potential hires. Having a well-defined profile for the required talent and clear hiring criteria will further enhance the chances of securing the right fit.

In sum, getting the right mix of technology, talent, and strategy is pivotal.