



# Agile: The Seek Asia Way

Lessons in agile transformation

By Tze Chin Tang

# How Seek Asia came to be

## Once upon a time, there were two pioneers in the online job advertising space in Southeast Asia.

JobStreet, founded in 1997 and JobsDB in 1998. As fierce competitors, these two companies were navigating a brand-new market, connecting hirers with job seekers in up to nine countries. They soon became household names, being the place to go if you were a recent graduate looking for a job or a recruiter looking for a new employee.

In 2007, a little company called Seek was started. Seek became very successful in Australia and started to consider growth opportunities further afield. So, they began their search for other companies that they could invest in. They found JobsDB and JobStreet, which they brought into the fold in 2010 and 2014, respectively. With their newfound presence in southeast Asia, both companies were merged in 2015 to become Seek Asia.

The founder of Seek, Andrew Bassett, had huge aspirations for the Asian market and had no intention of keeping the companies the same. But there was a small complication. After the two companies were merged, both founders and almost the entire senior leadership team left Seek. And what was left was a company without senior leaders, and that was still largely operating as two separate entities.

Now grappling with low staff morale, uncertainty, and distrust, as well as inefficient legacy technology, the rebirth of Seek Asia couldn't come any sooner. With two new competitors emerging in LinkedIn and Indeed, there were massive disruptions on the horizon.



## The vision

Fast forward five years, and Seek Asia wins the World Agility Forum's 2020 Agile Great Place to Work Award. So, how did they manage to turn things around in just five years?

In 2016, Seek Asia took the departure of their senior leadership teams and turned it into an opportunity for a new beginning and newfound hope. Stepping up to the plate as the new CIO was a chap named Daniel Walters. And his first move was to hire Tze Chin Tang as Seek Asia's resident "Agile Guy". The third person to join the team was Chief Product Officer (CPO) Ken Chin.

Together, the team had some tough decisions to make. They could maintain the status quo, stabilise operations, and get working practices running more smoothly.

This would have been the easiest and most comfortable thing to do, avoiding any resistance from the business. The harder choice was to transform. Because with change comes chaos, discomfort, misunderstanding, distrust, and instability. But, change is also about survival.

Once the team had committed to diving in headfirst and transforming the business, they moved to bring in more expertise. They rebuilt the senior leadership team, hiring more agile people, technology people, startup people, and more product people who brought new skills and perspectives to the table. Then, they spent time managing and updating all of the technology, processes and messiness that comes with merging two companies.

The aspirations around building these new teams laid the groundwork for where they wanted to go. They wanted motivated teams who were curious to learn and responsive to change. They wanted to continuously grow to move beyond being a regional player so they could compete with the likes of LinkedIn. And they wanted to become more resilient, knowing that the journey would be a lifelong one.

**Out of these aspirations came one goal - to build a single unifying culture. They didn't want a JobsDB culture and a JobStreet culture. They wanted a Seek Asia culture.**

But the question was, how would they reach this goal? As the agile person, the answer Tze arrived at was to "use agile to be agile". He mulled over what their product was, how best to deliver it to their customers using agile methods and what success will look like. At that point in time, they were releasing new product developments about once a month. The other thing Tze was thinking about was how well teams were responding to customer support cases.

To kick things off, Tze put together an assessment of where the organisation was at. He found that there was a lot of fear, uncertainty and distrust and that the division between the two sides of the company had become ingrained. Their first employee survey showed that engagement was at 17%. Tze knew then that he needed to create safety in order for teams to move more quickly and smoothly. Safety for teams to experiment, take risks, fail, break stuff and fix it quickly.

What Tze and Ken did next was redesigned the organisation using a concept called domains. With a focus on who their customers were and how they could serve them, they split business operations into five different domains:

1. Taking care of job candidates
2. Helping hirers
3. Solving business problems and managing internal software
4. Managing data
5. Responding to strategic opportunities or executive priorities.

Each domain would be made up of a set of teams. Each team called a mission team because of the specific mission they needed to fulfil. For example, one of the teams in the candidate domain was called "search". Their mission was to help candidates find the right job opportunities through the search function. But, searching was not the only way customers were finding jobs. So, they became the "discovery" team. The emphasis, then, was making sure that each mission solved a specific customer problem.

**“We are no longer calling people' resources'. We call them our talent and treat them as people.”**

**Daniel Walters**, CIO Seek Asia



## **Building high-performing teams**

So, crafting the missions was the first step. The next step was to build the teams. Traditionally management would assign people to each team, and team members would bounce between projects. But, Tze saw this as an opportunity to boost engagement. A lot of what he heard in that initial assessment was that managers made all the decisions and told their employees what to do. People didn't feel like they were in control of their own jobs or like they had the autonomy to choose the work they needed to do.

What Tze wanted was to create an environment where people felt empowered to make decisions for themselves. So the senior leadership team designed a self-selection process called mission recruitment that would allow people to make their own choices. To reflect this, the CIO, Daniel, would say, "We are no longer calling people' resources'. We call them our talent and treat them as people."

With a clear mission and success metrics, the product managers were recruited into the teams first. Then, each team would have a dedicated mix of engineers and, ideally, one designer. Both the testers and the developers were called engineers. Either engineering tests or engineering software, the role of the engineer was to build software (the product). Each team member could only work on one team at a time, with a strong focus on their single project.

Supporting each team were analysts from the data side to help the team use the data to make better decisions. And an Agile Delivery Lead, who were basically ScrumMasters. It was their role to help the teams work in an agile way.

# The transformation

Having designed the product, put the teams together, and their recruitment mechanism in place, it was time to reorganise the organisation. But, with four engineering centres, two in Malaysia, one in Hong Kong, and one in Shenzhen, the senior leaders started to decide if they wanted to put a big project plan together and do a big bang transformation or do it the agile way.

So, they transformed each site in quarterly iterations. Starting in Kuala Lumpur, each iteration was treated like an experiment, each time learning how to do it better. The first run was messy but a success in the sense that it was good enough. It became a mad scramble to make sure everyone had a role and that the vision was clear. They got Hong Kong and Penang up and running next, and by the time they got to Shenzhen, they had learnt so much that Tze's team could run it on their own.

Some of the common problems that teams ran into were people not wanting to work with different systems, not having the tools they wanted, wanting to be promoted or paid more, or not feeling heard by leadership. There seemed to be lots of little niggly problems, and teams responded to things as they were happening and were being very reactive.

To solve these problems, the leadership team needed to plan, garner lots of feedback and think about responses for that feedback. So Tze set up a leadership meeting every two weeks, where they set up a board and a backlog for the transformation. During these meetings, leaders would share feedback from their people to discuss and put in a backlog. If they could see that problems were happening across multiple sites, they'd work to identify a pattern and put it as a high priority to solve.

In an effort to get more feedback from teams, Tze used a tool called Office Vibe. Office Vibe is a continuous engagement survey tool that sends out a weekly micro survey that can be anonymous. This gives near real-time data about how the organisation is doing. Before this, there was a yearly engagement survey and maybe a six-month pulse checks if there was budget for it.

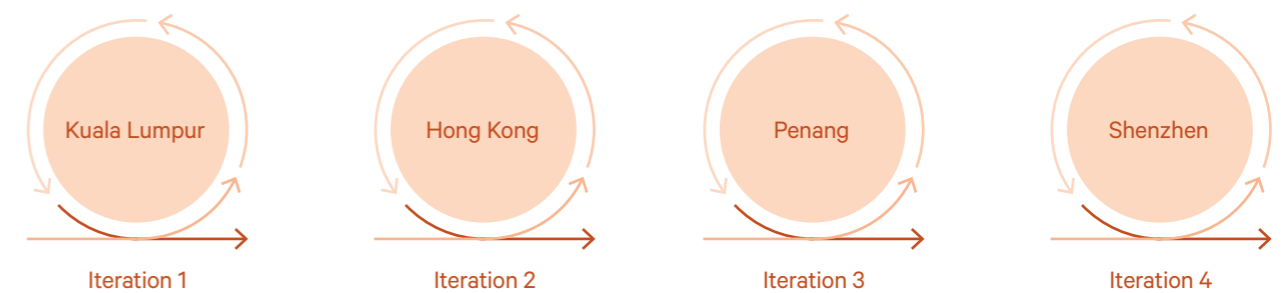
**But the team decided if they didn't have the feedback from talent, they were basically flying blind with no data coming back in to point them in the right direction.**

Leadership had many methods to try and create an environment where talent felt free to talk about what was happening with them, how they were doing, and any problems they were facing.

The next challenge was how leaders responded to that feedback. The team created a series of principles to help make decisions and identify what was valuable. One of the principles was not to leave pieces of feedback hanging. So, in Office Vibe, they committed to responding to every single piece of feedback within a week. One of the other principles was to over-communicate. Tze's team designed a series of town halls, newsletters, emails, and Slack channels just to get information out there.



## The agile way – 4 iterations of self selection





“We wanted to create a culture where team members can pursue mastery.”

Tze Chin Tan

## Creating an agile culture

To really hone in on the agile principle of continuous learning and improvement, CPO, Ken wanted to give time back to their talent that was purely for learning - tools down, no meetings, no work. So, for the last half of the day on Fridays, teams would go out for lunch together and then spend the rest of the day mastering skills they wanted to learn. The business provided learning resources, and Tze, Daniel or Ken would run workshops. They soon developed a whole learning and development program to ensure people had room to grow.

What Seek Asia wanted to do was to build a culture with a:

Strong purpose

+

Focus

+

Autonomy

The purpose came from the organisational design, and everyone in each team having a very clear mission. To support the purpose, the leadership team shifted the focus from delivering outputs to outcomes. The organisation was no longer valuing or recognising people for just working long hours; they were recognised

for creating an impact. This affected how people's work was evaluated, how teams communicated, and what was valued by the leadership team. To embed those values, team members were rewarded and made role models when they had outcome-oriented mindsets, helped customers and their colleagues.

Then, maintaining a clear focus is where objectives and key results (OKRs) came in.

One of the informal metrics that Tze used was called 'line of sight to value'. He would often ask team members, "who are you serving?" and see how many people he had to ask before someone replied with, "the customer."

As the business started building a user research team, engineers would have access to customers. They would sit in on customer interviews so that they would know who they're serving and create empathy to understand their customer's needs. This provided teams with both a strong sense of purpose and focus.

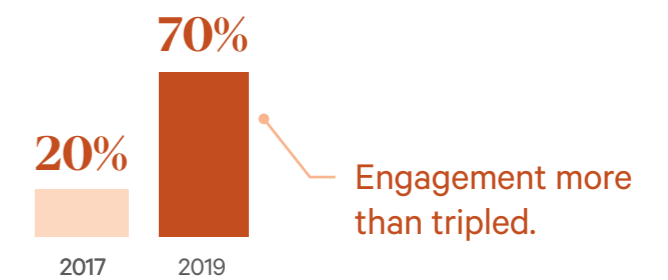
The last aspect of company culture was autonomy. Tze worked to create space within teams where people could voice their opinions, make collective decisions, and make sure everybody had a part to play in how work was done. This helped improve engagement scores and sped up the time it took to make decisions.

# Reaping the rewards



## The payoff

By 2019, engagement at Seek Asia had more than tripled to almost 70%, and as a measure of motivation and growth, 40% of the organisation got promoted. They went from deploying working solutions once a month to approximately 3000 deployments a month.



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Teams went from solving customer support cases 70% of the time to 97%. On the business side, topline revenues were on the up, and margins were growing. It's easy to see why they were recognised with the World Agility Forum's 2020 Agile Great Place to Work Award.

What's next for Seek? With the aspiration to become a global company with a single platform, the company is taking what they learned and bringing together Seek Asia and Seek Australia/ New Zealand.

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