



Mr Thomas Wee, 55, at the office of DataPost, one of the companies under the Jing King Tech Group. Mr Wee now oversees six firms belonging to the group, with a combined annual revenue of \$60 million. Staying true to his never-say-die spirit, he spearheaded the group's recent entry into the fintech sector. "The only thing that can stop you is yourself," he says. ST PHOTO: ONG WEE JIN

ItChangedMyLife

# CEO lost a job because his O-level results were too good

He wanted to be a technician but was advised to further studies, and now heads 6 companies



**Wong Kim Hoh**  
Senior Writer

There is a woman Mr Thomas Wee often thinks about.

She changed his life immeasurably, but he does not know her name, how she looks, what she does now, or even if she is alive.

He knows only that she worked in the human resources (HR) department of the Republic of Singapore Air Force (RSAF) about 40 years ago.

Then a bright teenager, he had applied to become an aircraft technician because he did not want to burden his widowed mother by continuing his studies.

When informed that his application was successful, he turned up at the RSAF recruitment centre in Dempsey Road to seal the deal and hand in his O-level results. But when the woman handling his application saw how academically able he was, she tore up his contract.

Go back to school, she told him. Mr Wee, now 55, was gobsmacked. "Her job was to recruit people, but she did the opposite," he says.

Her actions changed the course of his destiny. After getting a diploma in mechanical engineering, he joined the printing industry. One thing led to another, and today, he oversees six companies in the Jing King Tech Group (JK Tech) with a combined annual revenue of \$60 million.

The companies he oversees include Novation Solutions, which offers printing and document man-

agement services, and Nufin Data, a financial technology start-up.

"If you can find her, I would like to thank her," he says.

She is not the only game changer that serendipity strewed across his path. Many milestones in his life, he says, came together by mere happenstance.

The younger of two sons, he grew up in Changi. His father, a former accounts clerk with Robinsons department store, died of heart problems when he was 12 years old.

"I remember the day my mother said he was in critical condition and that we had to rush to Singapore General Hospital to see him. It was super urgent and yet we took the bus."

The episode left a deep impression, and made him resolve to be financially independent.

"Anyway, my father survived that day, and died one Sunday at home." To raise her two sons, his mother started a small stall at the Central Manpower Base, and later sold chicken rice in Chin Swee Road.

Mr Wee's teenage years were spent helping her.

He rose at the crack of dawn to slice cucumber, get the charcoal stove going for a big pot of soup, collect roast pork from the supplier and set up the stall. His mother prepared the chickens.

"After school, I would clean up and help her to close for the day," says the former student of St Patrick's School. "I was always ticked off by my teachers for not handing in my homework."

There was, he says, no resentment. That was the card he was dealt and he got on with it.

"After a couple of years, my mother gave up the chicken rice stall to become a cook at a holiday camp in Pasir Ris. She was afraid if I carried on like that, my studies would be affected," he says. To this day, he does not order chicken at a Chinese restaurant. "And if I have a choice, I will not eat it too," he says with a grin.

His O-level results got him into junior college, but he reckoned continuing his education would be financially tough on his mother. So, he applied to join the RSAF's aircraft technician scheme, which offered training at the Air Engineering Training Institute as well as a monthly allowance. His plan, however, was upended

by the RSAF employee who tore up his contract and told him to further his studies – an idea his mother was more than happy to go along with.

Mr Wee then decided to read mechanical engineering at Singapore Polytechnic in 1979.

To support himself, he gave a lot of tuition.

National service was another turning point.

Laughing at the memory, he recalls being served a big heap of rice and a piece of meat on his first day in the army.

But he noticed that at another table, the occupants were given nicer food, served on proper plates.

"I was very naive. When I asked people why they were so special, I had expletives thrown at me," he says with a guffaw.

When told that army officers not only got better food but also higher salaries, he decided to apply to the Officer Cadet School (OCS).

"I barely qualified, I was very unfit then," he says. "The training was very tough, and the sergeant was expecting me to give up."

But he did not. In fact, he was among his batch's fittest officers by the time he completed his training.

OCS, he says, did wonders for him. "It taught me how to set goals. I learnt that if I set my mind to it, I could achieve it. It made me realise that life can be different. You need not always remain where you are," he says.

After completing his national service in 1984, he became a management trainee at Singapore National Printers (SNP).

"I was attracted by their promise of overseas studies after training," he says. "I wanted to study abroad and I had to find a way to do it."

After two years, during which time he learnt how to operate all the printing machines in the company, he left for Britain to study at the London College of Printing.

To earn pocket money and get free meals, he worked part-time at McDonald's and Chinese restaurants.

"I graduated with very good results. In fact, my lecturer recommended me to work at a colour-scanning company that was willing to pay my bond," he says.

Printing and colour-separating skills were highly sought after then, and Mr Wee reckons he would have been offered British permanent residence if he had not returned home.

"I couldn't. My mother was here," he says. There were several offers from other printing companies when he completed his three-year bond upon his return.



Mr Wee (centre, back row) with his staff in Novation Solutions in Hong Kong. He led the company through tough times to where it is today. PHOTO: THOMAS WEE

Against the odds  
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VIDEO:  
Thomas Wee's  
journey from  
hawker to CEO  
[str.sg/4bUL](http://str.sg/4bUL)

But fate stepped in again. The manager of the company's security printing section – which was responsible for the printing of important documents such as passports and ballot papers – quit just before the 1991 General Election.

Then a supervisor in the section, Mr Wee – who had already written his resignation letter – was asked to take over. He was not keen because he already had an offer from another company. Convinced that his request would be rejected, he asked for a big increment. To his surprise, the company agreed to his terms.

"Life is very strange. Everyone was waiting to see how I would die because there was not enough staff and barely enough equipment. But just as I was wondering how I could solve the crisis, the HR manager

came through the door and asked if I would take eight printing apprentices from the Baharuddin Vocational Institute," he says.

Over the next several years in the company, Mr Wee earned a reputation as someone who could get things done.

"I knew what I was doing so well that I could tell how things were progressing just by listening to the sound of the machines."

He says he could have probably stayed at the company till retirement, but it was not enough.

So he took evening classes and got himself not just a diploma in management from the Singapore Institute of Management but also a degree in economics from the University of London.

He also got married to a classmate, a former executive in a timber com-

WINNING RESPECT

I was always rifling through the trash bins. I could tell what problems they (the machines) faced just by the amount of waste generated. After a while, my relationship with the employees became very good. Every Chinese New Year, all of them would come to my house in Sai Kung to eat and mingle.



MR THOMAS WEE, on how he earned the respect of his employees at HSBC Precision Printing despite a rocky beginning.

pany, while pursuing his degree. "I don't buy it when people tell me they have no time to do things," says Mr Wee, who has two sons, aged 22 and 24.

Deciding that he needed to know more than just operations if he wanted a career in upper management, he left SNP after 10 years.

The next few years were spent doing sales and marketing for a couple of companies.

One day, a call came, asking him if he was interested in managing a printing company – HSBC Precision Printing – owned by the bank in Hong Kong. The company wanted a graduate from the London College of Printing.

In 1997, Mr Wee left for the former British colony with his family.

Settling in was rough. Two key management staff, including the managing director who had hired him, left barely a month after he joined the company.

Floor workers were also less than friendly. But he soon earned their respect after he rolled up his sleeves and proved that he knew his machines and what they were capable of.

"I was always rifling through the trash bins. I could tell what problems they faced just by the amount of waste generated," he says.

"After a while, my relationship with the employees became very good. Every Chinese New Year, all of them would come to my house in Sai Kung to eat and mingle."

The ailing company became robust under him, gaining new accounts, diversifying into other printing businesses and expanding into China.

Eight years after he moved to Hong Kong, HSBC decided to sell the company. "I raised my hand and asked if they would consider a management buyout. They said, 'Sure, if you can match the price'."

Mr Wee made a trip back to Singapore, found a private equity fund to back his plan and became a shareholder in the company, which was renamed Novation Solutions.

Things hummed along nicely but turned rough when the 2009 financial crisis rolled around. Adament that the wages of his rank-and-file employees must not be touched, he announced that he would take a 25 per cent pay cut.

"All my management staff immediately offered to do the same," he recalls proudly, adding that he steered the company back into calm waters not long after.

In 2012, Novation was sold to SingPost, which sold it to JK Tech a couple of years later.

Both companies kept the staff, including Mr Wee.

After nearly 18 years away, he returned to Singapore in 2015.

In addition to Novation, he is now the chief executive of five other companies in the JK Tech Group. He also spearheaded the group's entry into the new fintech (financial tech) businesses of medical claims processing and supply chain finance.

He was instrumental in the setting up of Nufin Data, a start-up that, among other things, specialises in technology giving businesses easier access to financing.

Two months ago, Nufin signed an agreement with United Overseas Bank (China) at the third Singapore-Shanghai Financial Forum to introduce its cloud-based supply chain financing service to the bank's small and medium-sized corporate clients.

"It is very different from printing, but it is something I believe in. I started a fintech company at 55. Life begins at 55," he says with a laugh.

He has, he says, the never-say-die spirit. "The only thing that can stop you is yourself."