



Hamish Tyrwhitt, who runs the Asian operation, says using Hong Kong as a base was "visionary" despite Leighton's low mainland profile. Photo: David Wong

Working together is what matters, Australian says

Leighton Asia chief gets the most from his team

Eric Ng

Hamish Tyrwhitt brings to the business of managing his construction team the lessons learned in the sporting challenges that he relishes.

The 46-year-old Australian, managing director of the Asian unit of Australian construction and mining contractor Leighton, is a sporting enthusiast – evident from the photographs that adorn his office walls of mountain climbs, car-racing, skiing, cycling and sea-kayaking.

And once he gets talking you quickly understand the connection he sees between sporting and business challenges.

"The analogy between sport and construction is that in both cases people work together as one team. A lot of our team-building has to do with sport," he explains.

Under the circumstances, it is no coincidence that a few years ago three of the members of the Hong Kong Rugby Sevens side worked for Leighton Asia.

"Construction is a team sport. While the academic element is there, we are not looking just for straight-A students. We are looking for people who have the characteristics of being able to work in a team," Tyrwhitt says.

"It's about us forming teams around projects, so we look for strong leadership and team-building characteristics. The person may be part of a local football team or local community groups."

Although a civil engineer by training, Tyrwhitt, who has worked at Leighton for his entire 23-year working life, has learned that numbers and methodologies are only part of the equation.

"It's people, people, people. That's all this company is about. We are not a company like Apple that has a brand, or other companies that have patents.

"We just muster a group of people together to build or create something. People are our only assets, so we look after, train and support them."

Sydney-based Leighton has grown since its founding 61 years ago into one of the world's top 10 construction firms and the world's largest contract miner. Its Asian operation covers 14 countries and administrative regions and its turnover of A\$1.3 billion (HK\$9.37 billion) last year accounted for 20 per cent of group sales, double that of a decade

ago. With the emphasis on people, quality of training is so important that Leighton has set up its own schools in Indonesia and Mongolia, and sponsors students for up to four years of education. Unlike some companies that also offer free education, Leighton does not require students to commit to working for it.

"We don't have to tie these people up by contract. I find in most places in Asia, if you give people the opportunity and invest in them, they will return their loyalty by wanting to work with you," says Tyrwhitt, who believes a "fun, challenging and performance-driven" environment is the ultimate draw.

And this is a motto in the Leighton culture. Once every four months or so, heads of divisions in Asia dream up a challenge for themselves. Previously these have included climbing Mount Kota Kinabalu – Southeast Asia's tallest peak – climbing a volcano in Japan, and sea-kayaking in Japan in the winter. The latest contest, although not a sport, is no less challenging: a weight-loss competition among different divisions.

"We pick something that we train for to keep a balance between work and health. We write the rules down and all sign on to it. I get them to pre-sign letters of resignation for if they fail," he quips – and quickly adds that he has never used the letters.

Although construction engineering is a male-dominated profession, Tyrwhitt says roughly a fifth of Leighton's engineers with five to 10 years of experience are female, while only 3 per cent of graduates who joined

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Hamish Tyrwhitt, the managing director of Leighton's Asian unit



Pulling its weight

Leighton's Asian operation covers 14 countries

Last year, the share of the group's total sales it accounted for was

20%

construction firms were female just over two decades ago.

Tyrwhitt landed his first posting in Asia in 1989 in Kota Kinabalu, East Malaysia, where he lived for seven years and met his wife, with whom he had five boys. He was later transferred to Laos to manage the construction of one of the Mekong River bridges. Subsequent relocations brought him to Thailand, Hong Kong, Singapore, Indonesia, Australia, the US, Africa and Switzerland.

As a regional manager, he spends an average of 20 hours on a plane in a week, and regularly clocks up one million air miles a year.

An early adopter of iPad, he professes to no longer using a desktop computer, and tries his best to keep paperless an office that has 8,500 staff overseas across the region.

"A lot of our business is about understanding and controlling risks, and the ease of communications nowadays allows me to get the facts quickly and share them with people so that we can understand the issues and respond to challenges," he says. With its Asian operation entering its 35th year, Tyrwhitt says in hindsight the choice of Hong Kong as regional headquarter since the beginning was more "visionary" than a matter of luck. The mainland is "very much the engine-room of our growth", but at the same time the vast market is not on his radar screen at all.

"Mainland China is not a market I am looking at. But I am looking at everything that links to China," he says. "We are growing at 20 to 30 per cent a year by not being in China. Why would we enter China? There are 550 million people living in areas that we are currently operating in; it is not a market we need to enter."

The conundrum was not hard to

understand if one considered the large number of sizeable state-backed construction firms on the mainland, as well as the "exceptionally bureaucratic" licensing procedures that had limited room for foreign firms to have a significant presence there, he said.

"The basic criteria for us entering a market is whether we are adding value by providing our services, and the answer is no," he said. "The Chinese companies are doing an incredibly good job. The quality of infrastructure being built – like the Olympic facilities – is world-class."

Leighton has grown by expanding in Hong Kong, Macau, Mongolia, Australia and Kazakhstan, whose economies are booming thanks largely to surging mainland demand for resources and professional and entertainment services not available or lacking in the domestic market.

The company has grown on projects such as the City of Dreams and Wynn casino hotels in Macau, resorts in Koh Samui targeting mainland buyers, coal mines and related processing and logistics facilities in Mongolia, and the Hong Kong-Guangzhou high-speed rail line and Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau bridge.

Where Leighton tends to score, he says, is in resource-rich countries with lagging infrastructure, remote locations and harsh operating conditions. In Mongolia, which has all of these conditions, Leighton won mining contracts and infrastructure projects from Hong Kong-listed Mongolian Mining, Mongolia Energy and SouthGobi Energy Resources.

Although the slow pace of the Mongolian government in deciding on the railway development blueprint has affected the plans of some mining companies, Tyrwhitt says he believes the issue will be resolved before a "true bottleneck" forms, at least two years from now.

Boosted by business in Mongolia, the company's Asia orders on hand amount to some A\$6 billion, roughly equivalent to that of its global uncompleted orders 10 years ago.

As it prepares to mark its 35th anniversary, Tyrwhitt says he is in two minds on whether to celebrate the Asia headquarters' birthday. Still, he muses, it would be an excuse to hold some cocktail parties and attend a big rugby tournament in Hong Kong.

Young graduates vying for a position at Leighton had better be team-sports lovers.