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## 'The Philippines is a compelling thing'



IN the 13 years that Richard Mills has been doing business in the Philippines, he has seen the country grow by leaps and bounds. In fact, he sees the country as the emerging global business hub in the region. The boom that came with the growth of business-process outsourcing (BPO) businesses has contributed to enhancing the country's image abroad.

"The Philippines will at some point be the premier regional hub in the Southeast Asian region," Mills says in an interview with BusinessMirror. "Given the difficulties in terms of cost and access to labor, as in Singapore, coupled with its ageing population, the Philippines seems to be the next natural hub in the region. We all have a responsibility to promote that fact. We have to show what Filipino and international companies can do here in a successful manner. A good point to make is that if you have to hire a thousand accountants, you can do that here. If you need nurses doing healthcare type of work, where else can you do that but here? And all the workers are young and eager to learn, and they are nice to work with."

Mills came to the Philippines just after the 9/11 tragedy when his work in the human-resource industry in Toronto came to a standstill. He decided to join his wife, a Filipina, who was then on vacation in the country with their kids, for a break.

"Initially, I thought maybe I'd stay here for six months," he confesses. "Then that kinda dragged on to another six months, and before you know it, I have already been here for 13 years."

He saw the potential in the market then, and started Chalmre Associates. He tried to match the needs of businesses abroad with the potential in the local market, in turn promoting the Philippines as an appropriate venue for businesses looking for an operations center for their expansion in Asia.

The country wasn't hard to sell, he admits. In the past decade the business environment has gradually improved, offering not just a host of talent trained by BPO industries, but as well as the needed infrastructure to serve as home for international business seeking to grow in the region.

"There is a lot of work being done," he says. "Just take a look at Fort Bonifacio. Yes, there is a problem with transport, but you can easily bring people there, as I have done, from many different countries. Just set them up in the middle of it and have a look around, and the next thing I know, they were telling me that they were impressed. They were saying, 'Is this really the Philippines?'"

After getting international companies interested in setting office in the country, he says there is a need to make them aware of other options that are available in the country. He particularly points out the entertainment opportunities available for expats who will be doing business here.

"Now that the Philippines has shown what we can do here, the next step is to tell them what you can do here on a weekend. The next step is in the entertainment city that is rising up in the Manila Bay area. In the next five to 10 years, that becomes a compelling story to tell people. You can't do any of that stuff in Singapore. You can go to a casino or two, yes, but they are expensive. And that's all you can do. But here, you can go to the casino one weekend, then another weekend in Boracay, and the next weekend to other places. There are a lot of options, and you can afford to do them, because it is not as expensive as in other places," he adds.

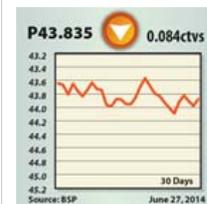
Mills isn't just an interested observer doing business in the Philippines. For the past four years, he has been the key figure in the annual Asia CEO Awards, which recognizes both local and foreign businesses in the country that have shown positive performance in their fields of expertise.

He describes the Awards in simple terms: "To help promote the country, we have to let people know that there's a lot of good stories here. That's what we are focused on."

"The Awards is there to help businesses. It is there to help the country. The purpose of the Awards is to display that people here are doing good work. We have people coming up on stage, all smiling, arm in arm, both Filipinos

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and foreigners, to give the message that if they can do good business here, then you can, too," he says.

Along with the Awards, Mills also organizes monthly forums under the banner of Asia CEO Forum. Speakers from various businesses and industries speak to large crowds to share their success stories and inspire others that they, too, can be successful."

"It has become a much bigger thing than what we expected," he says. "In the past, about a thousand people have attended our forums. It has become an activity for the business community. It brings everybody together at once, and they can interact with their counterparts in a way that they cannot on a daily basis."

To convince the business community of the credibility of the Awards and the forum, he says he specifically chose a credible set of judges.

"That is the key," he declares. "Early on, we had a diverse set of international judges including architect Jun Palafox, economist Bernie Villegas, the heads of the chambers of commerce of America, Korea and Europe, and Oscar Sañez of the Business Process Association of the Philippines. We purposely have a mix of Filipinos and foreigners among the judges to show that the Philippines is not just a local place to do business, but is also an international hub."

Mills sees big things happening to the country in the next three to five years, based on the present performance of businesses. All these changes will be fueled by the upgrade BPOs have gradually shown in the past years, from being merely call centers to doing back office work for global industries.

"For the longest time, the perception was the Philippines was a good place to look for talent when they need filler because everyone can speak English. In Thailand, because of the different language, they could not do that easily. But we have to change that perception. It's the natural progression from a human-resources perspective. You start your career here and then you move there," he says.

"The image of BPOs is now blurring," he adds. "It's no longer call-center work. Now, they offer back office work, from finance and accounting to human resources and software development, legal, healthcare, mortgage back office work, capital-market settlement work to financial analysis. It's very diverse. The good thing about these jobs is that they involve heavy training. They are sticky jobs. These people are hard to move somewhere else. These are jobs that can be built upon."

What this eventually means is that the pool of talent the Philippines has can go up the rung and become future decision makers.

"The BPOs have shown that without a reasonable doubt, Filipinos can move from low-level jobs to junior-level jobs. Nowadays, many of them are stepping into middle-level jobs, too. The next step is for them to get to the top jobs. Location is not really a problem because these top guys can be anywhere because they spend most of their time on a plane. That is the next movement of talent. A big number of the top guys will be coming from the Philippines over time."



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