

of getting a visa.

President and Chief Executive Officer,
COMPUTER ASSISTED LEARNING CORP. (CAL)



Leonardo A. Riingen

By BERNIE CAHILES-MAGKILAT

Education is the best equalizer but providing and making education affordable is more like of a vocation than a career. This is the unstated mission of Computer Assisted Learning Corp. (CAL), a company that brings quality Information and Communication Technology educational services closer, cheaper and more convenient to its market.

CAL president and CEO Leonardo A. Riingen, who witnessed the pride of parents during graduation ceremonies and the optimism of the youth, equally shares this pride and happiness by really walking the talk.

CAL, an international computer education provider established in Singapore in 1986, operates in 12 countries with over 56 centers worldwide. Riingen got the franchise and established it here in 1996 as a subsidiary of Informatics Holdings Philippines Inc. It pioneers and specializes in the use of ICT in education for all school levels from nursery to the primary and secondary levels and high school.

Recently, the Philippine franchise acquired an independent corporation status and is now the global franchise holder for CAL.

"CAL is for kids," Riingen said. The programs are meant for nursery, primary, elementary and high school kids or the beginners. Originally, CAL sites were located in the malls because the idea is to bring ICT educational services closer to the market. It was a success with CAL attracting not only kids but housewives or beginners who just wanted to know the basics of how to use the internet or e-mail.

By 1999, there was a big shift as schools adopted ICT programs in their schools making the mall location of CAL obsolete.

Instead of looking at it negatively, Riingen thought of following on the pattern and brought CAL inside the schools. The Singapore franchisor did not buy the Philippine business model and so with the franchise holders in the other 11 countries.

At first, some private schools outsourced its ICT programs. CAL's first client was Xavier School. Later on, however, schools tried to develop their ICT team by hiring ICT teachers.

Although this shift was good

because the objective of CAL is to let the schools eventually run their own ICT curriculum, the problem was that ICT teachers cannot stay longer in one school because there are better offers in other companies or abroad. There was also a problem of ICT people, being technical savvy, having difficulty teaching.

In the meantime, CAL perfected its business model by putting up a dedicated team to formulate a progressive and very structured curriculum for ICT teachers that even non-IT teachers can follow. This move also addresses the school's perennial problem of losing their IT teachers for greener pasture.

"Our curriculum five years ago is so different from our curriculum now," he stressed. The school, however, has the option to buy its curriculum plus the syllabus at P2 million. But that is too expensive for a public school.

When a school is enrolled under the CAL, the curriculum, the syllabus and the training of teachers come free with it. At P350 a book per student, that is the cheapest one can get.

With these developments, CAL mall sites have been reduced to only three - Alabang Town Center, Lollo and SM Manila

The company is also maintaining and growing the existing 40 Informatics sites in major cities.

There are 4,500 students enrolled in the short courses at Informatics but those who need shorter training could run from 10,000 to 50,000 students a month.

ADOPT-A-SCHOOL

Heeding the call of the Department of Education to address the deprived quality education of public schools, CAL has partnered with Adopt-A-School program, a private sector-government initiative of Congresswoman Anna Marie Periquet.

Various institutions also heeded the call including P.J. Lhuiller Foundation and Sugar Industry Foundation Inc. (SIFI) by adopting mostly public schools.

On her own, CAL engaged with the Division of Cebu Province through partnerships with parents to enrich the ICT Education Learning Curriculum for public school students in the elementary levels. It also aims

to provide the young learners of the Division of Cebu Province with the essential Pre-ICT Literacy and ICT Literacy skills as a suitable foundation for scholastic, and later on, industry-based skills which would assure public school graduates of equal opportunity in the digital work place.

CAL and its partners like P.J. Lhuiller Foundation have been recognized by the DepEd for their achievements in upgrading the quality of ICT education in the country.

The idea of the Adopt-A-School is to eventually get a private funding and in return the company gets a tax credit. This would encourage companies to adopt students because there is the incentive.

ONLINE LEARNING

Riingen is never tired of creating ways by which to improve his services. He got a franchise from the U.S. and now online ICT education is already in the Philippines. This is suited for the busy people with money but no time to go to a formal school. This is also a good supplement for ICT college students.

There are 2,000 courses purely available online. If one has to enroll, all he has to do is buy a prepaid card worth P2,500 which is good for six months browse the internet and study as against about P5,000 tuition in a regular school. There is no need to install a computer software.

EDUCATION EXPORT

Riingen's plan really is to export education but he is still prioritizing the Philippines because there is a wide gap to fill.

Based on 150,000 students that CAL is currently serving from 208 schools, these translate to over P50 million a year in earnings. But there are 17 million students from the public schools alone. The potential is just enormous. Riingen is just eyeing to serve 40 percent of the total primary and secondary private schools from the current 15 percent.

EMPOWERMENT

Riingen should not have been an ICT educator had he pursued his original love for medicine. Riingen was already enrolled in the pre-medicine at the University of the Philippines

but when he started slicing cats he decided to shift to economics where he could be more flexible.

After college, he worked with a bank thinking he could be assigned in the IT department but he ended up as an assistant branch manager. Then he worked with P & G where he met his wife.

That was there where he developed his managerial and entrepreneurial skills. Later he decided to become an entrepreneur himself.

"Instead of making money for others why not make money for my own," he said. His first business was producing cards while a customer waits. That started the story of the Informatics and CAL.

As a manager, Riingen does not really acts like a corporate executive although he is running his company using corporate principles.

"We do not have management committee," he said. Instead he empowered his people after making the objectives clear to each one of his staff.

"I make our objectives clear and then let them figure out how to do it, whether you break a wall or what," he said stressing he wants his people to become entrepreneurial on their own.

"This way they are forced to think and become more resourceful. If we're here in Makati and we have to go to Baguio, I don't care which way you take, the point is you have to reach Baguio," he explained. In fact, he allows flexible time in the office.

"I value people who work smarter than harder for as long as they finish their job on time," he said.

Riingen employs 600 people at Informatics and 60 at CAL. CAL has more potential as the company goes global. Regularly, he spends time with his 15 business heads imparting to them the marketing skills he learned from his MBA at Wales University in UK.

When he is not busy in the office, Riingen tinkers with his camera, a hobby he developed three years ago.

THE EDUCATOR

As a provider of educational services, Riingen wants to differentiate himself from the rest because he is more into the progressive and skills-oriented type of education.

"For me successful students

are those who get a job after taking the course," he said. That is why he is pushing for a ladderized education wherein after the first year in college a student can already get a job in the IT field.

In fact, the CAL curriculum is crafted in such a way that after high school, the student can already land an IT job.

"Our first two years in the Computer Science in Informatics is actually the 3rd and 4th year offering in a reputable institution," he claimed.

During his career talks in some high schools, Riingen would always emphasize to students the opportunities in the ICT field.

"It's not academic that makes you successful but it's your skill. Don't select a course based on the prospect of getting a visa. In nursing, you may get a job, a U.S. visa but who really wants to clean the bottoms of other people," he once told fourth year high students.

His talk successfully penetrated into the minds of the young students that after the session that followed, his room was filled up with ICT interested students where he had the chance to emphasize ICT's limitless horizon.

But Riingen is beyond pure business. He is enjoying a vocation of providing quality but affordable education to the youth.

During graduation ceremonies, Riingen makes it a point not just to shake the hands of the parents of the graduates but talk to them as well.

"You can see the parent's pride and you can feel the students visualizing themselves of becoming somebody someday," he said.

"This is more of a vocation than a career for me," he said.

"Education has lasting effect because it helps the person grow and improve. It feels good to be able to help someone improve himself from a helpless person to an independent person. It is a good karma," he stressed.

Riingen is already 43 years old. When he was yet 24, he set a target date that by 30 he would be earning his first million.

He failed that target but he started Informatics at 29 and had seen lots of students graduate from the different parts of the country.

That is worth more than a million.