

Innovator spreads its wings

Hong Kong's ATAL Engineering is firmly focused on expanding across the mainland as its prowess grows in technology and innovation.

Staff reporter

Electrical and mechanical engineering services provider ATAL Engineering is honing its skills in technology and innovation and seizing opportunities for development in China, especially in the Guangdong–Hong Kong–Macao Greater Bay Area.

Established in Hong Kong in 1977, the company provides engineering and technology services across four segments – building services, environmental engineering, information, communications and building technologies, and lifts and escalators.

Its parent enterprise Analogue Holdings (1977) was listed on the Hong Kong stock exchange in 2019.

STRENGTHENING TECHNOLOGIES

ATAL's in-house developed sewage treatment technology – the ATAL Multi-Stages Flocculation Sedimentation III – was granted a patent in the mainland last month.

The automated system, which has been used at hundreds of sewage treatment plants, can cut down on human resources and maintenance costs while enhancing efficiencies.

Besides, ATAL uses modular integrated construction or MIC for its projects since 2020.

By taking the construction process to a controlled environment within the factory, ATAL can complete a structure away from the building site and improve the quality of construction and worker safety, according to the company.

The Hong Kong Housing Society used this technique to build a 300-unit public housing development in Yuen Long, to reduce construction time this year.

The firm sets aside 5 percent of its net profit every year towards an innovation fund for employees to research and develop related technologies.

ATAL executive director Raymond Chan Hoi-ming says that colleagues used the funds to study 'digital twin' technology – which is a virtual representation of a real-world physical system.

They built a virtual project using big data to emulate the actual operations of a project and prevent possible accidents from happening by correcting them beforehand.

In addition, ATAL collaborated with Tsinghua University to design treatment standards for highly concentrated effluents and sewage treatment technical specifications.

MAINLAND PUSH

Last year, ATAL invested 60 million yuan (HK\$65 million) in its mainland subsidiary Nanjing Anlev Elevator to expand and



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set up an automated production line which is expected to be ready for launch by the end of the year, according to Alex Zhang Xisheng, the director of research and development at the subsidiary.

He says the company hopes to boost mainland sales with the increased production capacity and plans to increase sales of lifts from hundreds of units to 3,000 units in three years.

ATAL has invested a total of 160 million yuan into the subsidiary.

It had set up factories 30 years ago in Nanjing, a city in Yangtze Delta, and researched precision air-conditioning and related systems before developing its lifts and escalators business there.

Chan and Zhang, however, have different views on how Hong Kong can make inroads into the mainland market.

While mainland enterprises are better at executing innovative concepts, companies in Hong Kong and overseas are more creative, Zhang says.

He believes Hong Kong can hold the upper hand if firms specialize in one area of technology.

But Chan says that while many creative ideas are born in the mainland, Hong Kong is better at implementing them, and enterprises across both sides of the border should collaborate more, as they can complement each other.

He says ATAL first ventured into the Beijing market back in 1992 but due to the differences in the way business is done in mainland and Hong Kong, it was unable to win any orders for

seven years. But once the company became familiar with how the mainland market works, it found itself on the right track.

ATAL has recently concentrated more on markets in the GBA. It has set up a building information modelling team in Guangzhou that can generate and manage building data for GBA and Hong Kong projects. It also set up MIC factories in Jiangmen, a city near Guangzhou.

However, it does not neglect global markets – ATAL expanded its lifts and escalators business to the US and Britain years ago and has built drinking water plants and sewage plants across Southeast Asia.

DIVERSIFIED DEVELOPMENT

Having weathered the pandemic, ATAL understands that it should not concentrate on a single region and therefore aims to further develop various aspects of its business, says Chan.

Looking ahead, Chan warns that if the firm relies too heavily on engineering alone, it might "die of hunger" when there's no engineering work or "die from eating too much" if there's a flood of jobs.

He believes the company should strengthen its repair and maintenance services and increase its share from 20 percent of the company's overall business, to generate a stable and sustainable income.

So, to grow new income streams and sustainable development, ATAL will offer value-added services in operation and maintenance to extend the life of facilities, Chan concludes.



NEARING COMPLETION: ATAL's renovation of the 800-meter-long Central-Mid-levels escalator and walkway system in Hong Kong will finish this year.



RACING AHEAD: ATAL executed electrical, HVAC, plumbing, drainage, fire services and extra-low voltage works for the Hong Kong Jockey Club Conghua Racecourse in Guangzhou.