

FROM DUSK
TO DAWNWritten by
Jan Chan

Edwin Lai, senior scientific officer at Hong Kong Observatory, believes experience is as important as technology in forecasting dangerous weather patterns. Photo: Jonathan Wong

Meteorologist at Hong Kong Observatory has to make critical decisions under intense pressure

In the eye of a storm

Edwin Lai Sau-tak is a man who helps make "critical decisions" when the weather turns nasty in Hong Kong.

As the Hong Kong Observatory's senior scientific officer, with 22 years' experience in the field, Mr Lai no longer has to report for a regular overnight shift. However, when the evening satellite images show a tropical cyclone intensifying or severe weather is on the way, he knows there is a decision to make.

He can stay in the office, stock up on snacks and coffee, and hunker down with the rest of the team for the duration – or he can head home, but in the near-certain knowledge that the phone will go at some point in the middle of the night and he will end up driving in from Sha Tin through gales and rain to manage things on the spot.

"When there is typhoon or rainstorm, forecasters have to make critical decisions in addition to their routine work," Mr Lai said.

"In those circumstances, I act like a consultant and have to be there to work with the forecaster and give advice. People may be under a lot of pressure and might overlook something important when the situation is hectic, so it is always helpful to have one more person with experience to control the situation."

He explained that it was often easier to predict events and prepare for different eventualities when a powerful typhoon was drawing close to Hong Kong. There was a wealth of data to examine and interpret, from long-range satellite images and computer printouts to wind charts and historical records.

The staff on roster at the forecast centre could pore over this information and, as the weather system altered direction or intensity, there was also a regular stream of updates. "Rainstorms, though, are more

Labour of love

Mr Lai took a first degree in environmental science at a university in Britain and had an open mind about possible career directions. After graduating, he returned to Hong Kong and worked for the Hospital Authority's administration department, where he learned about the workings of a large organisation. Two or three years later, he realised meteorology was his true calling and went back to Britain to complete a master's degree in the subject and, since then, he hasn't looked back.

difficult to anticipate," Mr Lai said. "They develop so fast and change so rapidly that you can't easily predict when and where the rain will start to fall."

If heavy rain or thunderstorms are looming, Mr Lai generally prefers to sign off at his regular time and remain on standby at home until crucial decisions are needed.

Obviously, he is all too aware that the hoisting of various storm signals – and the timing – can have a major impact on Hong Kong's daily routines and the preparedness of the community.

"Therefore, if I'm woken by a call from the forecaster in the middle of the night, I'm immediately alert," he said. "I will discuss things over the phone first and, if the situation is critical, will drive in to work, which can be quite dangerous when it is already raining heavily."

The key decision, of course, is whether to issue an official rainstorm warning and, if so, at what level. That entails detailed analysis of all the available data and intense discussions with colleagues, particularly in the immediate pre-dawn period.

When a typhoon is approaching, the procedure is slightly different, and it is then up to the director of the observatory to make final decisions about which typhoon signal to raise and when.

"These pre-dawn hours are the most important," Mr Lai said. "People need to

prepare for work and school and to know exactly what is happening."

For this reason, one of the areas in which he volunteers to help is giving the live on-air briefings for news programmes and early-morning radio shows.

"I usually take care of this because the forecasters will be extremely busy," he said. "When I first went on TV, it was without any formal training. Of course, I needed to learn how to smile and project my voice well in front of the camera, and later I had the chance to take part in a media course in Singapore run by the World Meteorology Organisation."

Nowadays, it is a requirement for each senior scientific officer to have basic media training in order to explain the observatory's methods and conclusions clearly and convincingly.

While previously working as a forecaster, Mr Lai had no great difficulty adapting to the demands of doing a regular night shift. Now, he usually manages to take the disruption caused by occasional sleepless nights in his stride. He concedes, though, that a summons to the office in the small hours inevitably creates a certain amount of stress.

"Working regular night shifts was fine," he said. "Once my body got used to the schedule, there was no problem. But in my position, there is often a need to get to work in a rush. That adds to the pressure when you know already it will be necessary to make critical decisions. When you have to continue into the early shift after 6am and do the live morning weather reports for the TV stations as well, it is no easy task."

Much of the time, Mr Lai now focuses on a range of research and development projects. During the Beijing Olympics, for instance, his team used specially developed technology to provide microclimate forecasts for the Games organising committee. They also supplied the Hong Kong wind-surfing team with tailor-made data on the local weather and

likely offshore conditions in Qingdao. "It was a three-year project, so we started working on it long before the event," he said. "And, after the Games, we had to wrap things up, analyse the performance and write up the reports."

Attention is now on the final refinements to a new forecasting system that will be launched in Hong Kong in mid-2009. An investment of HK\$48 million will make it possible to give more accurate and localised forecasts, with more features accessible via the internet.

Mr Lai developed an interest in meteorology as a youngster. He used to watch his father, a railway engineer with the former Kowloon-Canton Railway Corporation (KCRC), track the course of approaching typhoons and wonder aloud where trees might be brought down and block the lines. They would listen intently to each radio bulletin, draw their own maps and plot every major change.

"I don't think my father received formal training in meteorology. He taught himself and was interested in the subject because it was relevant to his job." At the time, the family was living in KCRC employees' quarters at King's Park, with a direct line of sight to the observatory in Tsim Sha Tsui.

"I could actually see people hoisting the signal, so was probably one of the first members of the public to know there was a typhoon coming," he said.

These days, technology continues to transform the science of meteorology, but Mr Lai is convinced it will be some time before it can totally replace gut feeling and accumulated experience.

"The systems can calculate faster and the data gives us a framework," he said. "But when anticipating the wind direction, for instance, I need to use my experience and I'm the one who makes the decisions."

This is part five in our eight-part series on people who work at night

Job News

Written by
Rosheen Rodwell

Do you stand out from the crowd?

Nowhere is the strength of the economy felt more immediately than in the hotel and restaurant industry. Insiders are predicting thousands of closures as the financial crisis deepens, with people working in this sector having good reason to be nervous about their jobs. However, there will still be opportunities around, particularly for those with the kind of winning personality that is so prized in this industry.

The newly formed Swire Hotels will be opening two new hotels in Hong Kong next year, one at Taikoo Shing and one at Pacific Place shopping complex. The company will be recruiting 500 new staff and, as up to 250 of these will be frontline workers, it is already on the lookout for candidates who can demonstrate a natural affinity for customers.

Dean Winter, senior manager of hotel operations for Swire Hotels, said the hotels would have a distinctly warm, "unstuffy" style and that a candidate with the right personality would be valued more than one with 10 years' experience in the industry.

"We would consider taking people from other industries if they have the right attitude, the right personality, the right sense of fun, spontaneity and spark that guests respond to. If someone comes with those tools in their box, it is a lot easier to train and educate them to deliver the kind of service we are looking for," he said.

Mr Winter said service in the hotel industry had become "robotic" and some regular guests were tired of receiving an identical service in every hotel in every country where they stayed.

"Leading hotels have done extremely well in training and re-educating, but there isn't a great deal of innovation in training and as a result there is a slightly homogenous service style," he said.

He explained that the attitude of Swire Hotels was to hire people who could be themselves, who were not drilled to use the guests' names as often as possible when speaking to them and who had the personality and confidence even at a junior level to take care of any difficulties that might arise.

It is not easy to identify these kinds of people in interviews and Swire Hotels is taking the unusual approach of using training and leadership consultants in the interviewing process, rather than human resources specialists. These consultants have innovative methods for assessing candidates, such as walking into the interview room and dropping a pile of books to see who will jump up to help.

Friendly hotels

- Swire is opening two new hotels in Hong Kong next year
- 500 new staff will be recruited across the board
- It is looking for confident, fun, spontaneous candidates to apply
- Management traineeships are offered annually

In addition to front-of-house and restaurant and bar staff, Swire Hotels will be recruiting staff with specific skill sets in areas such as cooking, housekeeping, engineering, finance and sales and marketing. The company will be hiring according to experience in these areas.

General managers are already in place and most executive positions filled, but the company is still looking for executive assistant managers for its hotel in Taikoo Shing.

Swire Hotels has also been securing its future managers by recruiting up to five management trainees from the Chinese University's hospitality management course for the past two years and sending them to be trained at its Beijing hotel, The Opposite House, which opened in August. The first batch of these candidates arrives back next year to prepare for the launch of the two Hong Kong hotels in September and at the end of the year.

Competition for places on this two-year management training course has been fierce. Swire Hotels received 220 applications this year, interviewed 40 candidates and hired four.

Mr Winter said he was not expecting to have difficulty recruiting for the hotels, as job seekers would be attracted by a competitive salary, by the sense of security and trust that came with a well-known company and by a management style that offered coaching, support and an emphasis on work-life balance.

Prospective employees would also like the fact that it is a growing company that offers long-term opportunities for promotion and work overseas, he said.

Mr Winter said the hotels would also appeal to job seekers who are creative, fashionable and looking to work in "destination" restaurants or for a company that values the strength of their personalities above their ability to do paperwork. He said they were trying to eliminate the amount of paperwork given to front-of-house staff in particular.

"We want to hire people to forge relationships with customers, to go out of their way for customers and to not be distracted by the administration. And I think, when we get that message across, we will appeal to the younger generation," he said.



Dean Winter says Swire Hotels is trying to avoid the 'robotic' service prevalent in the industry. Photo: Edward Wong

Job Coach: Self-awareness key to successful career move

Angela Spaxman

The climate of economic uncertainty is likely to bring sudden changes in many organisations, resulting in redeployments and layoffs. It is important for employees to be ready to make decisions about their future. Now is the time to invest in one of the most important faculties: self-awareness.

Self-awareness means knowing and accepting your strengths, weaknesses and preferences. It takes a certain detachment to be truly honest about what kind of person you are. People are often overly modest about their strengths or take them for granted, thinking that everyone has them. People often either deny their weaknesses or constantly focus on fixing them. The most successful people fully accept their strengths and weaknesses and find situations that allow them to be their best.

When you fully understand your own personality, you can change jobs more easily for two reasons: you will know exactly what kind of job suits you and you can more accurately and confidently describe yourself to hirers.

A job search is much easier when you know exactly what you are looking for. You can clearly describe the job you want to your

Know yourself

- Knowing yourself well is essential to making good career change decisions
- High self-awareness results in higher self-confidence and better job matches
- Self-awareness is built through self-reflection, assessments and feedback from other people

contacts and supporters so that they can refer opportunities.

And once you have found the opportunities, you can apply and interview for jobs much more confidently. When your personality and the job fit well, you can focus on being yourself instead of trying to be someone you are not. If potential employers sense your underlying confidence in your self-awareness, and even if the job you are applying for is not for you, they will feel more confident in referring you to other openings or keep your name on file, since they sense that you represent yourself honestly and accurately.

When you already know about your weaknesses, have accepted them and understand how they contribute to the strength of your overall personality, no one can discourage you with slights about your

faults. When you know yourself well, you are also more likely to be successful in your job. Research has shown managers and leaders who know themselves better are more successful.

Building self-awareness is a continuing process that lasts a lifetime. Even though you may know yourself well at age 20, you will need to explore yourself again and again as your personality develops based on the challenges you meet in life.

There are three primary strategies for increasing your self-awareness. The first one is self-reflection. Take some time to write down what you think about yourself, what you like and dislike and what you want and need. Rather than keeping thoughts about yourself in your head, put them on paper. If you are the creative type, you can draw, paint or create pictures, maps or metaphors of yourself. Metaphors are an excellent way to represent the immense complexity of a personality.

Another way to know yourself better is through assessments. There are hundreds of simple, free online assessments that let you play with ideas about what kind of person you are. Better still, many of the assessments used for hiring, staff development and team building can give an accurate portrayal of

who you are. The better you know yourself already, the more sophisticated the tool you will need to shed more light. Look for assessments to help you clarify your work-related tendencies in order to set out your career path.

Another valuable way to understand yourself is through feedback from others. No matter how hard you look, you can never see yourself unless through another person's eyes. Information on how you come across is an invaluable source of insight. Ask your close friends and co-workers for an honest assessment of your biggest strengths and worst weaknesses. Solicit specific examples so that you can understand how they came to that impression. Make the most of your annual performance appraisals or other formal feedback mechanisms. To encourage others to be honest, offer to give them feedback in return.

None of us knows when sudden changes may force us to move to a new job. Now is always the right time to strengthen the foundations that will allow you to make smooth and successful career changes.

Contributed by Angela Spaxman, career and executive coach at www.loving-your-work.com

Trouble Shooter

Simple solutions to workplace etiquette problems

What is the correct protocol when receiving clients at the office? Should I go to reception to meet them personally or have them escorted to my office or a meeting room?

It is extremely important that visitors to your office feel valued and welcomed, especially if they are your company's clients. From a visitor's point of view, the way they are treated reflects the way the company conducts itself in business.

When the receptionist calls and says that your visitor has arrived, go out and greet them. If you have an assistant, you can ask him or her to escort the visitor, but it is more impressive if you greet them yourself. Never keep a visitor waiting for more than five minutes past the appointed time. If it is absolutely unavoidable, walk out and apologise to the visitor in person. Offering the visitor a cup of tea or a newspaper is a nice gesture.

If something unavoidable has come up that is going to delay your meeting more than 15 minutes, apologise and offer to reschedule the appointment. It should be stressed that keeping a client waiting for more than five or six minutes is not only rude, but also smacks of power play. If a visitor has arrived early and you can't meet them immediately, ask your receptionist or a staff member to welcome them and say that you will be out as soon as possible.

When receiving a visitor in your meeting room or office, always offer them a beverage. Give them your full attention and avoid taking telephone calls and other interruptions. When a visitor leaves, it is polite to walk with them or have them escorted to the lift or at least to the reception.

Article contributed by Alice Kaushal, corporate trainer and managing director of Refine Consulting. Send your questions to editor@classifiedpost.com