Agility as Strategy: How Korea's "Ppalli-Ppalli" Spirit is Shaping Global Business

By Daniel de Bomford and Quentin Lange

The year ends with one certainty: agility has become the world's ultimate business currency. Through 2025, corporations everywhere wrestled with disruptions, volatile commodity prices, fractured logistics and a torrent of new tariffs from Washington. President Trump's second-term trade agenda left no corner of the global economy untouched. Companies quickly learned that size alone wasn't enough. The real differentiator was adaptability: the ability to bend without breaking, to shift gears when politics or supply chains threw up roadblocks.

Few places embody that principle as deeply as South Korea. Here, agility is cultural, even linguistic. The phrase ppalli-ppalli, literally "hurry-hurry", is more than a casual saying. It's a mindset embedded in boardrooms and factory floors alike: move fast, innovate faster and never waste time. That cultural DNA has propelled Korean firms into global prominence. But it also raises a compelling question: how does agility play out when applied across very different industries, from construction and energy storage to artificial intelligence?

Building in a Gloomy Market

The construction sector, often a barometer for broader economic health, has felt the strain of Korea's demographic shifts. An aging population and rising labor costs are squeezing margins. Developers face higher expenses even as new demand slows. Tai Kyun Kim, CEO of Chinhung International, acknowledges the industry's headwinds: "Despite lower interest rates, establishing a sound and resilient financial structure remains difficult due to the current political environment. These factors have placed the construction sector in a rather gloomy situation."

Yet Chinhung's story is less about gloom and more about reinvention. In the 1980s, the company made its name in Saudi Arabia, building oil facilities with a reputation for fast decision-making and high-quality execution. Today, those same traits remain central, but the focus has shifted. Redevelopment of Korea's aging housing stock, often in partnership with the government-backed Korea Land and Housing Corporation (LH), is creating opportunities at home. Abroad, Kim sees a gap: "Many overseas markets have ample land but lack advanced know-how in high-density urban residential construction. This is where Korean companies can truly add value."

Technology is helping tilt the balance. Chinhung has begun testing drones and digital tools to monitor construction progress, reduce manpower needs, and manage costs. For an industry that often lags in innovation, the adoption of such tools signals agility at work, redefining not just how projects are executed, but also how companies preserve profitability under pressure.

Batteries That Bend with the Market

Agility also shows up in industries we rarely think about until a disruption hits. Take lead-acid batteries. They may not grab headlines like EV batteries, but they remain essential, powering vehicles, equipment, and countless devices worldwide. Sebang Global Battery has long been Korea's champion in this space, and CEO Jung Hee Park insists the market isn't going anywhere: "Lead-acid batteries continue to serve as essential consumer products with strong, real-world demand across a wide range of industries. We expect this demand to remain robust and continue growing in the mid- to long-term."

Yet Sebang isn't standing still. It's expanding sales of high-margin absorbed glass mat (AGM) products and partnering with global automakers to push into advanced technologies. At the same time, its subsidiary, Sebang Lithium Battery, is moving aggressively into EV and HEV systems, equipped with its proprietary "No Propagation" safety technology.

The geopolitical dimension cannot be ignored. U.S. tariffs earlier this year hit Korean exporters hard. But rather than lament the shift, Sebang turned the situation on its head. As Heungsub Oh, CEO of the subsidiary Sebang Lithium Battery, explained: "Numerous U.S. companies that had been working with Chinese partners are now seeking alternatives. Korean companies, renowned for their quality and reliability, are increasingly seen as viable partners."

Here, agility doesn't mean abandoning legacy markets; it means balancing tradition with forward bets, ensuring stability today while securing growth tomorrow.

Jae-il Shin, CEO, Ability Systems

Tai Kyun Kim, CEO, Chinhung International, Inc

Digital Agility in Action

While construction and batteries deal in physical assets, agility in the digital space looks entirely different. Ability Systems, an historical system integrater, exemplifies Korea's capacity to pivot. Born out of government-led IT initiatives, the company built its foundation in digital government platforms and network integration. But CEO Jae-il Shin had no intention of staying in that lane.

Last year, Ability launched a dedicated AI Lab, weaving artificial intelligence into everything from system integration to autonomous driving projects. Shin captures the vision in four letters: ABAS, Autonomous systems, Big data, AI, and Smart healthcare. "We are actively developing autonomous vehicles and planning to showcase our technology at upcoming exhibitions. We believe this will be a major growth driver and a defining opportunity for the future of Ability Systems," he says.

The company's work in port logistics offers a tangible example. Container yards still rely heavily on manual labor in Korea, even as U.S. and Chinese ports deploy automation. Inspired by these cases, Ability is developing solutions to bring automation home. That's agility in its purest form: spotting inefficiencies, borrowing proven concepts, and reshaping them for local needs.

Shin also points to the strength of industry networks: "This strong industry network helps us bridge the gap between research and commercialization, allowing us to position ourselves as a key player in cutting-edge projects despite our SME status." Agility here isn't only technological, it's relational, built on collaboration across sectors.

If 2025 proved anything, it's that agility isn't a buzzword; it's the only strategy that matters when the rules of trade, finance and technology are rewritten at lightning speed. Korea, with its ingrained ppalli-ppalli ethos, is showing the world how it's done, through quick decision-making, relentless innovation, and an instinct for seizing opportunity in the middle of turbulence.

Whether through drones hovering over construction sites, batteries adjusting to tariff battles, or AI labs pushing into autonomous systems, Korean firms are practicing agility as a way of life. And as the global economy braces for another uncertain year, perhaps the lesson is simple: those who adapt fastest don't just survive, they define the future.