

CONCLUSION

OVER THE PAST 150 YEARS, the SISK Group has been involved in the construction of some of the most famous and iconic buildings in the State, and it is today one of the largest privately-owned companies in Ireland. In 2008, turnover exceeded €1 billion, with 2,300 people employed across its operations.

The story of the first 90 years of the SISK Group is that of three John Sisks, each owner-managers of a modest but successful family business, operating almost entirely in the province of Munster. The size and scope of the company was limited to what each could personally supervise and control. But the third John Sisk, John Gerard (John G), took the business to a new dimension, and with strategic planning and innovative technical and business methods, he created the framework of the SISK Group as we know it today.

The company's survival into the third generation was a significant achievement, because it is an internationally recognised phenomenon that only 4 per cent of family firms survive this long. In Sisk's case, it may have been helped by its unusual practice of consolidating the overall ownership into one individual's hands when passing on to succeeding generations.

Group chief executive Liam Nagle has no doubt about the key reason for the company's success. "Sisk is a family business. This is vitally important as it allows us to take a long-term view in terms of strategy," he says. "Everyone working in the business knows who the Sisk family are and understands the company and family values. One of the areas where this has very visible benefits is in staff retention – when you walk around any one of our offices or sites you'll find people who have been with us for 20 and 30 years – and more."

Opposite: The Sisk/CMP Team at the Convention Centre, Dublin





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“There is a great sense of belonging and being together as a team,” says Jim Doyle, commercial director of John Sisk & Son Ireland. “There is always someone to rely on, someone to help you and you are encouraged to help others. The family is very loyal to its staff in difficult times, such as bereavement and sickness. The company’s ethos is to follow the right practices and procedures and there is a strong sense of wanting to do the best for clients and partners.”

Doyle recalls a client who went into receivership, owing Sisk about £6 million with no likelihood of getting it. “We owed about £5 million of that to subcontractors and were going to lose big time. The legal advice was that we didn’t have to pay the subcontractors but George insisted, saying, ‘I will not be responsible for any subcontractor going out of business.’”

It may be that because Sisk is a private family business, it is afforded the space to take a more measured approach in its dealings. Its long-term view is facilitated by an ownership structure very different to that of companies quoted on the stock market. “I would not for a moment criticise the plc model of ownership,” says Nagle. “But it does help that we are not driven by quarter-on-quarter results. We are as aggressive as anyone else in terms of growing the company, but we can afford to take a longer-term view and I believe this gives us a competitive advantage.”

And long term means just that. “The business is now owned by the fifth generation of the Sisk family and I am very much aware that our job is not just to deliver results this year, or next year, but to continue building the business for future generations – that’s a pretty awesome challenge,” Nagle says.

“Our vision is to create a diversified business built around our historic strength and culture; a business that delivers results for all of its stakeholders, including the Sisk family, our staff, our clients and our partners.”

The relative simplicity of this vision is reflected in the Group’s strategic plan. “Our strategy is fairly simple,” Nagle says. “We will continue to do what we already do well and continue to invest in the various businesses in the group. We will continue to diversify into sensible areas. And we will start to behave more as the SISK Group and make our 11 companies greater than the sum of their parts.”

The last aim of behaving more like a group does not herald any fundamental change in culture. On the contrary, this move is also driven by the long-held values of the company. “We are very consciously not creating some kind of a corporate centre which is distanced from the operating companies in the group. All of our people are empowered to make decisions and grow their businesses.

“It is out there at the coalface that business is won and done and delivered. Whether it’s selling a washing machine in Origo or tendering for a job in the construction business, the expertise is out in those companies and we are very conscious of not interfering with that.”



Opposite: SISK Group Management Team. Standing (l-r), Pierce O’Shea, managing director John Sisk & Son International; Ger Penny, Group finance director; Paul Wilson, managing director John Sisk & Son UK. Seated (l-r), Donal O’Connor, Group HR director; Liam Nagle, Group chief executive; Tom Costello, managing director John Sisk & Son Ireland; John Osborne, managing director Sisk Healthcare

Top left: Kevin Kelly (right), former managing director of John Sisk & Son Ireland, and Pat Harrington, outgoing president, on the occasion of Kevin being elected president of the Construction Industry Federation in 1996

Top right: Bernard O’Connell (former executive chairman construction)



Sensory garden at the School of the Holy Spirit, Kilkenny. Constructed by SISK Group volunteers as part of the 150th anniversary volunteering programme, with materials contributed by SISK Group companies

Overleaf: This wood carving was presented to John G Sisk to mark the 25th anniversary celebration of Sisk working in Africa



Looking to the future of the group, Nagle believes that Sisk's history holds the key to its long term success. "The SISK Group has managed its way through civil wars, depressions, recessions and world wars and we have done this by diversifying sectorally and geographically and continually looking for new and different things to do."

"We travelled abroad to the UK in the 1980s, to Africa in the 1970s and 1980s, and to Germany in the 1980s and 1990s when work was thin on the ground here."

"In Ireland, we constantly diversified and moved into different areas such as civil works. For example, we recently moved into the road-building area and we were part of the consortium responsible for the M8 from Cashel to Mitchelstown – and we are currently involved in the construction of the Shannon Tunnel."

"Over the decades, we have demonstrated the ability to change in order to win work; we have a great reputation for the delivery of good-quality work, on time and on budget, and that reputation is now standing to us in the tougher times."

This ability to adapt is particularly important in the current environment, where tender prices have dropped by more than 20 per cent over the past 18 months. "Even in the good times, we were only earning profits of around 3 per cent of turnover so we have to become even more efficient," Nagle says.

"We are looking at everything we do to improve our overall competitiveness. In addition, we aim to win a decent share of the business that's out there; we will make sure that clients know about Sisk, our longevity, reliability and financial strength; and we will probably look at travelling again and looking for work abroad."

This commitment to winning clients and holding on to them lies at the core of Sisk's ethos. Years ago, and long before mission statements had become popular John G formulated his business principles in simple and direct language: "We are vitally interested in giving the best possible service to all our employers. This we do by delivering satisfactory work on time. Anyone who seeks to work or do business with us is entitled to just, courteous treatment."

Sisk's enterprising spirit means it will pursue all opportunities – to other countries if necessary, embrace new construction techniques and expand into new areas and sectors.

The natural extension of this "can do" approach has been George's understanding since he took over as chairman of Sisk that the company had moved from "building buildings to building a business". ■

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