

Where There's a Will ...

Since assuming the role of chairman and CEO of Willis Australasia, Roger Wilkinson has resolutely and radically transformed the insurance giant.

Images by Captured Vision Photography

As a leading global insurance broker, Willis Group Holdings has more than 400 offices in nearly 120 countries, with a team of approximately 17,000 employees serving clients internationally. Through these multiple arms and offices, Willis delivers professional insurance, reinsurance, risk management, financial and human resource consulting, and actuarial services to corporations, public entities, and institutions across the globe.

Chairman and CEO of Willis Australasia Roger Wilkinson joined Willis in 2005 after 31 years with Marsh, where he held several senior management roles in

Asia-Pacific. After joining Willis, Roger led the broker's Asia operations for five years before being appointed CEO of the Asia-Pacific unit. In 2011, Willis Asia was named Broker of the Year at the Asia Insurance Industry Awards in recognition of Roger and his team's dedication and achievements.

In addition to his responsibilities in Asia-Pacific, Roger held the Hong Kong-based position of chairman and CEO of Willis Asia-Pacific, the Middle East, and Africa. This diverse, substantial role was recently split in three, coinciding with Roger's appointment to the role of chairman and CEO of Willis Australasia.



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To start work, Roger relocated from Hong Kong to Sydney in October 2012. This was the end of an era, as he had worked and lived in Asia for over a decade. Originally from New Zealand, Roger has worked in Singapore, Indonesia, and mainland China, to name a few. Utilising this international expertise and scope, he set out to revolutionise Willis's Australasian business.

In his first week of work, Roger stated that Willis Australasia was underweight in comparison with other countries and markets, and that he planned to adopt inorganic growth strategies to supplement organic growth. Additionally, he said he would concentrate on building Willis's bench strength at the top end of the market and in specialisations.

Roger spoke to *insuranceNEWS.com.au* about the shift and admitted that Willis had decided that "this job needed the focus of a senior insurance person ... I've been around a long time, and anyone who knows me will tell you I am a builder, not a slasher."

Willis International's CEO Tim Wright had the same idea and instructed Roger to concentrate on building the business in Australia and New Zealand. In a press release announcing Roger's >



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appointment, Tim stated, “Roger has been instrumental in tripling the size of our Asia business over the past seven years. His appointment to Willis Australasia underscores the importance of the region to our business.”

Although Roger worked in Asia-Pacific, the Middle East, and Africa regions in his previous role, he states that he worked with the local business long before he arrived in Sydney. He played a vital role in convincing key managers to stay at Willis during a period of considerable movement between international brokers.

In addition to retaining key staff and utilising inorganic growth strategies, Roger will also work to nurture relationships with Willis’s London headquarters and its various offices around the world. “No more ‘Fortress Australia,’” he says. “When we need expertise and assistance, we’ll ask for it.”

This collaborative approach will spread throughout the Australasian region and ensure that Willis staff will concentrate on understanding their clients’ needs and providing them with the best insurance opportunities available. “We’re not going to spend time at the bottom end of the market,” Roger says.

Since October 2012, Roger has worked with Willis staff across Australasia to develop the business and adopt his tried-and-tested successful growth strategies. *The CEO Magazine* recently sat down with him to discuss working across Asia, engaging staff, and the future of Willis Australasia.

***The CEO Magazine:* What lessons did you learn from your time as chairman and CEO of Willis Asia-Pacific, the Middle East, and Africa?**

Roger: Dealing with different cultures was a big part of the excitement around the role—particularly the Asian portion because that’s where I was before the Middle East and Africa. Our businesses are at different stages of development right across Asia, as is

the insurance industry, so that made life very interesting.

One of the most important facts is that you can never completely understand a foreign culture that you might be visiting or living in, but you’ve got to try. You have to treat it as a privilege to live there or have a business there, as it is their country and you’re a visitor, so you should never take it for granted. You need to commit—especially in developing countries like China—to giving something back, and that’s usually around training, development, and education. I think that’s vital. When

I was in Indonesia, we actually took on an orphanage and gave back that way.

Never be arrogant, and learn to listen. People in Asian countries often won’t tell you directly because it would appear to be rude or insubordinate in their culture, so you have to listen very carefully.

You also have to mix with the local people. I do not like ex-pats who only mix with ex-pats. It’s amazing what you can learn over a lunch. In most Asian cultures, lunch is a big thing. >





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speaking to have English as a second language. I've learned to be more patient, which is not one of my virtues, and I've learned to be more consultative, with an open door for staff. I want to be open, honest, and transparent about where the business is, what it needs to do, and where it's going.

What are the differences in management approaches between Asia and Australia?

There are a lot of differences. For example, in the 'town hall' meetings I do here, I get a lot of questions, whereas in the town halls I did in Asia, I often didn't get any questions. That's not because they have nothing to say or they're not interested; it's because of the culture of not asking in front of other people. They'll come and ask you questions separately.

Here, funnily enough, I have to deal with people who are slightly older. In Asia, you're dealing with many young people, as they hold a lot of senior positions there. Additionally, Asian people are probably more accepting of new ideas and change. For example, we're a global organisation with global specialists. In Asia, those specialists are accepted very well. Here, they are also accepted, but we've had to drive a bit of that. We have had a bit of what I would perhaps describe as 'Fortress Australia'.

In Australia, we are a multicultural nation, but we are a more mature business environment so we've got a lot of people my age or in their 50s who find it more difficult to accept change. We've driven a lot of change through the organisation here during the past year, and sometimes it has been a challenge. Some people haven't liked the new structures or the changes we've made.

CEO of Willis International Tim Wright credited the growth of Willis's Asia business to you. Will you utilise the same strategies across the Australasian business?

Most definitely, I will. I was successful there because I was able

to hire good people. Ours is a people business and I'm people focused; it's a real cliché in our industry that we're a people industry, but we are. It's about giving them direction and putting the right people in the right jobs and making sure they understand the rules of engagement, and then letting them get on with it.

I hired a lot of good people when I was in Willis Asia, and that's really the key to success.

You need a good team that can take initiative, don't you?

Yes. An example of that was that a lot of people followed me from Marsh to Willis. That was very gratifying, and Willis benefited substantially.

You oversee more than 400 associates in nine offices across Australasia. How do you lead such a large and widespread workforce?

I have always been a firm believer in structure, and there is a robust management structure in place within Willis locally. This allows me to manage the workforce in both Australia and New Zealand, supported by my deputy CEO Tony Barber. Some divisions report to Tony, who in turn reports to me. Other divisions report to me directly.

It's important to have the right leadership team around you. We have a strong leadership team driving our state divisions and specialist practices. I have monthly review meetings with the major businesses, enabling me to keep a good handle on what is happening.

How do you engage and inspire your staff?

Each quarter, I present a town hall meeting in all of our major offices, during which I share our company results with the whole team. I believe everyone in the business needs to know exactly how we are tracking, not just financially, but also with respect to compliance and other key success factors. >

Managing diversity is important. We have a lot of diversity in terms of race and style. When I ran a business in Singapore, we had people from Singapore, China, Malaysia, India, Japan, England, Ireland, Australia, the United States, New Zealand, and many more—all in the same office of 120 people—so it was quite a challenging office to manage.

The main thing is to be yourself. I've never stopped being myself wherever I've been, and I think that's the most important advice I can offer anyone.

How have your international experiences shaped your management style?

I've learned to be a better listener, sometimes out of necessity, because the people you're often

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- Roger Wilkinson

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I lead by example. I am involved with clients and I attend new business pitches. It's important for staff to see that I am working hard to drive the organisation, as they are. To share news more regularly, I also write a fortnightly blog which celebrates our new business wins and highlights the success achieved by our associates.

What do you think are the vital characteristics of a leader in today's business world?

Important characteristics are honesty, transparency, to be available and visible, and to be front leading. With me, what you see is what you get, and that attitude has stood me in good stead throughout my career.

What do you believe sets Willis apart from its competitors?

In Australia, we are a lot smaller than some of our competitors, so we really have to focus on particular areas of expertise where

we have good local people with expertise and global Willis experts who can back us up. Examples of that are mining, power, and construction; we are very successful in all those industries.

What role will your business partners continue to play in your future success?

Our business partners are essentially the insurance market. They are key for us because without our clients and without them, we don't have a business. We need to engage with them and share our plans and aspirations. We need to treat them with respect and treat them professionally, not hit them over the head to get deals done.

We meet with our key strategic markets quarterly. We discuss together what's working, what needs improvement, and what are the next steps to build a better relationship and market position for both of us.

How do you work with suppliers and strategic partners to ensure consistent communication?

I am closely involved with our team that undertakes quarterly reviews with each of our key business partners and their teams. I also undertake regular one-on-one CEO meetings with the leaders of our major suppliers and partners. This combined approach helps to create trusting partnerships with clear, open channels of communication.

In the short time you've been in charge of Australasia, what do you think have been some of your greatest achievements?

Before I arrived, there were two or three senior people who had resigned or were about to, and I managed to convince them to stay. We've attracted some very good talent who used to work for Willis. One good example is Tony Barber, who's now deputy CEO. I've also attracted some talent in specific areas from our competitors, so I'm very happy about that.

While not an achievement of mine, it was great to go to New Zealand and see our team there pick up the Large Broker of the Year Award. We have also moved into some very nice, new premises in

"In our market, we respect Willis's commitment to their clients. We have a broad relationship with Willis, particularly in our specialty product lines. Chubb seeks to differentiate with a claims service that exceeds expectations, which we believe Willis particularly values." - Mark Lingafelter, Managing Director, Chubb Insurance Company of Australia

"I want Willis Australasia to be the partner of choice for the industry sectors in which we specialise, with a reputation that assists us to acquire new business while retaining our valued current clients."

- Roger Wilkinson



Melbourne, shifting from what I thought were terrible premises because we were spread over three floors and we had too many offices. Now we have around 150 people on one floor, primarily open plan, and this has been a very exciting change.

I also think we are going in the right direction and we're acting as a team. I think people are feeling like they have more purpose. Maybe I'm sitting in an ivory tower and I've got it wrong, but I hope not. Activity levels are very high right across the business and across Australasia.

You've got to have a sense of purpose. That's one of seven key points promoted by our new global chief executive. There's no point coming to work if you hate it.

With the responsibilities of both chairman and CEO, what do you do to unwind and relax?

I'm a regular gym-goer, and because I'm a Kiwi, I'm very passionate about rugby. I'm very fortunate to live in a great sporting nation like Australia. I'm trying to do everything traditionally Australian to immerse myself in the culture.

I also firmly believe that you must take your leave. It's something that

I'm preaching here. It's important for people to get out of the office and engage in some rest and relaxation. My wife, Carol, and I are certainly going to take that opportunity, to go to the Kimberley this year; and we have a place in France, so we go there every year as well. It's not all work; you've got to have some play.

As a leader, what is your vision for Willis Australasia?

We are working to increase our brand profile throughout the region, leading to the sustainable growth of our business. I want Willis Australasia to be the partner of choice for the industry sectors in which we specialise, with a reputation that assists us to acquire new business while retaining our valued current clients.

With that in mind, it's important to recognise that being a leading insurance broker relies on having the right staff; so although it is a cliché, it would be fantastic to be the employer of choice in the Australasian broking industry.

Finally, I am proud of the philanthropic culture being developed internally by our Willis Legacy team, and I will ensure this continues, as it's important for us to support the communities in which we operate. •

