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TAKING Sarens GLOBAL

In 2008, most companies were still reeling from the GFC. But Sarens decided to expand its business globally, with great results.

Images by Michael Smits

Started in the 1930s in Belgium with one man and a horse cart moving trees, Sarens is now a worldwide heavy lifting and engineered transport company. The company was started by CEO Wim Sarens' great-grandfather.

"The company slowly started somewhere in between the two World Wars when it was half between a farm woodcutting and transport company, and ultimately it was only after World War Two that the proper structures were put in place as a separate legal entity," Wim says.

While Wim now continues his family's legacy, he did not start his

career with Sarens, but with another global company. "I graduated engineering in 2002 from the Catholic University of Leuven; however, not to go into engineering but into management consulting. I then got recruited by McKinsey." Wim learned a lot from McKinsey, which he says formed his leadership style at Sarens. "So a great part of my career, training, and coaching has taken place inside that company."

"I would say they have quite a strong leadership approach and corporate culture and I carry a lot of that with me inside Sarens now as well. I have used McKinsey as a good training ground and an opportunity to see the world."

While Sarens is traditionally a family business, the company recruits solely on merit. "Nowadays we are, I would say, as a company, at a good level. We have 4,200 people worldwide. Within the company I think nine or 10 people are from the Sarens family.

"And 78 per cent of the shares are still with the family. The advantage for me is that I have a stable long-term shareholder and at the same time that we are able to source our talent with external managers worldwide."

One thing Wim is particularly focused on is taking a worldwide view for the Sarens Group, and looking at international >

"Right now we are much more diversified, with a lot more people recruited from different regions."

- Wim Sarens



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opportunities for the business and recruitment. "When I joined Sarens I came into an organisation that was mainly focused on Europe and with a predominantly Belgian team. Right now we are much more diversified, with a lot more people recruited from different regions."

"I think that aspect of trying to find talent worldwide and pushing people to think and take the next step in a company; that is something that has been hammered into me in my McKinsey time, and I take that with me at Sarens as well."

At the beginning of 2008, Wim left McKinsey and joined Sarens as a business development director. One of the biggest challenges for Sarens and Wim at that time was the global financial crisis, which hit the company hard. "I had been business development director I think for a year, a year and a half. At that point we were really at a crossroads.

"The worldwide crisis came in and so the question was do we scale down and fall back on Europe, or do we see the opportunities of the crisis and move beyond Europe and try to get sufficient business volume from other regions. At that point in time I really wanted to go for the second option and see the crisis as an opportunity to grow."

Sarens used the GFC as an opportunity to grow, and focused on expansion. "I was mainly focused on growth strategy and taking a company towards areas where at that time we were not that active yet.

"That was mainly the BRIC countries, Northern Africa, and countries like Nigeria and Iraq. We diversified from a predominantly European based organisation to a true global player, not only in terms of the

"We only started in North America in 2009. We have been able to source people locally and quickly established ourselves as a credible player in the North American market."

- Wim Sarens

"A trustful and long-standing commercial relationship exists between Sarens and Faymonville. Strong partners for heavy projects! Sarens is an international leader in the transport business and we are sharing the same key elements to grow and succeed in the sector." - Filip Verhoeven, Sales, Faymonville



market that we serve but also in terms of the employees that we recruit.

Wim stresses that although the company was built in Belgium, it is a global company, with Europe as only one part of their organisation. "Belgium is our home base but the Belgian company unit has been organised just like any other country unit through a country manager who reports to the regional director."

After becoming CEO in 2009, Wim looked to North America for expansion. "The company is now achieving a level where we can confidently say that we are truly a professional global company. We only started in North America in 2009. We have been able to source people locally and quickly established ourselves as a credible player in the North American market.

"It gives me the confidence that as a group you are able to enter a country, recruit the best team, and build your market share by earning the trust from your clients."

Sarens has been able to achieve this globalisation of the business so quickly because of worldwide processes, making the expansion smoother. "I think that we have achieved a certain level of maturity and stability in the organisation. Before, it was less process-driven, and we have taken the approach towards implementing QEHS processes and standards thoroughly in all business units.

"That gives our people the advantage to move around the world more easily because there are recognised similar processes. Although it is still a growth process for us and not everything is running perfectly, there has been quite an achievement. >



To me, it is really important to make sure the organisation can tick along without me or any other key figures needing to be there to make decisions.”

One thing Sarens really values is collaborating with equipment manufacturers to better service the needs of their customers. “We have quite an extensive view on how our customers look at pieces of equipment and how we look at it ourselves. So we have quite a lot of knowledge about where we believe future equipment may have to change versus what we currently have. Based on that, we have discussions with some of the manufacturers, and some of them are more open towards adjusting their products than others. With those who are, I would say we have quite good joint product development where Sarens is more interested in qualifying the specs and what we expect the equipment to deliver on.”

In the future, Wim sees Sarens going from strength to strength. “Strategically, geographically, we just need to grow to a larger size in more countries such as Canada, the US, and India. We’re seeing some technological evolution; there is always a push towards cleaner technologies. On the other hand, we are also planning ahead and looking at other opportunities outside of our core business of making and shifting equipment around.”

Looking back on the past five years, Wim says he is happy to have played such a key role in taking Sarens global. “To me, to the biggest reason for our success is that we spread out to more than 60 countries worldwide in so many different time zones, cultures, and languages. I am conscious that the decentralised module that we have implemented can only function with a great team of people, and that is part of the success factor of Sarens.” ◦



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