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Cathal Hughes (left) and Harry Hughes (right)



# A Workwear TRADITION

For more than 100 years, Irish company Portwest has been experiencing steady growth to become a well-known brand in the European and international protective clothing, safety footwear, and work glove market.

Images courtesy of Portwest

“One of the great advantages that we have as brothers running an expanding company together is that we are constantly in communication with each other. We are over all of the issues that are arising in the company.”

- Cathal Hughes

In 1904, Charles Hughes established a small retail business in Westport, Ireland, that designed, manufactured, and distributed high-quality workwear throughout the country. More than a century later, the company is still in the same family’s hands, run by third-generation brothers Cathal (Chairman), Harry (Managing Director), and Owen (Managing Director, Charles Hughes Ltd) Hughes. The Portwest name is an anagram of the town name. Distributing protective clothing, safety footwear, specialist accessories, and personal protective equipment globally from its five bases in Ireland, Poland, Dubai, the UK, and the US, Portwest serves retailers and distributors in more than 84 countries and sells to 3,000 safety distributors. It has manufacturing facilities in Bangladesh and China.

Last year marked the 110th anniversary of the business and

was an opportune moment to reflect on the past successes while also talking about future visions. *The CEO Magazine* spoke to Cathal and Harry about their long tenures with Portwest and what it means to be an integral part of a family company with so much history.

Cathal, a trained accountant, says he remembers back to the mid 1970s when Portwest was an extremely small operation. “It was a family business and so from the day we arrived we were involved in running it,” Cathal recalls. “Harry has a degree in clothing technology so our expertise complemented each other. Ever since, we have worked together like a hand in a glove.

“Both of us have very different skills and to expand a company you need people with skills in different areas. One of the great advantages that we have as brothers running an expanding company together is that we are

constantly in communication with each other. We are over all of the issues that are arising in the company. Our coffee breaks are board meetings where we discuss details that may have arisen in the morning. When one of us is away on holiday or on a sales trip or on an overseas excursion doing something else, then the other person steps into the role. This is so we can make sure that all queries are answered in a timely fashion.”

Harry says that in those early days Portwest had only two small factories with 50 sewing machines in each. Over time, it has successfully grown and expanded into other countries and markets. “We opened up a facility in the UK, which is obviously a much larger market than Ireland and that has certainly helped us to grow our business,” Harry notes. “In 2011, we opened up a factory in Bangladesh and today we have 1,540 workers in that factory. We >



are now looking for another factory either in Bangladesh or Myanmar. So that is the process of our growth. Also, because of globalisation, we started sourcing some products out of China and that enabled us to get into areas that we weren't involved in previously such as in footwear and work gloves. So we are dealing with 47 different factories in China at the moment."

Today, Portwest sells its products to businesses in every single country across Europe and also has sales teams in Dubai and Africa. According to the Hughes brothers, its success is largely thanks to it having a competitive price range, a large holding of stock, and a fast distribution channel that enables it to deliver products quickly to anywhere in the world.

A high level of customer service is also of utmost importance. "Our staff are responsible for making sure that the quality is first class and that everything is shipped on time," Harry says. "We must strive to give our customers a better service all the time. It is company policy that emails must be answered within 15 minutes. It is all about urgency and a first-class service. Customers must get a first-class service and this is emphasised at every meeting and it is a part of our training programs."

"We also visit our key suppliers several times a year. Our fully staffed office in Fuzhou, China, ensures that the factories are making the product on time and that the quality is right. We make sure we are encouraging them and letting them know that we are 100 per cent behind them in terms of the business that we are going to give them."

Most of Portwest's employees are graduates or people who are already equipped with the necessary technological experience required for particular roles. Regular training and development is conducted in-house as well as offsite with staff often sent away on various courses. "It is a continuous process so that they really



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become confident in the jobs that we have asked them to do," Harry states.

Portwest considers its Bangladesh factory as one of its greatest achievements. Its operations there, and in all of its facilities, meet stringent international criteria and are certified by the Worldwide Responsible Accredited Production (WRAP) standards.

"We built the Bangladesh factory from the ground up," Harry explains. "Bearing in mind that it is a country that is so far away from us here in Europe, and then being able to fill it with skilled people, put in a management team and get production out of it—very good production in a timely manner—that probably was the single greatest achievement that we can actually put our finger on over the past 20 years."

In the past five years, Portwest has doubled its turnover to reach €100 million. Cathal says that the strategies it has taken to achieve this include having more sales people on the ground, a greater product offering, and warehouses in some of the countries it operates in.

The company's vision for the future is to continue to double its revenue every few years as well as expand its operations in the US. "There is a plan in place to get there, and our strategy is to introduce more products and more countries," Harry says. "There are many key parts to growing our business but the key strategy is that we always feel that our product is better because we are making the products ourselves and we always have the lowest prices for our clients. Our customers want the latest product that uses the latest technology."

"We have a global team of 2,030 people in Portwest involved with the design, manufacture and distribution of safety products. We always make sure that we have the best products and then by making them ourselves, this ensures that we have the keenest prices. On top of that, there are five warehouses in different parts of the world so our clients will always get the best service. This is supported with a 400-page catalogue in 26 different languages. These things are definitely not going to change anytime soon and will help Portwest to continue its success and help our customers to prosper." •

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