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Family Ties

Whites Group is connecting with its people and local Australian communities as it delivers innovative solutions to the rural, hardware, and industrial sectors.

Images by Scott Ehler

As a proudly Australian-owned family company, Whites Group has been growing steadily by way of dedication to its people, its customers, and its innovative products. Through its brands, Whites Outdoor, Whites Wires, and Whites On-Site, the group offers a growing range of fencing, gardening, and site-management products across Australia.

Peter Kelly, Managing Director of Whites Group, spoke to *The CEO Magazine* about the growth of this longstanding family business and its exciting strategies for the future.

The CEO Magazine: Can you give our readers a brief overview of your career?

Peter: I studied accounting at university and then completed a banking graduate program, which gave me great exposure to diverse functions. I then progressed into corporate and commercial areas and found I wanted to take on a challenge and be involved in building a business.

I joined Whites Group, which was founded by my father, and I've

spent 20 years here. Over that period, I've honed my skills in sales, marketing, and operations. In fact, when it was a much smaller company, I would be called upon to be sales manager, marketing manager, operations manager, or HR manager at any one time.

Since becoming MD, what challenges have you encountered, and how did you and your team respond?

With more than 150 employees in seven sites across Australia and an office in China, I have had to delegate authority. I've had to build a strong team around me that I can trust and guide in the right direction.

Nowadays, with my brother Michael stepping into the role of general manager and taking on the running of the business, I am able to focus on the long-term vision and our key relationships. The challenge for me has been to adjust my management style without losing touch with what's going on. I am a step removed from the day-to-day, so we've had to clearly define our roles to optimise our working relationship.

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When I started with Whites, I began in sales and marketing, so I've always had that drive for growth. I love seeing the growth and the benefits it brings. The challenge in getting to where we are today has been continuing to find opportunities to grow while staying on strategy. It's easy to lose focus and chase things that aren't best for us. Another challenge that many growing businesses like us face is how quickly to grow our staff numbers, determining what areas we need to ramp up, and how to keep our culture intact. We want to have a culture that everyone enjoys working in and is engaged in, and that's been a major focus for us.

One of the key initiatives has been developing our company values, really embracing them, and we now utilise them in hiring programs to make sure we get a good fit, right from the start.

Our values were developed through an exercise where we looked at the key contributors in the company over the years and their main attributes. We were then able to distil those attributes into the attitudes and aptitudes that were vital in making our business effective. >



We found five attributes that we use daily across our business: always improving, always growing; being courageous; helping each other out; being passionate about what we do; and getting in and doing it.

How has the family background of the Whites business helped, and how do you plan for succession?

There's an advantage in being a family business. As an MD, I can

be extremely engaged and focused on the business. If I was an MD of a corporate business, I'd have more demands on my time with investor relations and other responsibilities. With Whites, I get a better chance to have a stronger engagement in the business and with our key partners. That's critical, as it also allows us to be streamlined and to move quickly, especially in the area of innovation.

I have two brothers in the business, and that brings an element of extra trust as well. The biggest thing that a private family company has going for it is that you get a long-term outlook on business that is a very different model to other companies. Our business is structured to be successful over the next 10 years, so we're not afraid to invest and take on partnerships with long-term aims.

In terms of succession planning, we need to be planning for family

as well as management. We recently completed an exercise with KPMG to identify issues in succession. One of the key outcomes of that is that we've drawn up a charter for the family which includes an agreement that excellence in management will continue to be favoured. Any future member of the family joining Whites management will need a tertiary education plus a minimum three years commercial experience.

How do you engage with the local community and especially the rural community?

We pride ourselves on being part of the communities that we operate in. As a company, we fund a specialist physiotherapist in the Cystic Fibrosis Unit at The Children's Hospital at Westmead. We also provide a matching scheme for our staff where, if they raise funds for a particular charity they are interested in, we will match their donations.

We take a partnership approach to business, and this extends into the concept that what our partners care about, we also care about. For instance, if one of our partners were running a community project, we would get involved. Similarly, if there was a disaster in a rural area, whether it's bushfires or floods, then we would look to provide assistance and help that cause as well. It's about getting engaged and interested in your partners and the communities you operate in.

How does Whites work with its international suppliers?

We have similar views when dealing internationally. We usually find that our international suppliers have a long-term outlook, especially when the owner or operator has a stake in the business. So it's about having that connection with them and their business. It's a case of understanding them and them understanding us. We want that right fit.

Most of our suppliers are privately owned businesses with an owner actively engaged, and over time we've built a lot of strong partnerships. It's about nurturing that connection, even to the extent that I speak a bit of Mandarin. In China, our Nanjing office is integral to the smooth running of the day-to-day business, and we supplement this with our Australian management travelling frequently to maintain high-level relationships and drive continuous improvement.

What about local suppliers, especially SYSPRO and Frauenfelder Gates?

We're an organisation that is very careful in how we employ our own staff, and that extends to our partners as well. In terms of SYSPRO, our partnership has been great for both of us because as well as being a provider, they also give us a lot of new ideas to enhance our business. They're very nimble, and they've been happy to identify our issues and help solve them. We like to move quickly. For

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example, the integration of the Frauenfelder business with our own was done within just two months, which is quite incredible.

The Frauenfelder business is one that really shares our values. In April this year, we entered a joint venture with this Albury-based manufacturer to supply high-quality rural fencing. It's a win-win situation working with a trusted supplier. We provide a national sales and distribution footprint, and they provide a high-quality manufacturing base. The partnership gives us the capacity to deliver solutions and innovations into rural areas that we could not offer before. For instance, a big issue in rural Australia is a rise in wild dog numbers, which hasn't adequately been addressed with appropriate fencing.

What does the future hold for Whites Group?

The future is looking very strong. We will continue to grow in our markets with a lot of innovation in our practices, in how we operate, and in our ranges. We aim to develop and lead markets with innovation.

Our company is a values-based organisation. If you have the culture right with people who are growing and engaged, then it means that you're operating to maximum potential and it gives an organisation wings. We're enjoying being in business, and still have a lot of opportunity to bring innovation to Australia. We have recently started trading in New Zealand, and with many world-leading ranges we also have further international ambitions. ●

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