MIRA BURGBACHER

Family Ties

There are two ways to hand over a family business: either keep it in the family, or put it in the hands of an external manager. Creighton Hutchinson from Hutchinson Engineering in Kilrea, Northern Ireland, decided to do both. He told us how that worked, and how important a close working relationship is between him and his sons.

When Creighton Hutchinson drives down the streets of Kilrea, the locals give him a friendly wave. The company founder is clearly something of a celebrity in this town. Leaving Kilrea to produce goods closer to the industrial heartland of Northern Ireland was never an option, because Hutchinson believes in sticking to his roots and listening to local people. That has made him a valued member of the community, especially since it is entrepreneurs like him who have boosted Northern Ireland's economy and emboldened it to step out of Great Britain's shadow.

Creighton founded Hutchinson Engineering in 1971 as a one-man business producing parts for farm machinery. His company flourished, and he was soon employing 10 people. But as the years went by, his core market began to shrink. In 1996, his eldest son Mark joined the family firm and the decision was made to set out in a new direction. Today, Hutchinson Engineering employs 100 people making products for customers from a variety of sectors ranging from bus manufacturers to the aviation industry.

"It's not a good idea to just keep following the same well-trodden path." Creighton Hutchinson, funder of Hutchinson Engineering (Picture: Frederik Dulay-Winkler)

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company invested in a TruLaser As the business grew, it became clear that it would need to increase its production capacity. In 2015, the company invested in a TruLaser Tube 7000 laser tube cutting machine and a TruLaser 5030 fiber automated laser cutting machine and expanded its production floor space. In 2001 company founder Creighton stepped back from the day-to-day running of the business. We talked to the key figures in the handover process to discover how things had gone.

Creighton Hutchinson, 70 :

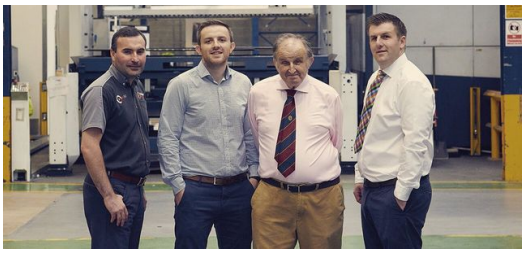
When I founded my company 46 years ago, I never imagined that we would end up employing a hundred people. But the company did well and simply got bigger and bigger. That's partly down to the fact that my sons and I made good decisions at critical moments – for example when we saw a drop in orders for agricultural machinery, and when the time came to restructure our management board. It was clear that we needed an objective viewpoint when it came to making strategic decisions, so I decided to bring in people from outside, in other words some non-family members. It's not a good idea to just keep following the same well-trodden path. And it's important not to underestimate the value of an outside perspective, because it can breathe new life into any business, including ours.

He may have retired some time ago, but Creighton Hutchinson still enjoys dropping by the company on a daily basis. (Picture: Frederik Dulay-Winkler)

Mark Hutchinson, 39, Managing Director:

I grew up with the company. It was part of our family life, and I always knew that I wanted to get involved at some point. Like father like son, they say, and I always looked up to my dad and wanted him to be proud of me, just like I'm proud of him. We worked very closely together and I learned an awful lot from him. At the same time, I gradually had to cut the cord, as it were, in order to forge my own path in the business. I had to make my own decisions and push ahead with the expansion of our product range. We also teamed up with a new partner, TRUMPF, and I've certainly been impressed by their highly advanced machines. Our first TRUMPF machine was a CO2 laser machine with automation, which enabled us to achieve even higher levels of productivity. We were especially taken by the fact that TRUMPF is a family business like us, so we share the same values.

We see our employees as forming part of a big, extended family. We offer regular health checks, annual team-building events, a big Christmas party, and little rituals that have built up over time like our Pancake Tuesday celebrations. The people who work here appreciate all that, and many of them have been with us for years or even decades. One of them has been working here for 40 years! I always remember our dad saying that you should treat people the way you would want them to treat you, and that's the basis on which my brother and I still run the company today.



f.r.t.l.: Mark, Creighton and Richard Hutchinson, Jason McCullagh from Hutchinson Engineering (Picture: Frederik Dulay-Winkler)

Richard Hutchinson, 35, IT and Marketing Director:

I joined the company in 2007. To tell you the truth, Mark pulled a bit of a clever trick, because I was only meant to be helping out for six months during a really busy period, and that was 10 years ago! So it wasn't really what I had planned. I studied business administration in Belfast, and at that point I would never have imagined joining the family business. It's not always easy when your dad is also your boss, and your brother your colleague, but I'm really pleased that I stayed. In a big company I might have been just another cog in the wheel, but here I've had so many opportunities to develop myself. I've also had the clout to get things done, such as introducing IT systems for our in-house processes and incorporating the TRUMPF TruTops Boost solution to modernize our machine programming. We also installed TruTops Monitor which enables us to monitor our production processes with tremendous precision. That's an area that really interests me.

Sadly our dad has been suffering from Parkinson's disease for the last few years, but he has still kept his enthusiasm for hard work. When he was no longer able to work here, he looked for a new project, and now he's renovating our family's old cottage on the company premises.

Pancake Tuesday: The Hutchinson brothers treat their employees like members of the family. (Picture: Frederik Dulay-Winkler)

Jason McCullagh, 41, Director of Manufacturing:

I may not be a Hutchinson, but I have very close ties to the business nevertheless. I joined the company as Director of Manufac-turing two years ago and I'm one of only two directors who are not part of the family. That was actually one of the reasons why Mark and Richard took me on. They wanted me to bring a new perspective into the family business. It didn't take long for me to feel like part of the family, because the Hutchinson brothers are tremendously welcoming. In fact, I think that's what distinguishes us from other companies. We make a big effort to create a great working environment, and in return we get deeper commitment from our employees.

Obviously it was challenging for me to join such a close-knit family environment. Mark and Richard already have such a positive, close relationship. But it quickly became clear that our collaboration would pan out, and now Mark and Richard really value my opinions and experience. We're really the perfect team. Mark tends to make gut decisions on a very intuitive basis, whereas I'm far more analytical. That creates a good balance, and we all respect the expertise each person brings to the table. My specialty is production, Richard's is IT, and Mark has the management skills.

Hutchinson Engineering employs 100 people making products for customers from a variety of sectors ranging from bus manufacturers to the aviation industry. (Picture: Frederik Dulay-Winkler)

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