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Beyond A PIPEDREAM

Interflow is a pioneer company in the repair, restoration, and renewal services of underground non-pressure pipelines and pressure mains. With almost 80 years in the industry, this family business is a leader in trenchless technology.

Images by Scott Ehler

Growing up in the family business, Geoff Weaver, Managing Director of Interflow, had spent many school holidays at the company's workshop familiarising himself with the organisation and equipment. He moved through different roles within the business while taking night courses in civil engineering, until 1990 when Geoff took up his current role.

"When I took over and started in the role," Geoff explains, "I had a reasonable knowledge of contracts and a broad understanding of business, but my first challenge was to get up the curve and understand the broader aspect of running a business. Fortunately, I had my father who mentored me through this and provided that guiding hand. If I did make a mistake, it was always a learning experience and nothing too disastrous. Early in that period, we

made some strategic changes to the business, which meant a structured move away from the traditional pipe construction—that is, digging trenches and laying pipes. One of my drivers was that the traditional work was quite tough with low margins and having to really fight for every job, so I was always looking for other ways we might do business smarter.

"Not long after taking over, I got interested in trenchless technology as an alternative means of renewing pipes. This was a big change for the organisation because it meant we were no longer just looking at the traditional dig-and-replace approach. It didn't happen overnight, and it meant that we had to invest in new technologies that weren't readily available in Australia. Trenchless technology, when we started, was a relatively new thing. Having to embrace this new strategic direction,

introduce new technology, and then win work was a very interesting challenge for the company."

Introducing trenchless technology posed some challenges as the local industry had to adapt after years of using the same methods. "This was at a time when the average client knew about replacing pipes through dig-and-replace methods, and most of the specifications were written that way. We were presenting an alternative technology that didn't readily fit their specifications, and the client really didn't have an appreciation for what we were talking about, so we had to go through an education process with our clients to demonstrate the benefits and build our work platform from a standing start.

"We kept the open-trenching part of the business going at all times; in the early days, the trenchless technology was just a small >



component of our business and, if we didn't have work, we fell back to our traditional methodologies. Over time, however, that has evolved and today we really see ourselves as specialists in trenchless renewal of pipelines.

"Close to 15 years ago, we made the decision to grow the business and started by putting into place a five-year plan, which was not something that came naturally to us, but we decided to try to take a look at the future and start planning our growth.

"We said we would grow the business at 20 per cent per annum and maintain our profitability. That was easy to say, but to think you can double the size of the company in five years was quite daunting at first. Overall, we've achieved our objectives, but the challenge wasn't saying that we're going to grow; it was finding, training, and retaining the right people throughout that process. Going with that, as you grow rapidly, maintaining our culture and core values was a big challenge."

Stepping into the family business, Geoff has helped shape the company's core values and promote them in numerous ways. "They are fairly simple: honesty, reliability, and competence. We promote those to our people through our newsletter; we promote them in our everyday discussions; we remind people of them every year at our Christmas functions; and at every opportunity we try to explain to people what we mean by them. Often, people have different perceptions in regard to these core values, but to overcome different interpretations we simply tell people that we strive to act and communicate in a way that's sincere, truthful, and straightforward.

"We don't compromise on the way we do things, whether it's the quality of the work or the way we do something safely. If it's not right, we fix it. If we make a mistake, we don't hide it; we just correct it, learn from it, and move forward. We strive to be dependable, and we do what we

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say we will do. In terms of competence, we strive to be the best at what we do, and we're continually looking to improve; we take an analytical view of what we do and are always looking for better ways to do it. We are continuously training our workforce in all aspects of the business, whether it is technical, safety, or leadership. Because of this, we have placed ourselves into what I would class as a world-leading position in our industry."

In order to drive innovation within the business, Interflow remains outwardly focused by always being open to and looking for new ideas. "We encourage innovation within a reasonable framework; we don't just make it carte blanche, but we're interested in people's views, whether it is our staff or our clients. Client input is particularly important. We listen to what they say, what they need, and really our growth has been driven by that relationship with our clients, listening to their needs, and then finding solutions or adding to our offerings by finding some new products and services that are driven by our clients' needs.

"We maintain a good worldwide network with a variety of overseas companies, likeminded individuals doing the same kind of works—not necessarily competitors, but they may be doing the same thing in another country or they may be a supplier. Through these relationships, we are kept up to date on what might be best practice or what's new out there in the world, and we leverage off that. Many times, it doesn't translate directly into the Australian



environment because our standards or our pipe diameters or the like may differ, but at the end of the day, if you've got the knowledge and the capability, you can adapt and modify to suit our conditions.

"Besides the written and verbal communication with these overseas companies, we regularly visit trade shows around the world and, within reasonable limitation, give managers an opportunity to see what's happening, either at the trade shows or by visiting suppliers or companies that we have relationships with."

With regard to working with suppliers, Interflow builds >



relationships that are supported by the company's core values. "We first and foremost consider ourselves to be loyal consumers. We try to work with our key suppliers in partnerships that are fair and open, and with honest communication. We have our standards and expectations, and they can be relatively high, but if you're clear with those expectations then I believe you'll generally get the outcome that you want and everybody will be happy at the end of the day."

Interflow wants its staff to feel valued and empowered regardless of what role they fill within the business. "The first thing in terms of looking after staff is to actually believe that they are our most valuable asset. We try as well as we can to give them clear roles and responsibilities, and we do that

"Australian Hammer Supplies has a long standing relationship with Interflow that spans over 25 years. Interflow are one of our most important partnerships and this is highlighted by our co-developed realigning machine which is now an industry leading product." - Bruce Pennells, Managing Director, Australian Hammer Supplies

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through simple things like position descriptions or delegations of authority. In terms of making sure we retain the people that we want, we're regularly carrying out reviews.

"We have some interesting methods of monitoring people's competence. Given that most of our labour is field based and we can't see them every day, when we train somebody in a task, we'll assess them internally using someone with the appropriate expertise, and then we'll register that on our skills database as they achieve competency. One of the great things about our company and our growth is that it gives the people an opportunity to take on new responsibilities, achieve new

skills, and be able to see that in a structured way through recognition in our skills database."

Geoff sees an exciting future ahead for Interflow. "The world—and Australia is no different—has pipelines or conduits in various stages of their life cycle, and we're really only just touching the surface of pipeline renewal by trenchless technology. This technology has a long way to go and will have many more potential applications. We read and hear about, for example, water pipes bursting around the country, which is just an indication that pipelines of any nature, like any asset, wear out. So they have a life span. And as the community develops and uses the land more extensively, then the opportunity to use conventional methods of excavating are becoming less attractive and achievable, so trenchless technology has a great future in Australia and around the world—and we believe we are a key part of that." ●