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Johan Willemen

Willemen Groep

The Willemen Groep is one of Belgium's biggest and fastest-growing construction companies. Run by a father-and-son team, Willemen managed to triple its annual revenues during one of the toughest periods on record for the construction sector – from 2008 to 2013. Johan Willemen says much of the business success is due to it being family controlled. With Johan's son Tom preparing to take over the reins in the next "two to three years," and with international expansion progressing rapidly, Willemen looks set to prosper as a family business for many years to come.



"So many people who work for us want to work for a family business because, in a way, they become part of the family."

Johan Willemen,
Managing Director,
Willemen Groep

The Museum aan de Stroom, otherwise known as MAS, is an impressive-looking building in the dock area of Antwerp, Belgium's second-largest city. Opened in 2011, MAS has become arguably the country's most-talked-about museum. Designed by a cutting-edge architectural practice based in Rotterdam, the museum was also the work of a family business called Willemen, which constructed the MAS building, and which has also built a big reputation in Belgium and beyond.

Willemen employs more than 2,000 people

Based midway between Brussels and Antwerp, in the charming city of Mechelen, the Willemen Groep is one of Belgium's most successful construction companies. Besides building MAS, Willemen carried out the renovations of the Royal Palace of Laeken – the official residence of the King and Queen of Belgium – and has also constructed the headquarters of many of the country's biggest companies, including those of cable internet provider Telenet and a number of office buildings for the Flemish and Belgian governments. Willemen has displayed its civil engineering prowess with the construction of a series of road and rail tunnels under the cities of Liège and Antwerp, and the firm recently won the contract to build Belgium's embassy in Kinshasa.

Willemen employs more than 2,000 people, who are based at its many sites throughout Belgium and at its subsidiaries across Europe and the rest of the world. The business is run by a father-and-son team, which has proved hugely successful, transforming the business into a €600m multinational construction company. Today, the business encompasses many different companies involved in a whole host of building and engineering projects, including the construction of residential properties, hospitals and government offices, as well as roads and bridges.

Family business was split in 1999

"Yes, things have been good over the last few years, with the business growing rapidly," says Johan Willemen, the head of the company. "Obviously, that growth has come about because of our hard work and our ability to spot opportunities. But it is also because we are a family business, which means that we can take long-term decisions and we do not have to worry about quarterly targets all the time. It gives us flexibility to expand."

He adds: "As a family business, we can look at the bigger picture. And we can act quickly because of the quick decision-making process that you get in a family business of our size."



The famous Museum aan de Stroom (MAS) in Antwerp was constructed by Willemen



The Vlaams Administratief Centrum in Gent was finished in 2013



Belgium's King Baudewijn (right) visited the company in 1981 (Johan's father in the middle)



Johan and his two sons Bram and Tom



The company has managed to triple revenues since 2007

During the past few years, the strength of the business has been reflected in its performance. In 2007, Willemen had revenues of €200m, a figure that the company had managed to triple by 2012. This was despite the fact that these were years in which the construction sector experienced one of its worst downturns.

Now in his early 60s, Johan is the entrepreneurial and guiding spirit behind Willemen. He came into the family construction business in 1972. At that time, the business was run by his father and uncle, and it was called Van Poppel. Johan worked his way up to a senior position within the original business, alongside his uncle's son Paul Van Poppel. Despite their success

in growing the business throughout Belgium, the cousins decided to split the company in 1999, when Johan formed Willemen. "We reached a mutual agreement to split the business and go our separate ways," says Johan. "Although it was an emotional decision to split, there was no bitterness."

Johan's two sons now work in the new company. Bram is head of communications and Tom is head of the road building section. Johan says that Tom is being groomed to takeover from him. "He's completely prepared to step into my shoes within the next two to three years," he says. When that happens, Johan plans to stay on as a non-executive chairman.



Willemen constructed the Vlaams Administratief Centrum in Leuven

As the business has grown, Johan says that there has been an increasing emphasis on the need to professionalize the governance structures and to bring in outsiders to top positions: four independent and non-family executives have been appointed to the board. "I suspect that this emphasis will increase when I move over to the chairmanship role," says Johan.

Transition to the next generation

Clearly, family and business are both very important to the Willemen family. Johan says that business matters usually dominate dinner table conversation among the family. "We talk about Willemen at home all the time. It's a big subject even for the family members not working in the business."

Nevertheless, the family members are yet to draw up a family constitution or create a family council. Johan says that these steps might come later; after all, the business is just making the transition from being a first-generation controlled business – albeit one with family roots behind it – to being a second-generation controlled one.

What is probably more pressing is the fostering of entrepreneurial flair, a quality that is just as important for family businesses as for businesses of any other type. Indeed, Johan is anxious that the same entrepreneurial spirit that he displayed should now be developed within the business.

"You can never forget the importance of entrepreneurship, in any business," he says. "If that entrepreneurship goes, then you'll eventually have no business."

Another central theme of the company's culture is the encouragement of good staff morale. As Johan says, "So many people who work for us want to work for a family business because, in a way, they become part of the family." All staff members are encouraged to join training courses to advance their careers. And this helps the business to maintain its good record of staff retention.

Willemen also places a considerable emphasis on sustainable and environmentally friendly building practices. And Johan says that this is something that will continue to be important in the company's strategic plans.

International opportunities

What about the future? Johan hopes the business will continue to grow domestically and internationally. The company has developed operations in Poland and Romania, but Johan sees even bigger opportunities in Africa. "It's the continent of the future," he says. "But if you only get there as everyone else realizes that fact, then you'll be too late." Willemen recently won the contract for a big construction project in the Ivory Coast.

But wherever Willemen expands, Johan is confident that the next generation of the family will take the business forward and will follow good family business practices. "You have to work at being a successful family business," he says. "But when it works well, there are huge rewards – not just for the business, but for the family and the wider community as well."

Johan Willemen

Managing Director

Company name:	Willemen Groep NV
Generation(s):	1st and 2nd
Founded:	1999 in Mechelen, Belgium
Industry:	Construction
Employees (2013):	Approx. 2,000
Turnover (2013):	Approx. €600m