Interview: Jim Curley – CEO, Jones Engineering, Ireland



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08.02.2017

Tags: Ireland, Jones Engineering, Service Provider, Engineering, Pharma

Jim Curley, the CEO of Jones Engineering Group, details the company's more than 125-year history in Ireland and in more recent times across the UK, mainland Europe and the Middle East. He gives an insight into how they have maintained their leadership role in the engineering contracting industry particularly in Ireland through both continuous innovation as well as a commitment to developing the skills and know-how of their people.

In 2015 Jones Engineering celebrated its 125th anniversary, congratulations! As an introduction for our readers, could you provide a brief overview of the company's extensive history?

The firm was founded in 1890, by a young Irish man named Harry O'Neil, who had travelled to Philadelphia in 1880 to learn the trade of plumbing. At that time the Eastern Seaboard of the US was the global center of innovation in sanitation, plumbing and heating systems in both municipal and domestic applications. After returning to Ireland imbued with all this new knowledge and information he started his own business as a plumbing and heating contractor. From our history we understand that Harry was a very rounded individual. He had a great understanding of the art and science of building services engineering along with a love of the fine arts, particularly the Celtic Revival, which was taking place in Ireland at that time.

He realized early on in his career that in order to succeed, he needed to have a Team of good people around him, and in order to attract good people he needed to support education. If you have a Team of good, smart, driven people you are better equipped to take on the challenges that

come your way. If Mr. O'Neil was alive today and able to see the organization, he would not recognize the firm or what we are doing. He would however recognize our core values and our ethos. We continue to support people with apprenticeships and third level education. We are one of the largest trainers of apprentices, if not the largest, in this country. We take part in our national craft skills competitions annually and are regular winners of the event. Our people have gone on to compete at a global level and we are the only firm in the World, we understand, to have won the World Skills competitions on a number of occasions. In parallel with this we support education in the colleges of technology and the universities. In recent times our Chairman has put in place scholarships to help a number of students each year to study engineering at Trinity College Dublin. The secret to our success is recruiting good driven people putting the effort into training them, and giving them the opportunity to be the best people that they can be.

Harry managed his business through the turbulent and challenging times of early 20th century Ireland. Working his way through a period of rebellion, a civil war and a few years later the global economic crash. The 1930's were difficult times and just when things were starting to pick up World War Two came along. The 1950's brought new opportunities to the firm. Ireland started to move away from being an almost totally agricultural economy to one that started to embrace industrialization. One of the first major opportunities that came the firms way in the 1950's was to supply and install the services in the sanatorium built to deal with the TB epidemic that afflicted Ireland at that time. A disease that mainly affected our young people. HAO'Neil Ltd which was to become Jones Engineering, won a big part of this work. This was very important work for the firm as it positioned Jones as the contractor of choice for future large scale projects. Today Jones Engineering Group is the largest mechanical, electrical and fire protection contractor in the Irish marked supporting and working with many of the global multinationals particularly the pharmaceutical companies who are located in Ireland.

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When did Jones become active in the pharmaceutical and life sciences industry, and how important is the sector to the overall portfolio of the company?

One of the first pharmaceutical facilities to come here was Swords Laboratories. They arrived in Ireland during the 60's, and our firm worked on that project. We became the services contractor working on many of the incoming multinational projects after that.

Nationally, we are the largest and most experienced contracting company. Our published turnover in Ireland for 2015 in the mechanical, electrical and fire protection sectors confirms that we are a

third bigger than our nearest competitor. We now have teams working in the pharmaceutical, the semiconducting, data center, the process and engineering sectors, oil and gas, along with maintaining our position in the health sector and the commercial area.

Pharma is a very important part of our portfolio mix. Construction turnover in Ireland is approximately €17 billion per annum. A significant amount of the work in the industry is pharmaceutical and allied industries. Pharma is also very important for the construction industry because it is high tech and has given the industry the opportunity to develop world class people to support the needs of the end users. After the construction of the initial facilities opportunities are also afforded to construction firms to provide ongoing support for maintenance and retro fits.

What makes Ireland such an attractive destination for the pharmaceutical industry?

There are many reasons why firms locate to Ireland. These including we speak English, we are on the edge of Europe, we have a young, well-educated population, it is easy to set up a business here, it is a safe place to work and live ,there is a good work ethic. There can also be some tax advantages. We have a government agency, IDA, who is second to none in supporting firms establish a business in this part of the world. But most importantly Irish firms have a proven track record of delivering. Projects and products in Ireland tend to be delivered safely, on time, with a high degree of certainty of cost. Firms are coming to do business in Ireland for these and other reasons. Business people are risk takers; notwithstanding, companies need some degree of certainty when they are investing. Ireland is a low risk place to do business in.

When we met with Dave Murphy, the CEO of PM Group, he was commenting on how in recent years Ireland has seen much more emphasis on R&D and innovation. How does Jones Engineering innovate and evolve to meet changes in this type of dynamic market?

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Once firms set up here we often become strategic partners to them. We recognize that they (multinational manufacturing companies) often have to compete internally on a global basis to win the next investment dollars from within their own group. As construction is a significant part of any development cost we feel duty bound to be as competitive as we can in order to support the local branches of firms as they compete against their sister sites across the globe. We do this by continuously looking at our processes and how we can deliver faster, safer, higher quality projects, cost effectively. We have succeeded in doing this in many locations in many different sectors. This is measurable by the amount of repeat work that we get.

Our focus at the moment is on LEAN along with BIM and prefabrication.

We have made significant investments in prefabrication facilities in recent times. We have workshops throughout Ireland that support the work we do here at home, in mainland Europe and even in the Middle East. We are an industry leader in our sector in building information modeling (BIM) .We are a founder and one of the main drivers of the LEAN institute here in Ireland and have been active in the area for quite some time in our quest to always stay ahead. Our goal is to make ourselves and our outcomes even more predictable and efficient. We are looking into doing more R&D in prefabrication / module building as we incorporate more and more LEAN initiatives into our constructions techniques, helping us to exponentially increase our efficiencies , by building smarter, quicker, better, safer and more economically.

Quality construction is fundamental for the pharma industry. They rely on us on delivering high quality facilities where they can manufacture high quality and high yield products at a predictable level. We have built a reputation for delivering these exacting standards to our clients. We are always ready to work with Clients and their representatives on their upcoming projects and looking at how we can help them deliver their projects so that they can start production as soon as possible.

In recent years Jones has experienced tremendous growth. How did you accomplish this, and how do you plan on maintaining it moving forward?

Our growth was planned growth. Our turnover multiplied during the recession thanks to a major transformation we under took at the outset of the banking crisis. We took the time to look closely at the organization and how we could manage ourselves during the recession. Our plan was to leverage off the skill set that we had and retain as far as possible our people, many of whom had built up a tremendous skill base in the pharmaceutical and other high tech industries. (People are our biggest asset). We evaluated our strengths and weakness .Identified the sectors and geography’s were we could potentially successfully capitalize on our capabilities. We built several teams to come up with different business plans that were analyzed and tested in detail. Some of these ideas fell by the way side. Others became our new focus. Eventually with the support of our whole team we took our experience and capabilities to new sectors and to new countries. An example of a sector that we are now working in is the Waste to Energy industry. We are the go to people in Ireland and the UK for large scale dry anaerobic digestion plants and production of energy through waste. By diversifying and readjusting our focus, we were able to successfully see out the recession. Today, most of our growth is overseas. There are currently Jones Engineering teams working in Finland, Sweden, Holland, Belgium, UK, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and shortly UAE and

Denmark. The work ranges from pharmaceutical projects, semiconductor plants, data centers and projects in the FMCG sector. In each location we have found that we have been able to compete on price, quality, safety and schedule delivery.

What is your vision for Jones Engineering in the coming 3-5 years?

We want to continue to develop a team that can successfully manage the company into the future. To do so we have to keep challenging and developing our people while continuing to expand in a controlled way. We expect that going forward fifty percent of our turnover will come from overseas, from projects with our existing clients and some new clients that we will win along the way. We are working to stay at the forefront of LEAN, modern construction, BIM and prefabrication and are exploring and looking for the next blue ocean.

To close on a more personal note, what motivates you each morning to come into work here at Jones Engineering?

We have a wonderful group of people in the company. I get great personal satisfaction seeing young people coming into the firm, progressing and developing on their journey to be the best that they can be. I started travelling on that same journey almost forty years ago when I received a scholarship from the firm when I commenced my engineering career. That is what in our DNA here. That has been the cornerstone of the firm from the very start. That is what motivates me every day along with sharing in the success our Clients very often enjoy from having people like this help them deliver their World Class projects.

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