

would be enhanced by more of the type of charts and summaries presented in the final chapter, as well as an appendix containing more details on the database created from the research. Practitioners will be disappointed by the lack of interesting or useful conclusions and should probably wait for future volumes in the series for more insightful analyses in this important area of research.

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Sole Survivors: How Exceptional Companies Survive and Thrive at the Edge by Anto T. Kerins, Oak Tree Press, Dublin, 1999, pb, 420 pp, £18.95, 24 Euro. ISBN 1 86076 131 3

The footwear industry, together with textiles and clothing, were among the first casualties of the opening of the Irish economy to free trade. Employment in footwear manufacturing in Ireland today is one-tenth of what it was twenty-five years ago. The sector has declined dramatically in all developed countries and most of the world's footwear is now manufactured in the newly industrialised countries where labour costs are very low and where many workers endure conditions which are often little better than slavery. Given such pressure on wage costs in an intrinsically labour intensive industry, the survival of any footwear manufacturers in the high wage economies is remarkable. The factors which have enabled some of the footwear firms to survive in Europe is the theme of Anto Kerins's wittily titled book *Sole Survivors*, published by Oak Tree Press, Dublin.

The book presents detailed case studies on nine footwear manufacturers in four countries, Ireland, the UK, Finland and Sweden. Two of the UK firms, Barker of Earls Barton and Start-Rite, are well known manufacturers of high quality adult and children's footwear respectively. The Irish firm studied, Dubarry, is the most successful surviving Irish footwear manufacturer, well known for its yachting shoes. The countries were chosen largely because among EU countries, they had suffered the greatest reduction in their footwear industries as a result of cheap imports. The author tells us that he chose the footwear industry because in an industry so familiar, producing a basic product needed by everybody, it is possible to concentrate on the business

essentials without being confused by endless technological innovation. There has of course been technological innovation in the footwear industry, and capital has to some extent replaced labour, but as in the case of clothing, the industry remains labour intensive and in the wealthy countries its success largely depends on how work is organised.

The EU funded Anto Kerins' research because the footwear sector in the EU was rapidly losing jobs. The EU Commission felt that information on exceptional companies, and the strategies which enabled them to survive and prosper, would be useful to the sector as a whole and to other "traditional" industries. In the case of the Irish firm, Dubarry, the strategy which has ensured its survival is summarised in the title of the case study: *Better Work Organisation, Better Production*. From 1937, when it was established in Ballinasloe, until a 1983 management buyout, Dubarry was a family owned firm, set up behind the high wall of tariff protection which it was thought in the 1930s would generate an indigenous industrial sector. By the 1980s the company was subject to intense competition from imported shoes and after the management buyout the new team set about revitalising the company. They introduced a more participatory management style, installed new technology and improved design and diversified their product range. This strategy succeeded in stabilising the company but the management wished to expand and with this in mind strengthened their marketing function and introduced World Class Manufacturing, based on teamwork with the support of Enterprise Ireland. This process of continuous improvement led to the desired expansion in output and employment in a sector where employment has been decimated and where many components have to be imported.

The first UK company studied, Barker of Earls Barton, was established in 1880 and by the 1950s was a leading producer of high quality footwear and still owned by the Barker family. The company suffered a significant loss of market share in the late 1980s and early 1990s when its production had fallen to half its 1970s level. As part of its survival strategy the company appointed Lance Clark of the much larger Clarks shoe manufacturer as managing director. Clarke's initial strategy of cutting the cost base did not succeed in turning the company around and financial pressures eventually led to the company being sold to an Indian conglomerate. A new marketing manager was appointed who quickly transformed the haphazard marketing operation and directed the company's efforts towards gaining a

share of the youth market, a strategy that halted the company's decline.

The second UK company, George Cox, produces fashion shoes for young men, a difficult market with frequent changes of trend. George Cox did not originate designs but produced mainly "retro" styles based on earlier fashions with many design ideas coming from retailers. The company for a time produced the famous "Doc Martens" under license but lost this in 1996. In response to erratic but declining sales, the company has improved its design and product development and reorganised its management structure. It has also expanded its exports and has survived the crisis caused by the withdrawal of the license to produce Doc Martens.

Start-Rite, the third UK company studied, is the oldest shoe manufacturer in the UK and has been a leading brand for generations and pioneered the measurement of children's feet to ensure they wore properly fitting shoes. Its survival has been due partly to the fact that long-term growth was given priority over short-term gain by its owners but it is also a very interesting case study of what approaches may or may not work in a particular company. Start-Rite introduced and then abandoned team working because it did not produce the desired outcome. It subsequently considered introducing TQM but decided against it. As Anto Kerins points out, Start-Rite shows that the ability to learn and undo is vital for a company's survival.

One of the Finnish companies, Nokian, was turned around by a management consultant who was employed as managing director in response to a financial crisis in the company, which like Dubarry had experienced a management buyout. The second Finnish company studied, Hamken, produces high fashion women's shoes and is owned and managed by Petri Hamroth, who is a famous shoe designer. Hamken's success is largely based on swift response to changes in fashion, which are quickly implemented in an effectively organised company that responds well to change.

One of the Swedish companies studied, Lundhags is, like Nokian, a small family business whose survival is largely due to the commitment of the Lundhags family to supporting and training their staff. The second Swedish company, Arbresko produces safety and occupational footwear and its success is based on meeting the needs of a technically demanding market. This has been achieved by ensuring that workers have multiple skills and by a sophisticated and participatory management structure.

Sole Survivors shows that the European footwear companies studied have survived not by driving down wages or extracting produc-

tivity through oppressive management but by creative adoption of new technologies and work methods and by a management approach which made workers feel valued. This approach increased the loyalty of workers and stimulated their productivity, thus enhancing the competitiveness of their companies. The book is written in a fresh narrative style and gives the reader many insights into the day to day reality of managing a small company in a highly competitive sector. *Sole Survivors* will be of great interest to final year students of management and business and the companies studied would provide excellent case studies for MBA students. As a study of an industrial sector experiencing intense competition the book will also be of interest to economists and policy makers.

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