



thomson adsett

With seven offices employing 160 staff, ThomsonAdsett is the 8th largest architecture fee earner in Australasia.

Brisbane-based ThomsonAdsett is one of the most successful architecture firms in the world. So why haven't you heard of it?

ThomsonAdsett is not as well known as you might expect for a firm that sits 89th in the Building Design World Architecture ranking of Top 100 largest practices.

The firm has completed more than 10,000 architectural commissions since 1971, yet remains relatively unknown outside the sectors in which it specialises.

After four decades of growth, in 2013 CEO Chris Straw invited Business Adviser David Schloeffel to conduct a "health check" on ThomsonAdsett having noticed the firm's upward trajectory was beginning to plateau.

Was there a turning point at which you recognised the value of seeking external business advice?

Chris: During the GFC, we built more than 500 schools in one year as part of the Federal Government's Building the Education Revolution program. But when the program ended, we found that the business itself hadn't grown. It had stabilised, and our turnover seemed to have plateaued.

Essentially we wanted a health check on our business that would help us understand, 'Where to from here?'

Did this "health check" help you identify areas to improve?

Yes. Whilst our brand is strong in the areas we work in, it's probably weak in the sense of a large-scale architectural practice. How do we increase our public voice and exposure? If we brand ourselves in a much more 21st century way, we see great opportunities ahead.

Our global network of offices and the strength of our specialty divisions are also strengths that we arguably haven't leveraged enough.

Are you planning to capitalise on these strengths now?

Yes, as a specialist practice you need to be more than architects. Much of our specialist work falls outside that of a traditional architect and in the past we have given it away to secure the architectural commission – perhaps it is our business of the future.

How does a 40 year-old company sustain a strong and relevant company culture?

In the past we had a very strong Christian culture due to the beliefs of the company's founders, but we really need to revisit this.

This will be one of the first tasks undertaken as a result of the Business Evaluation – the key item for me is that we need external help to assist in understanding both who we are now and who we want to be.

Acquiring other practices is part of our growth strategy, but sometimes we have embedded cultures into the business more successfully than others – often due the opportunistic nature



Case study



Cover image:
St Paul's Villas,
Queensland

This page:
St Justin's Primary
School, NSW (above);
ThomsonAdsett's
studio (right)



of the acquisition, which may have not substantially added to a long-term company vision.

What sorts of HR issues do you face?

The ability to balance the needs of the company and the individual is becoming more important. Rapidly changing technology and delivery systems means that clear employment paths and opportunities need to be developed to retain the brightest and the best.

We have started from the top by sending our young MDs to the CEO Institute, which is now filtering through the company in the form of personalised programs tailored to meet the individual needs of our staff.

Which markets are you earmarking for growth?

The South Pacific region is a real growth area for us. We are also working on a number of hospitals and Senior Living developments in South East Asia.

The last frontier is Africa – we have been working on township designs in Nigeria, and the scale of this work is quite enormous.

Overall, what are the benefits of undertaking a Business Evaluation?

Sometimes the things said by someone outside the room can have more impact than someone inside the room. It is great to have an independent person who's done this before with many other creative industries offer a fresh perspective.

What are your goals for the next 12 months?

We've had a lot of organic growth, but we now need to be more meaningful in that growth. As a group, we have tended towards medium-sized projects around the \$50 million mark. To get to the next level, we need to embark on billion dollar projects.

At a Glance

www.thomsonadsett.com

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|-------------|---|
| Name | ThomsonAdsett |
| Sector | Architecture |
| Launch date | 1971 |
| Location | Brisbane, Melbourne, Sydney, Cairns, Rockhampton, Lismore, Hong Kong, Jakarta |
| Employees | 160 |
| Turnover | \$20m |

Article by Barbara Messer

ABOUT US

The Creative Industries Innovation Centre supports the business of creative enterprise. It is part of the Australian Government's Entrepreneurs' Infrastructure Programme, and is supported by the University of Technology, Sydney. The CIIC's website, creativeinnovation.net.au provides creative companies and practitioners with access to business services, resources and features.

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