

THE QUIET REVOLUTION

Inside the remaking of Ed Gibbs and his ISO-certified pool company

By Joshua Keim Some businesses make big changes on a dime. For others, slow and steady wins the race. Ed Gibbs clearly belongs in the second category.

Gibbs has spearheaded a corporate restructuring of his company that's lasted nearly a decade. The result? A complete makeover of the firm's mission, and revenue growth of more than 600 hundred percent. Of course, he doesn't see it in those terms.

"[Our changes were] more of an evolution than a re-birth," says Gibbs, who is president of Gib-San Pools Ltd. by Master Pools. "It's really a matter of moving forward in your life."

Since taking over the business from his father in 1996, he's grown the Toronto-based business from a \$2-million-a-year builder to the \$12-million-a-year international powerhouse it is today. And he's done it by incorporating new divisions and expanding his portfolio, all on customer-driven initiatives.

Natural selection

His "evolution" began in 1996, when a local customer asked him to build a pool for



Survival of the fittest: Ed Gibbs believes that if personal ambition doesn't force you to adapt, consumer demand will.

**GIB-SAN POOLS LTD.
BY MASTER POOLS**

How'd they do that?

For Ed Gibbs, president of Gib-San Pools Ltd. by Master Pools in Toronto, getting his Canadian company ISO-certified was the most ambitious project he's ever tackled.

Most believe that ISO standards are for global manufacturers and dictate specific methods for making products. However, under ISO 9001: 2000, smaller firms such as construction companies can create their own protocols for production methods, business practices and quality management programs.

"The thing that makes ISO certification so valuable is the aspect of independency and third-party recognition," says Niall Gordon, president of Niall Gordon & Associates in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. He's the consultant who worked with Gib-San for close to two years to help prepare the company for ISO certification.

Gibbs' journey really began three years ago. After attempting to get his company up to snuff for ISO on his own, he realized he needed the help of an expert. "Some companies feel they can do it quicker and cheaper by themselves," Gordon says. "With a consultant, there's less trial and error."

Gordon's methods worked in three phases:

Phase 1: Development.

Everything started with what Gordon calls a "gap analysis." The consultant conducted an in-depth audit of Gib-San's existing practices and compared those to the ISO standard. The purpose was to identify all of the processes that were lacking. "Upwards of 100 things needed to be implemented," Gordon says. "Some were small, some were big. Some programs didn't take a lot of time to put together. Others took 6 or 9 months to complete."

Phase 2: Documentation.

The next step was to create an exhaustive procedures handbook that outlined and systematized every phase of Gib-San's operations down to minute detail. The document, says Gibbs, serves as a sort of "How-To" manual and becomes "your bible as far as the company is run."

"We realized we were going to have to build everything one way," he adds. "So we sat by committee with our construction [and service] managers and figured out what the best methods were."

For example, if you're a pool builder, the



The team: Peter Friis (left), senior vice president, and Ed Gibbs, president, of Toronto-based Gib-San Pools Ltd. by Master Pools.

manual might document the correct way to tie steel or the thickness of concrete your company prefers. A service company would demonstrate what it feels is the best way to vacuum a pool or check chemicals. In a retail setting, you'd make sure the phone is always answered with the same greeting. Being all of the above, Gib-San's handbook featured those elements and then some.

The manual is composed of both written text and flow charts, which makes it a useful guide for training as well.

Phase 3: Implementation.

The final stage was to train every employee according to the system outlined in the manual. "As we did it," recalls Gordon, "we discovered some things that weren't working as they should be. So we went back and did some tweaking." A few forms and procedures had to be revised to make the system efficient and usable.

One of the most significant implementations was creating a process for documenting customer satisfaction to gauge the

company's improvement. Six employees serve as internal auditors, checking departments, job sites and records at random. That way, there are no surprises during the annual audits Gib-San must undergo by a third-party ISO firm to maintain its certification.

Though the cost of retaining an ISO certifying body can range from \$10,000 to \$25,000 for a smaller firm, Gibbs' total expenditures were in the hundreds of thousands. However, most of that expense came in the form of soft costs, such as man hours. Four people were hired as a result, including an administrative manager and human resources personnel. And additional equipment was procured to increase its effectiveness.

Gordon says such costs are a function of growth and progress in an ISO company. "It's a process of continual improvement," he says. "It's not a static system. It changes as the organization changes. You must always improve something everyday."

—J.K.



his villa on the French Riviera. “We told him, ‘Are you crazy? We build in Toronto,’” Gibbs recalls. But the customer’s persistence won out, and he built the project.

Slowly, word got around, and Gib-San developed a reputation for bidding projects

Ed Gibbs has always set his goals high. As he says, ‘I believe in excellence. I believe we are the best.’

halfway around the world. Eventually, the company was hired to construct the pool complex at the Marriott St. Kitts Royal Resorts in the West Indies. The 40,000-square-foot project took three years and 18 shipments of materials and equipment

Face-lift: One of Gib-San’s initiatives was to rebrand its corporate image and logo (as seen outside the corporate headquarters here). Thus, “Gib-San Pool & Landscape Creations” was born.

to complete. Gibbs' crew even had to fly down to St. Kitts to train the concrete supplier how to correctly produce gunite.

The next logical step was the creation of Gib-San International. Today, the company has worked in five countries, and Gibbs is currently in the process of bidding a project in Anguilla, off the Caribbean island of St. Martin.

Similar circumstances led to the launch of Gib-San's retail store as well. The company's headquarters were inconveniently located in a commercial district

of Toronto, and Gibbs became frustrated with the location's inaccessibility.

After six months of researching the most serviceable areas, Gibbs opened his first retail store, in 1998. The Gib-San Pool and Hot Tub Centre, was in a highly trafficked residential community.

Initially, the store was slow to mature, earning about \$100,000 in sales its first year. After an extensive marketing and ad campaign, the store turned into a profitable venture, generating more than a \$1 million annually within three years.

Overall, Gibbs says opening a retail store is really a "natural progression" for any pool builder. One advantage to having both sides of the business, he adds, is that each department "feeds" the other.

But the vision has a third component as well. In 2000, he hired Jay Middleton, a landscape architect, to head Environmentals. But Gibbs did more than buy CAD equipment and some backhoes for his new division. He made Middleton a partner to give him a stake in its future.

"The ideology was to run it as a separate

Opening a retail store is really a natural progression for any pool builder. One advantage to being in retail and building is that each department feeds the other.

profit center and make the company responsible," says Gibbs, who firmly believes in rewarding his principals by making them stake-holders in his ventures.

"Ed is one of the best motivators I know," says Peter Friis, Gib-San's senior vice president, who's known Gibbs for 20 years. "He has a strong belief that if everyone around him is succeeding, then he'll succeed as well."

The first of a kind

Taking on all of these new departments, Gibbs realized he might be spreading his management resources thin. "The tendency is to become scatterbrained when you have all these divisions," he says. "You need a glue to hold it together." He found the glue in the business ethic of Stephen Covey.

An internationally renowned business consultant, Covey is author of the best-seller *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*.

A strong believer in the value of consultants, Gibbs hired Covey's firm in 2000 to speak with his 125 employees. Gibbs says

that his company underwent a dramatic “cultural shift” when they applied Covey’s principles of leadership to their business model.

“The management development that we took on from 2000 really changed the dynamic of who we were and what we became,” Gibbs says. “These windows of opportunity opened up as our minds opened up. ... We realized we had to stop saying ‘we can’t’ and start saying ‘we can.’”

Still, he felt his company needed new focus, something cohesive between each division. That’s when he set his sights on

ISO certification (see *How’d they do that?*).

Late last year, Gib-San became the first pool and spa company to be certified by the International Organization for Standardization in Geneva, Switzerland. The ISO9001:2000 rating, which the company received, indicates that every Gib-San pool built or serviced will conform to rigorous quality parameters.

The idea was to bring a higher level of credibility to his business. “Anyone who has a shovel and a pickup truck can be in the pool business,” Gibbs says. “When I tell a customer

that I build the best pool in town, I now have a third party validating what I say.”

In fact, his unprecedented efforts are inspiring his colleagues. Another Master Pools Guild member and *Pool & Spa News* Top Builder, Patio Pools & Spas in Tucson, Ariz., recently started down the road to ISO certification as well.

Gibbs believes so strongly in the merits of certification that he’s working on a second level, ISO18000, an occupational health and safety standard. Once that’s completed, he says that Gib-San will tackle

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ISO14000, an environmental management standard.

That commitment to quality recently earned Gibbs a rare, coveted honor. He received a two-page spread in the July issue of *The Robb Report Collection*, a high-end consumer magazine known for featuring the *crème de la crème* in home design and lifestyle products.

That might’ve seemed like a long shot for the 16-year-old kid who started out in the service department of his father’s little Canadian pool company 24 years ago. But Gibbs has always set his goals high.

“I believe in excellence,” he says. “I believe we are the best.” ■