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PETER SCHIAVELLO

PHENOMENONALLY SUCCESSFUL UNDER HIS FATHER TONY, FURNITURE MANUFACTURER

SCHIAVELLO IS NOW BEING LED BY PETER SCHIAVELLO

In a country like Australia, hardly renowned for its manufacturing sector and with the inexorable shift of production off-shore, the Schiavello Group stands out in magnificent defiance. Firmly committed to local production, Schiavello is by far the largest and most successful Australian manufacturer of commercial furniture and interior products, and they not only operate nationally but internationally. They have also accumulated production capacity across a wider range of materials and processes than any other local supplier. Ninety-five percent of Schiavello's products are designed in-house or in collaboration with local or international designers and most are made at the company's 13-hectare estate at Tullamarine, Melbourne. This extensive factory site features an award-winning administration building, completed in 2004, which practically demonstrates Schiavello principles, expertise and product range. With offices in all major Australian cities and an expanding international presence in Singapore, Japan, New Zealand and Dubai, the company leads the field in exemplary style.

Manufacturing is only one side of Schiavello's success. Interiors construction is the other major contribution, with project management teams around the country and overseas working with major architecture and interior design firms to plan and create effective workplaces. Property development represents a third avenue. Extraordinarily, despite operating from 12 showrooms, four manufacturing plants, and employing over 1,200 people, Schiavello remains a family business – established in 1966 by Tony Schiavello, now executive chairman.

Before emigrating to Australia from Italy with his wife in the 1950s, Tony Schiavello was a furniture-maker, a trade described by his son, Peter, as starting "all the way from identifying a tree in a forest, to felling that tree, drying it and curing it before hand-making it into furniture". In Melbourne, Tony set up a business supplying and installing demountable

office partitioning. Fired with the energy, urgency and determination to succeed that is so often the immigrant's story, Tony thrived on the idea that 'anything is possible', and he instilled this can-do attitude and driving work ethic deep into the culture of the company he built. Recognising in the early stages that through manufacturing his own products he was much more in control of cost, quality and service delivery, Tony committed the company to production as well as installation and construction.

This approach has been responsible for his remarkable success, not just leading in the field of workplace design in Australia, but in building a business empire. Plans had long been in place to ensure continued development of this empire, and the company has evolved into its current form, not least because over the years it has come increasingly under the influence of Tony's son, Peter, who had been Deputy Managing Director since 1995 and over a long period of transition officially took the title of Managing Director in 2009. Through this process an increasing emphasis has been placed on design quality and sustainability, with a new commitment to research and innovation.

A YOUNG APPRENTICE

Schiavello is a business that Peter, born in 1963, knows by heart. On weekends and school holidays, from the time he was eight years old, he accompanied his father to work. "I was probably fortunate in that I always knew what I wanted to do," says Peter. "I just assumed I would eventually be involved in the business because it was something I was passionate about." Tony was not about to force any of his three children into the family firm. "If we were interested, the opportunity was there for us," says Peter, whose brother and sister also work in the furniture manufacturing business. "Clearly, you've got to make something of this opportunity. It was one that I naturally took up."

Leaving school, Peter began a commerce/law degree, but within months determined that graduation would only lead him back to the business. So he telescoped the process. At the time, the company had a small joinery shop that was underperforming, and in July 1982, Tony Schiavello placed it, as an independent financial entity, under his 18-year-old son's direction.



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PETER SCHIAVELLO

LEFT Oliver Field, who designed the 'Hedge' seat, is just one of the Australian designers Schiavello works with on products
ABOVE Schiavello's intelligent workstations are central to the business



ABOVE RIGHT '101', designed by Helen Kontouris in 2009, is part of Schiavello's range of statement seating
BELOW A new generation of workstation, 'Climate' evolved from collaboration with a range of designers
OPPOSITE The 'Marina Fold' table is one of many products designed in-house

Peter saw the position as a natural progression. "It was an interesting time," he says, "almost a crisis in life." He quickly had to prove that he could "run a good business, provide good quality, competitive service, and obviously you had to make money, otherwise you don't exist very long." As it happened, the early 1980s saw the rapid transformation of the workplace. Full-height offices gave way to more open planning and greater flexibility, and the proliferation of computers meant standard desks were gradually replaced by workstations and ergonomic furniture. In 1982, the company was commissioned by the Federal Government to produce its first ergonomic desk, and as the joinery company expanded to cater for the changing needs of the market, the Schiavello furniture business developed with it. "I don't think we had a year when it slowed down," Peter recalls with some pride.

CONTINUED GROWTH

Through the 1980s, Peter developed his vision for the furniture side of the business. In 1984, after his first visit with Tony to ORGATEC – the largest European workplace furniture fair, held every two years in Cologne, Germany – he proposed they exhibit there to help create an international profile for the business. After showing initially in 1986, the company's first exports followed. At the same time, the partitioning and fit-out side of the company was evolving into a full interiors construction service, and expanding its operation around Australia. By the early 1990s, Peter was becoming more involved in the business as a whole, and Schiavello was growing nationally and internationally. A feather in the company cap and a fillip to finances during the recession of the early 1990s came in the form of a contract to supply product to the World Bank, Washington, D.C., a commission won through international competition, and which Schiavello continues to service today.

NEW FOCUS ON DESIGN

In the early days, just about everything that came out of Schiavello was designed either by Tony or Peter – although Peter is quick to point out that he is no designer. By 1995, as the business was evolving, he found so too were his own ideas and aspirations. "I think I was gaining a greater appreciation for good quality design, developing my own aesthetic. It doesn't just naturally happen," he insists. This

aesthetic has been mostly influenced by Europe and Japan. He looks for something with "an emotional engagement" rather than simple visual attraction. Through working with some of the best architects and interiors designers in Australia, Peter had also become more mindful of the design-driven nature of the industry, of the importance of design ideas and design quality, and of the value design can bring to a business, not least its potential for Schiavello.

As a result, Peter orchestrated a deliberate shift in direction for the company away from its traditional manufacturing role to a position offering high quality design and innovation to the design-driven end of the market. These days there are respected product designers on staff and the organisation is working with independent designers, from Australia and elsewhere. "There is such amazing talent here, and internationally, obviously," says Peter. "But in Australia we have great talent." Brisbane-based designer, Brian Steendijk, who has a collaborative relationship with Schiavello, admires the way the company invests in design. Normally, he says, it is the designer who has to be the entrepreneur. "Peter is heir to the European mentality that invests in the prototyping of new products, and as far as I know that is unique in Australia."

ON SUSTAINABILITY

In 1995, Schiavello took part in the Eco-Redesign Project, a federally funded design initiative run through the RMIT Centre for Design. "This was our first exposure to sustainability, to the issue of our environmental footprint and the challenges we're facing in the world," says Peter. Schiavello then developed the 'Hot Desk', which integrated sustainability, ergonomics, new technologies and carefully selected materials and resources. "It was our first completely mobile workplace," says Peter, "produced at a time before mobility had been proposed in a broad sense." While the market wasn't quite ready for such a radical concept, the importance of sustainability struck home.

By 1996, Schiavello had engaged an environmental manager and initiated procedures to comply with international environmental standards, gaining Environmental Management System accreditation, ISO 14001, across the whole business in 1997. Schiavello was the first furniture manufacturer in Australia to make this commitment. "A big part of our culture is about living and demonstrating social responsibility. This wasn't done from a commercial perspective. The luxury of being in a family business is being able to do the right thing even if it costs a bit more."

ON RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

Beyond 2000, while the business was "heading in a nice direction", Peter began looking past design to the increasing importance of sustainability and how the workplace might be more effective at a fundamental level. "Until then, design was being carried out on the basis of our industry's known needs," he says, recognising it was the unknown needs that would be vital to design in the future. After deliberations about the future with workplace designer Peter Geyer in 2002,

Geyer was engaged to direct the development of an innovative new approach. The two worked closely, and began an extensive research project into workplace psychology, managed by an organisational psychology researcher within Schiavello in liaison with one of the world's leading workplace psychologists, Professor Jacqueline Vischer of the University of Montreal. By studying the impact of developing technologies and the effects generational diversity and multiculturalism have on people at work, they set out to identify workplace solutions that could contribute to greater effectiveness, to create places where people could be more engaged and inspired, and that could, at the same time, have a reduced environmental impact. "We were challenging what we knew. I really do seek to drive and develop the culture of learning within this business," says Peter, and the business was changing accordingly. In 2004, to align Schiavello more closely with the company it had become, emerstudio was engaged to re-position the brand and express its evolved identity.

INNOVATION IN PRACTICE

After seven years, the research process culminated in the creation of 'Climate', which was launched in August, 2010 (see workclimate.com). 'Climate' is the first complete range of workplace furniture malleable enough to allow individuals, teams and organisations to re-configure workplaces to suit themselves, and to evolve with changing circumstances. Different components attach to a central channel, which acts as a platform for personalisation. There is the suggestion that 'anything is possible'. All the elements are light, streamlined and sustainable, and the changeable nature of the parts allows the range to be continuously extended and updated. The design of 'Climate' evolved from a broad collaboration, not only with furniture designers and architects, but fashion designers, graphic designers and artists. "The way Schiavello has embraced designers is a rare event in the Australian landscape," says Steendijk. But this too may change as local manufacturers witness Schiavello's progress.

In his efforts to support research, innovation and high quality design, and champion sustainability and local design, Peter is providing a service and example to the industry. Schiavello has demonstrated that Australia not only has design talent worth investing in, but that high quality design can be produced commercially in this country, and even exported. Fast-talking, analytical and quietly intense, Peter, in his cautious way, simply says, "Hopefully we've had a positive influence on other companies in our position in the market". For his part, satisfaction comes from constantly learning and pushing the boundaries in a business that continues to drive him. "I hate to use the word 'love', but I really do enjoy what we do, and that passion is the greatest motivator."

SCHIAVELLO

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PETER SCHIAVELLO TIMELINE

1963	Born in Melbourne to Italian-born parents who emigrated to Australia in the 1950s
1966	Peter's father, Tony, establishes Schiavello, producing and installing demountable office partitioning
1971-72	Eight-year-old Peter begins joining his father at work on weekends and holidays
1976-81	Attends Ivanhoe Grammar School
1982	Begins commerce/law degree at Monash University, Melbourne, but leaves mid-year to join the family business. Schiavello introduces its first ergonomic desk
1984	Peter and Tony make their first trip to ORGATEC, Cologne, Germany
1986	Schiavello first exhibits at ORGATEC
1987	The company's first export contracts fulfilled
1988-90	Schiavello hires its first product designer
1990-92	Peter becomes more involved in the entire business, which expands nationally
1992	The company wins a significant contract for World Bank, Washington D.C.
1995	Peter becomes Deputy MD, increasing the company's focus on design. Through the federally funded Eco-Redesign Project run by RMIT, Schiavello creates the 'Hot Desk' concept. Built on sustainability principles it is Australia's first mobile workplace
1997	Committing to sustainability principles, Schiavello receives ISO 14001 accreditation
2003	Workplace psychology research project begins
2004	Garry Emery is engaged to re-design Schiavello identity and re-position the brand
2005	Schiavello brand is re-launched
2009	Peter officially made MD of Schiavello
2010	Launch of 'Climate', a new generation of workstation