



WORKING WITH FAMILY IS A GIFT

By Cathee Johnson Phillips

This special feature explores the dynamics, advantages, and challenges of working closely with family members and across generations in the scaffold and access industry. Last spring, the SA Magazine put out a call to readers for family businesses who would like to be interviewed. Special thanks to Bee Access Products, Klimer Platforms, Inc., and Superior Scaffold Services for answering that call – and to Nicole Belmonte for suggesting this article!





Nancy Gordon and Megan Russell

KLIMER PLATFORMS, INC.

When opportunity knocked to start his own business, Jay Gordon was ready.

He said, “I was working for Houle Hi Reach and had the opportunity to start a new division importing equipment from Sweden. I fell in love with the mast climbing business, and, in 1991, I started my own business with my cousin Todd.”

His efforts were successful, and he founded Klimer Platforms, headquartered in Milton, Ontario, Canada, in 1993. Today the company is an industry leader in providing access solutions for a multitude of industries and custom applications.

It’s been a family effort. Gordon’s wife, Nancy, joined the company in 2001 and serves as marketing manager. Their daughters Megan Russell and Christine Gordon both work for the company and had an early introduction to the industry

through the Scaffold and Access Industry Association (SAIA).

Nancy Gordon said, “One advantage to having a family business is that we traveled together as a family. When Jay attended an SAIA Convention or Committee Week, we turned it into a family vacation.”

“In ninth grade I attended my first convention, in Vancouver,” said Russell, who is the assisting marketing manager. “It was my first visit out west, and I loved it. I set a goal to attend the University of British Columbia (UBC).” She was accepted and attended there, as she said, “all because of seeing Vancouver at the SAIA Annual Convention.” Russell’s oldest sister, Katie, also went to UBC for her education.

As a college student, Russell worked for the company during the summers. She joined the company full-time in 2013. Her younger sister, Christine is in

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her third summer working for the company and said, “I’m just getting indoctrinated.”

“It’s a great opportunity to get hands-on experience. I wouldn’t

have been able to take on as much responsibility if it weren’t a family business,” said Christine Gordon, who is working in inventory control. “It’s easier approaching people for help in a family business.”

It’s Like Having Dad as a Coach – Every Day

There are challenges as well as opportunities, like separating work from home. Jay Gordon said, “It’s a conscious decision to turn it off and to preserve the family,” a sentiment echoed by his wife.

“It certainly can get confusing for Christine and me,” said Russell, laughing and half-joking, “because at work we have to call Mom and Dad Nancy and Jay. It is a privilege to be able to work alongside family. We understand and support each other, and it’s something I try not to take for granted.”

WORKING WITH FAMILY

Advantages

- Trust and loyalty come naturally.
- Family members learn about the business from a very young age.
- Young people enjoy a greater level of freedom and responsibility in the family business.
- The company can be more responsive to changing trends and make decisions more quickly.
- The family members' investment in the business motivates them to work as a team, putting egos aside and taking on different roles to get the job done.
- The family's shared commitment to quality inspires confidence in customers.

Challenges

- Separating home and family life from work can be difficult.
- Family needs must sometimes be sacrificed for the good of the business.
- Expectations are higher for family members than for other employees.
- Family members have to work harder than everyone else in order to prove themselves.
- Family members have to be extra diligent about working through conflicts and keeping the lines of communication open.

on their own family members as well. We are a close-knit team, which makes it very special and something the company as a whole values.”

That same dedication to making the family business a success is also reflected by the Valentine family at Klimer Platforms' Ohio branch.

Trust and Loyalty Come Naturally

Jason Valentine, who works out of Klimer Platforms' Ohio branch as sales representative, and his sister Kristie Valentine, the branch's assistant general manager, both tried working outside of the family business after college, but they came back. Jason Valentine said, “Working with a family is a gift. You have more personal freedom with your style and personality and more emotional support. Trust and loyalty come naturally.”

He paused and added, “My dad has been self-employed in the construction industry since I was born. When the company is doing well, it's a wonderful experience. But it's tough when it's not going well.”

Ray Valentine, general manager of Klimer Platforms' Ohio branch, started in the industry in 1966 as a bricklayer and by 1990 was owner of Valco, a building supply company. By 2000, Valco offered stationary construction scaffolding, including mast climbing work platforms, and became one of Klimer Platforms' biggest distributors. But, then the 2008 recession hit, and in 2011, Klimer Platforms acquired Valco.

“We had had a long, successful business relationship and friendship with Klimer,” Ray Valentine



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Russell said that she and her sisters learned a lot about the business at the dinner table as they grew up. “As the second generation, you have to be prepared to take on more responsibility and be prepared for growth.”

“There's a pressure to succeed because you are part of the family,” said Nancy Gordon. “We wear a lot of hats and work as a team, regardless of what is going on.”

Jay Gordon concurred: “Family members have to work harder and demonstrate their skills and knowledge more than everyone else to fight the assumption that they didn't work for it, that it was given to them. It's kind of like having your dad as a coach every day.”

Klimer's family tree has grown from just two employees to now over 60. “Everyone is part of the ‘Klimer Family,’” explains Russell. “We have many employees that have brought

said. “Klimer saved us and purchased us, and the result was a stronger mast climber company. A family joined a family. That family atmosphere is the reason that customers call us.”

Jason Valentine agreed. “When a customer speaks well of Kristie to me, I let them know she is my sister and that we are on the same page. Our customers know that our family is working together to provide quality service and products – and that is an advantage for me as a sales rep.”

Both Valentine siblings began working at a young age in the family business. Kristie Valentine helped with filing, and Jason Valentine washed machines and was the “yard

“It’s kind of like having your dad as a coach every day.”

boy,” as his dad called him.

In 2003, Jason Valentine was working with a pharmaceutical company when he went back to

the family business. It was a big change. He went from a desk job to working outside building scaffolding and wearing steel-toe boots. “I had my first sale in three months,” he said, “and I haven’t looked back since.”

Kristie Valentine came back to the family business in 2006. She supported many different areas, wherever she was needed. “I enjoyed learning all of the different aspects, from accountant to service manager,” she said. “I learned about hydraulic oil, filters, etc. and assisted guys who were calling in. It helped me to gain respect in the company.”

Leave the Ego at the Door

Jason Valentine said, “We do what is needed to make sure we

are successful. I still help with installations. We all work as a team to meet our customers’ expectations. It’s easier as a family because we care about every job.”

“We’re on call 24/7,” said Ray Valentine. “If we’re at a barbeque, and a customer calls our cell with a problem– we’re on our way.”

This dedication can have its down side. Ray Valentine said, “Of course, it does sometimes make it hard to have a private life. Also, if you are going to work with family, check your ego. You are honest with each other, and you have to swallow your pride. By accepting that, we’ve been able to work together and still maintain our private lives with each other.”

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