

From junior clerk to CEO: The inspiring rise of Sweet-Orr's John Jacobs

John Jacobs, who hails from Kraaifontein, Cape Town, has risen up the ranks from being a teenage junior clerk at an international protective workwear company to becoming CEO of that very business and developing it into one of South Africa's most prominent workwear brands.



John Jacobs, Sweet-Orr & Lybro CEO. Source: Supplied

Headquartered in Cape Town, Sweet-Orr & Lybro is one of South Africa's oldest protective workwear manufacturers. The company provides PPE to critical economic sectors across the region, including the mining and engineering, combat and disaster, automotive, medical and the petrochemical industry, to name a few.

Whilst his life and career journey haven't always been smooth sailing, Jacobs reflects positively on the past 50 years with the company. "The situation has not always been easy, but as a team, we have managed to navigate whatever storms came our way, from economic crises to pandemics," says Jacobs.

He openly talks about the challenges faced, coming from a blue-collar family that was disadvantaged by a system based on racial segregation. "We were six kids, and my father worked for the railway. So, as you can imagine, there were some tough times along the way."

R55 per month

Commenting on the start of his Sweet-Orr journey, Jacobs says, "I was barely 18 when I joined the company in 1971 as a junior clerk, two years after having to leave high school. I was by far the youngest in the team back then.

"My key responsibility was dealing with all incoming orders in exchange for a salary of R55 per month. This was considerably more than what I was earning as a post office messenger, my first job after leaving school to help my parents and siblings make ends meet."

Fifty years have elapsed since then, and a lot has changed for Jacobs. He recalls how he took every opportunity to climb up within the company, which was founded in 1871 in the United States and has been operational in Cape Town since 1931.



Source: Supplied

His efforts paid off, which eventually allowed him to buy his first company shares. Ultimately, this resulted in him and his family owning the company outright. “To think that when I joined Sweet-Orr, I didn’t even have a matric certificate,” he says, noting that going back to school was always on the agenda those first years after starting at Sweet-Orr.

“Education has always been important to me. That is why I went back to night school when I had the chance in the late 70s, aged 24. I wanted to finish what I started in the 60s. Of course, it was tricky to combine school and a full-time job, but I felt I had to walk this journey. I stayed the path and eventually completed a BCom Honours degree at UWC.”

Investing in people

Jacobs’ drive has always been to keep Sweet-Orr at the forefront of South Africa’s protective workwear scene. “Thanks to continuous and proper planning, saving for a rainy day, being agile, and not skimping

on our products’ and services’ quality, we have stood the test of time. We did so together as a team, and it is something I am incredibly proud of.”

Jacobs is particularly proud of his workforce. “To me, our employees – who hail from all walks of life – are our most important asset, and I have made it standard policy to treat them as such. We make a point of continuously investing in and adding value to our staff’s skill sets and abilities. I want those who work for us to have the same opportunities to grow professionally and personally as I did when I joined Sweet Orr as an 18-year-old.”

This is especially important in a country like South Africa, Jacobs says: “There are so many people who want to work but who do not have the right skills. Elsies River, not one of the most affluent areas in Cape Town, is a case in point. Companies can change the status quo by helping people acquire skills that get them into jobs and allow them to climb the ladder. Our staff are like our family, and we treat them as such.”

Investing in employees has benefits for the company too, Jacobs says. “Helping the people who work for us improve their abilities and talents, thus working towards a skilled workforce, makes your operation run smoother and more efficiently.

“In addition, staff members who feel valued and cared for are loyal and will stand by you in good and bad times. This shows as Sweet Orr has an extremely low staff turnover. The average employee stays with us for 25 years. One of our operational managers has been with us for 40 years before he retired!”



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Customers as partners

Jacobs believes that building a customer-centric business is vital for sustainability. He, however, prefers to see and treat customers as partners while extending this philosophy to suppliers and service providers alike. “Together, we work to build each other’s businesses and keep people safe in the workspace, so we can continue to grow local economies from the inside out. The best things happen in partnership!”

After celebrating the milestone of 50 years with the organisation, Jacobs is still confident about the future. “This company once started with a dream to manufacture superior quality workwear for those who needed it most. Whilst the dream

became reality years ago, we continue to evolve and build – one stitch, one garment, and one satisfied client at a time,” says Jacobs. “Our story is far from finished!”

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