

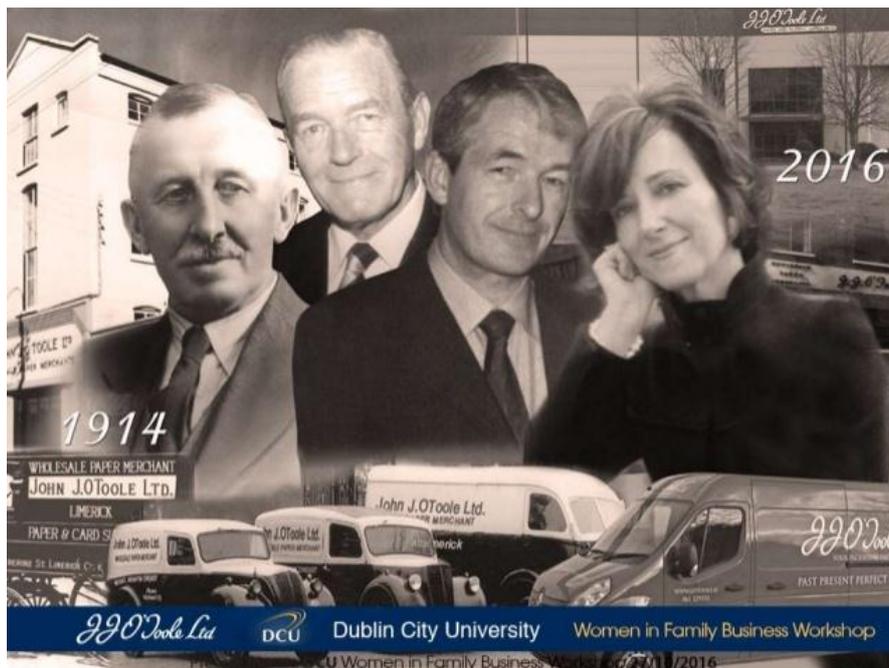
Learning to be both a Leader and a Caretaker — Vicki O’Toole and JJ O’Toole Ltd.



JJ O’Toole Ltd. is a 102 year-old family business owned and managed by Ms. Vicki O’Toole. As Ireland’s leading packaging supplier, the company has clients throughout the country and abroad including Selfridges & Co., Newbridge Silverware, Brown Thomas, Avoca, Dunnes Stores and the Kilkenny Group. In the past 12 years, the family company has experienced tremendous challenges, but also incredible achievements. Speaking at the recent DCU CFB Women in Family Business event, Vicki O’Toole explains her journey from a stay at home mother to Managing Director of JJ O’Toole Ltd.

Family business management is a challenging role and even more so for those who are propelled to leadership during a crisis. Ms Vicki O’Toole became leader of JJ O’Toole, Ireland’s leading packaging supplier, in a time of both personal and professional turmoil. She not only oversaw the company’s return to financial stability, but reinvigorated and expanded the 102 year-old business.

The story starts in 1914 when JJ O’Toole established his business on Patrick Street in Limerick. The small business began trading and supplying packaging and branded stationery to local businesses. When JJ retired his son Jack stepped in and developed the company further, opening new premises in 1978. Following his retirement, his son, Fergus O’Toole, became third generation Managing Director. Fergus modernised the company with a new state-of-the-art facility with warehouse and office combined. He became a well-respected leader, who was particularly skilled with accountancy, and fiercely proud of his business heritage.



The four Managing Directors of JJ O’Toole Ltd. since its formation in 1914.

Then in 2002 the company was dealt a huge blow. The government introduced the plastic bag levy and the market for plastic packaging collapsed. Initially, JJ O’Toole was not too worried about the effect on business but this was soon to change as Vicki explains: *“I went food shopping on the first day the levy was introduced and could see that everyone was bringing their unbagged groceries out in trollies. We knew then that it was bad”*. Their turnover slumped by 40% almost immediately, forcing the company to *“adapt or die”*. This motivated Fergus’ wife, Vicki to join the business to help with redevelopment. Vicki, who spent time at University College Cork studying law, had assisted in JJ O’Toole Ltd. occasionally. In the wake of the plastic packaging crisis, Vicki decided to start sourcing new suppliers for paper packaging. Today the company’s paper supply is sourced across Europe and the Far East.

Vicki increased her involvement in the business as Fergus became ill and later retired. In 2005, the instatement of the first female Managing Director of JJ O’Toole, Vicki O’Toole, had occurred. Vicki was given the mantle of leadership for the family business. *“I didn’t want to see anyone losing their jobs. So you have something, now you have to try work with it. That’s what I did. And it all evolved from there.”* Vicki faced some backlash when she first became Managing Director. *“It would have been quite negative at the beginning and a little suspicious like ‘what’s she doing here?’”* However, with both patience and time, she was able to *“win them over”* and, most importantly, their respect.



Vicki O’Toole speaking at the CFB Women in Family Business & Leadership event.

Under her leadership, Vicki returned the business to its paper packaging roots and expanded the company’s product range which also includes a free in-house graphic design service to clients. Vicki follows a very client-oriented approach which has undoubtedly helped the business through adversity. *“Luckily the clients believed in what we were doing and followed suit”* in the midst of redevelopment. The company built upon its clientele which includes Newbridge Silverware, Avoca, Dunnes Stores, and Brown Thomas. JJ O’Toole was winning more contracts and returning to financial stability. Then in 2010 personal tragedy struck the O’Toole family when Fergus sadly passed away. Once again the company’s future was uncertain.

Vicki turned her attention to sustaining the legacy her husband, his father and his grandfather worked so hard to build. Her determination and effort have not gone unrecognised. In 2011, she was named Image Magazine's Business Woman of the Year. In 2014, JJ O'Toole celebrated its 100th year in business, which was one of the greatest milestones and sources of relief for Vicki. *"We've thankfully turned the company around financially"*. In the summer of this year, the company secured its most renowned client yet, Selfridges & Co. To cap a stellar year JJ O'Toole was named Best Services Company at the SFA National Small Business Awards 2016.



Vicki and JJ O'Toole accept their award from the Small Firms Association.

Despite all these achievements and the confidence she exudes, Vicki admits she still feels nervous ahead of every meeting. Once she entered the business, she faced a steep learning curve and a need to prove herself which she did with sheer effort. *"I do work harder than everyone else. I think that would be normal for Managing Directors in family businesses."* As part of the 14% cohort of female CEOs in Ireland¹, Vicki has faced some stereotyping. However, she has used the negativity as a driver rather than a deterrent. *"If we can be confident of our own ability then we can handle any barriers including gender bias."*

Similar to any family business leader, Vicki is incredibly passionate about the company. Even from home she works diligently, answering all emails and finding solutions to problems. With five children, she feels not only a responsibility to the past but also to the future. *"Every day I work really, really hard to make sure nothing happens to the company. It's not my blood but it's the blood that's pumping through my children's veins."* This responsibility extends to the employees, many of whom are long-term, having worked with her husband and even her father-in-law. *"I like that when*

¹ 30% Club Ireland, DCU & BNY Mellon, 2016.

colleagues walk in the door they feel part of the family as we're all going down the same road together."

Although currently she is the only O'Toole working in the business, Vicki still considers it a family affair. Her son, JJ, who is currently completing his accountancy exams, hopes that one day he will join the business that shares his name. Ever the professional, Vicki is adamant that her son or any of her other children must gain sufficient outside experience and add value to the company. She is a proponent of the policy that family members "*shouldn't take a job because a job is there*". But Vicki does envisage a life after the business, one where she can return to her much loved hobby of gardening and even write a book. For now though, Vicki is content to remain as Managing Director and caretaker of the O'Toole legacy.