

Blending Old with New.

Read the article below and the answer the following questions.

Questions

1. What generation is currently taking over management at A.S. Wilcox and Sons, and who holds the top executive role?
2. Who are the current owners of the business, and how are they structured?
3. How does the company distinguish itself from a traditional family farm in terms of its business structure and policies?
4. What specific protocol or rule does the family enforce for next-generation family members before they can obtain a permanent role in the business?
5. How did the next-generation managers gain external experience before joining the family business structure?
6. Why is succession important for A.S. Wilcox and Sons?



Wilcox's new generation of family leaders, from left: Blair Wilcox, Scott Harvey, Scott Wilcox and Akash Varma

BLENDING OLD WITH THE NEW

A new generation of growers is taking up management roles at a longstanding vegetable business near Pukekohe. HELENA O'NEILL talks with Wilcox's chief executive and a trio of youthful family-linked managers.

A fourth-generation family-owned and operated business, A.S. Wilcox and Sons grows potatoes, onions and carrots for both domestic and international markets.

Over the past few years, several personnel changes have led to the formation of a youthful management team under the guidance of Wilcox's chief executive, Akash Varma.

Akash took up his new role in December last year, after seven years with the company, initially in operations, then with the sales teams. He says some of the core management team are in their thirties and have family links to the business.

"The ownership structure of Wilcox is Kevin Wilcox, who has been managing director here for 25 to 30 years, and his wife, Debbie. Then there's his brother Brent Wilcox, with wife Jane, Scott and Blair's parents. John and Mary Anne

Wilcox, another owner and key account manager, and there's my wife Anna and I as owners too. Scott Harvey and I come under Kevin's family as in-laws."

Akash grew up in Pukekohe and spent time in the summer holidays working with local growers like Bhula Das and Wilcox. He went to school at Pukekohe High before studying commerce at the University of Auckland. After graduation, he joined Mainfreight's graduate programme, also working for that company overseas before coming back to New Zealand and spending a further four-and-a-half years with them before joining Wilcox at the end of 2017.

Having a young family with Anna (née Wilcox) means that balancing work and family life is key. Staying close to family has been important for us, he says.



Wilcox has a central packhouse at their Pukekohe site and a packhouse in Rakaia

Blair Wilcox, potato crop manager, says it's about creating the environment to meet expectations, goals, and objectives.

"We grew up around the farm, working in the school holidays, and we were always encouraged to get around things and learn the ins and outs. But we were also encouraged pretty strongly to go away for three or four years to work in other businesses. Then, when we came back, we had to apply for a role within the business."

"...we were always encouraged to get around things and learn the ins and outs"

Blair spent some time in the United Kingdom before working for LeaderBrand in Gisborne.

One of his highlights with Wilcox is introducing broccolini as a product for the business. Blair learned more about the vegetable while visiting growers overseas and realised there was a space to deliver a consistently fresh product year-round that could be locally grown. The broccolini have been part of their regular crops for about five years.

Home production manager Scott Wilcox worked on a carrot farm in Germany for five months, later taking up a role in Hawke's Bay on a hydroponic blueberry orchard.

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Wilcox employee Sangeeta packing washed Vivaldi potatoes, which love growing in the winter alpine-like conditions in Ohakune

"It was good to gain some experience in covered cropping. They were developing a big site there, so it was more construction than growing. It was really interesting and great to pick up some valuable life lessons and the skills you get from being away.

"I always had the drive to come back and be a part of the business. It's more of a family business rather than a family farm. So there are a lot of processes and protocols around working there as a teenager. There were definitely plenty of opportunities."

Meanwhile, Scott Harvey grew up on a sheep and beef farm in the Wairarapa, before he came to Wilcox in 2018.

He already had a Bachelor of Agricultural Science (Hons) from Lincoln University under his belt and experience working as a sales agronomist, but says he found horticulture provided different and interesting challenges.

"I went into a sales role before joining Wilcox. This is kind of a middle ground with vertical integration of the business. It's still a growing business like sheep and beef, but here I'm exposed to the whole supply chain, which appeals to me.

"I started off working in crop support on the potatoes side, then transitioned across to the onions."

He is now managing the onion crop programme for the company, and his role incorporates the whole supply chain,

from planning and growing a crop, through post-harvest handling to sales and marketing.

Scott Harvey was also a HortNZ Leadership scholar last year, and says the programme is a very good pathway for people to progress in the sector.

Developing strong teams driven by quality and customer focus has been key to Wilcox's success, Akash says.

"The real backbone to our business is our amazing team.

We have 220 full-time team members across New Zealand, which goes up to 300 odd during the season.

They represent over 14 nationalities. The longest serving team member is still going with over 50 years of service."

Looking forward, one of the key problems is how to get out of the challenging space the vegetable industry is in, Akash says.

"We're looking for the next generation to come through. Do they have the energy, the passion? We've got the sense that it's there; it's not something that we take for granted. You need to have those good foundations - good purpose, good values, good outcomes to move forward," he says.

Blair agrees. "If we're displaying it and living those values really well, then it should drive our behaviours not only through this leadership group but across the business."



Wilcox has four main growing areas across the country. Northland provides the start of their early-season potatoes (Perlas), which benefit from limited frosts in the region. Pukekohe is the company's headquarters, affectionately dubbed the 'home farm', with early spring production of potatoes, carrots and onions in clay loam, volcanic-rich soil. The soil is famous for producing long-keeper onions.

Further south in Matamata, the good, free-draining soil with a sandy base helps produce summer potatoes, carrots and onions.

Carrots and winter potatoes are grown in Ohakune through the summer, after being planted out in October and November. Stored in the ground through winter, the carrots and potatoes are easy to dig from the volcanic ash soil. It's the ideal region in the North Island for washed Vivaldi potatoes, which love the winter alpine-like conditions.

They have a central packhouse at their Pukekohe site and operate a packhouse in Rakaia where they collaborate with growers in the mid-Canterbury region. Late-season potatoes, carrots and onion crops thrive in the productive soil and climate there.

"We've been through a period of challenge, so getting 'back to basics' and 'focusing on the core' of our business are important elements that have really established us in the past," Akash says.

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It was really interesting and great to pick up some valuable life lessons and the skills you get from being away

"It has been good reflecting on past stories and products like our Perlas that have been really successful for us. How do we ensure that the story isn't lost along with the meaning and learnings we had?

"Then we're looking at some of our other products and innovations that are coming through, like our Beta Bites, growing methods and what we're doing in terms of partnerships, like with our broccolini, as an example. Where there is growth and differentiation, it keeps that energy going as we work at making a difference and limiting that commodity space and price battle." ●



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Answers.

1. What generation is currently taking over management at A.S. Wilcox and Sons, and who holds the top executive role?

The company is a fourth-generation family-owned business. The youthful management team is led by Chief Executive Akash Varma, who took over the role after seven years with the company.

2. Who are the current owners of the business, and how are they structured?

The ownership structure includes multiple family members across generations:

- *Kevin Wilcox (Managing Director for 25–30 years) and his wife Debbie.*
- *Brent Wilcox and his wife Jane.*
- *John Wilcox and Mary Anne Wilcox (an owner and key account manager).*
- *Akash Varma and his wife Anna (née Wilcox).*

3. How does the company distinguish itself from a traditional family farm in terms of its business structure and policies?

Scott Wilcox notes that A.S. Wilcox and Sons operates as a "family business rather than a family farm." It maintains formal processes, protocols, and a clear corporate structure—even for family members working there as teenagers. Additionally, Scott Harvey highlights that the company utilises a vertically integrated business model, controlling operations from crop planning and growing to post-harvest handling, sales, and marketing.

4. What specific protocol or rule does the family enforce for next-generation family members before they can obtain a permanent role in the business?

Next-generation family members are strongly encouraged to work outside the business for three to four years. When they decide to return, they are not automatically handed a job; they must formally apply for a role within the company.

5. How did the next-generation managers gain external experience before joining the family business structure?

- *Akash Varma (CEO): Studied commerce, joined Mainfreight's graduate programme, and worked overseas and locally for Mainfreight for four-and-a-half years before joining Wilcox.*

- *Blair Wilcox (Potato Crop Manager): Worked in the United Kingdom and for LeaderBrand in Gisborne.*
- *Scott Wilcox (Home Production Manager): Worked on a carrot farm in Germany for five months and on a hydroponic blueberry orchard in Hawke's Bay.*
- *Scott Harvey (Onion Crop Programme Manager): Completed a Bachelor of Agricultural Science (Hons) at Lincoln University and worked as a sales agronomist prior to joining.*

6. Why is succession important for A.S. Wilcox and Sons?

Succession is vital for A.S. Wilcox and Sons to ensure the long-term sustainability, continuity, and competitiveness of their fourth-generation family business.

- *As a fourth-generation family-owned enterprise, bringing through a new wave of leadership ensures the company transitions smoothly without losing its core identity, legacy, or operational stability.*
- *The succession strategy requires next-generation members to gain outside industry experience before returning. This external exposure injects fresh experiences, drives business growth and product innovation—such as Blair Wilcox introducing broccolini to their regular crops or adopting new growing methodologies.*
- *Chief Executive Akash Varma highlights that the vegetable industry faces challenging economic conditions. Cultivating a fresh management team with the energy, passion, and modern skills needed to focus on "back to basics" while avoiding price-commodity traps is key to their future survival.*
- *Operating across four main growing regions with over 220 full-time staff requires robust corporate oversight. Succession planning ensures that young leaders are trained across the entire supply chain—from crop planning and growing to post-harvest handling and sales, sustaining the vertical integration and ensuring a good understanding of large-scale operations.*
- *Strong succession instils foundational purpose, values, and behaviours. As Blair Wilcox notes, living these shared values within the young leadership group sets the standard for the workforce of over 300 seasonal team members across New Zealand.*