

# NEW DYNAMISM AT WILSON FABRICS

**A number of mishaps at the historically indomitable Wilson Fabrics have led to investments in IT systems as well as weaving, printing and dyeing machinery, resulting in a company that is now well placed for the next chapter of its legacy.**

Many in the industry may by now be aware that stalwart business Wilson Fabrics, historically regarded as an embodiment of reliability, quality and service, has encountered its fair share of obstacles over the past 24 months.

However, the business of moving through adversity comes with a number of handy maxims attached. One of them, which states that “an obstacle is often a stepping stone” could be said to encapsulate Wilson Fabrics’ recent journey.

Now that the dust has settled, Wilson Fabrics’ CEO Chris Sencek believes it’s critical to keep the industry apprised of the obstacles that eventually turned to “stepping stone” developments at the company.

“We’ve had a series of mishaps, from manufacturing glitches to IT breaches, which meant that for some time, we were locked into damage limitation mode, but now that the worst of our troubles are behind us, we believe the time has come for a transparent disclosure about what’s been happening at Wilson Fabrics, how we’ve resolved it, and how we’re preparing to move ahead.”

## A SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS

Issues first became apparent at Wilson Fabrics in early 2017 when changes to the layout and arrangement of the company’s mill at Wangaratta, regional Victoria, were set in motion, says Sencek.

“Originally the mill facilities had been spread over a large area and the decision was taken, in order to streamline the facility, to condense operations into a much smaller footprint comprising two factories. Unfortunately, in the process of moving the machinery into the new locations, we encountered a number of unforeseen difficulties in getting the machines up and running once they’d been reinstalled.”

In an unrelated development, around five key staff members left the company at around this time. “The staff departures were just natural career evolutions for the most part; team members moving on in their careers, but the fact that we lost that number within a short period of time added significant pressure.”

“Meanwhile, we were also implementing a change to our widths, from 280 to 300 cm wide for blind fabrics. I’m pleased to say that we expedited this successfully, but it was a move that involved considerable time and effort amid other pressures.”

Issues with the machinery at the mill might be enough to destabilise any company, but unfortunately Wilson Fabrics’ troubles were far from over. The company’s operations

were inching towards “business as usual” status again, when another serious obstacle emerged in the form of a ransomware attack that affected operations during April and May of 2018.

“It was a classic case of this kind of attack,” says Sencek. “One of our employees received an email containing a corrupted word document. The document was opened, which unleashed a virus that attacked the IP address and server.” Most people think about the backup as their go-to position; in our case, all of our backups were also corrupted, affecting all key functions:



finance, planning, manufacturing, everything. While we did initially attempt to remedy the situation ourselves, identifying a solution was taking too long so the company decided to negotiate with the initiators of the ransomware, whereby much of the mission critical data was restored.

Critically, the virus infected operations at the Wilson Fabrics dyehouse. “It wiped off all the recipes for literally thousands of shades, and this “shade data” has been permanently lost. It has been an enormous job rematching thousands of shades, as Wilson has a huge portfolio

of shades in the marketplace. We’ve now reached a stage where our dye operations are operating to the expected standard.

## UPGRADES AND LESSONS LEARNED

The IT breach led to significant changes in the company’s approach to security, says Sencek.

“We have introduced another level of security monitoring of our network to prevent malicious software infection. We have now incorporated anti malware alongside spam filtering and antivirus endpoint protection. This covers desktop computers and servers across all our sites.”

Wilson Fabrics has also strengthened its disaster recovery processes through a number of initiatives:-

- Improved password protection
- Backup up to the cloud (Amazon Web Services)
- Offline backups that are physically stored in a separate building or location
- Site to site replication of critical applications (such as payroll)

“In terms of the ransomware incident, there are a number of lessons we learnt that we would like to pass onto our customers so it doesn’t happen to them. Unfortunately, many (like us) don’t believe that it is a problem for THEM!

“Firstly everyone needs to be wary of every email they are sent and websites they browse. Users need to be educated about the dangers of viruses and ransomware. Secondly, backups need to be disengaged from the network through offline or cloud storage. But sadly there’s no room for complacency with these things; nothing is fully



protected and I’m afraid no-one is immune.”

## CHALLENGES TRIGGER INVESTMENT DRIVE

Aside from upgraded IT systems, the calamities at Wilson Fabrics’ mill have sparked another positive outcome; an investment drive in a suite of state-of-the-art machinery.

## NEW WEAVING MACHINES

The investment includes six Iteima Rapier R 9500 Weaving Machines with Staubli Electronic Jacquard capability. Key features of the machinery include:-

- High speed weaving
- Energy efficiency
- Flexibility of design
- Ability to weave wide width fabrics

“Installed and commissioned in November 2018 to replace old jacquard and weaving machines, this equipment enables us to produce innovative fabrics with computer aided design capabilities, keeping us at the forefront of international technology,” says Sencek.

## NEW PRINTING CAPABILITY

The company has also procured an EFI Reggiani – Pro 430 digital printing machine. Featuring 16 printing heads, the machine has four colour CMYK capability and is designed to print directly onto fabric. Utilising sublimation disperse water based inks, key features of the printer include high light fastness and wide width printing capability.

“The printer reinforces our ability to produce designs for free standing fabrics, furnishings, wall fabrics as well as displays. We’re also able to print on polyester fabrics. The integrated print management software enables streamlined production and data capture and we can of course work with a range of file formats from tiff to pdf to EPS and so on.”

“We can print up to 400 gsm fabric, and the machinery also has the capacity to handle large diameter rolls.”

## NEW DYEING MACHINE

Installed in December 2018, new dyeing technology was installed, capable of dyeing a wide range

of fabrics. It will also mean a significant increase in our output as it allows for larger batch sizes and is ideally suited for blind fabrics.

## LOOKING AHEAD

Sencek is keen to reassure industry clients and partners that the company is now well set for the future. “We’re still very much committed to Australian manufacturing and to supporting the local industry, a commitment that is in fact underpinned by our growing international presence in the US and Europe.”

“We’re also really grateful to all our industry associates who have continued to stand by us as we’ve gone through this challenging period.”

“The message that we’re keen to get out to the industry is that this has actually been a ‘crisis-opportunity’ of sorts. We’ve emerged from this a much stronger company, with better operations and systems than ever before, and a commitment to continue driving our quality offering to the market.”