When Richard and Wes Wyatt graduated from college in 1970, Richard had a degree in pre-law and Wes in business. “Neither of us thought about going into the wall and ceiling business at that time,” Richard Wyatt recalls, “We both had different plans.”

But fate dictated otherwise. The brothers’ father, who had been in this trade, died in that year. There wasn’t the direct connection of the sons taking over the father’s business, for the latter had brought his business to a close two and a half years earlier. But a carpenter who had worked with the elder Wyatt had some demountable partitions he wanted installed and asked the brothers if they would help. “Wes and I thought we might give that a try,” says Wyatt. “We weren’t doing anything else and thought, ‘What the heck; we have nothing to lose.’”

And, everything to gain. The two brothers began, by themselves, literally out of their basement. Now, according to Engineering News Record, they are ranked 11th in the top 20 of companies with annual revenues ranging from $12 million to $80 million. Wyatt says the annual revenues of Wyatt Incorporated, which is based in Pittsburgh, exceed $30 million. The number of employees has grown from the two brothers to about 400 today.

How did the brothers get from that basement to here? They had to accomplish an even greater distance than most. Though they had worked for their father during their summer vacations when they were younger, it was along the lines of demolition and sweeping the floor, Wyatt
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the coming nine to 12 months, and long-term to four years. “We think about different geographical markets, areas we need to strengthen and look at the various school, hospital, office and other markets to see where we should shift our forces.” Wyatt says. “If you’re just doing office work now, you’re having a tough time.”

Wyatt calls a 20-page capabilities brochure, which lists clients and the jobs that can be performed. The brochure is not mass mailed but given only to existing and prospective clients. Being such a large company, Wyatt is able to offer more manpower, resources and services than most of the competition in the area. But it also takes small jobs. Many times Wyatt himself serves as the prime contractor or construction manager.

“We’re very proud of our bonding capacity,” Wyatt says. “The bonding company is basically an insurance company that insures you based on its belief that you will complete the project based on your past record and financial soundness.” Wyatt says the premium for the bond averages 1 percent of the project, and sometimes, once clients find out Wyatt qualifies for a bond, they waive it and thus save the expense of the premium. If they do purchase the bond, Wyatt’s good record and financial strength makes the premium the owner would pay less than it might be otherwise.

Competition has gotten much tougher during the past five years or so, Wyatt says. “Businesses really do have to become slimmer and more efficient,” he explains. “The buyers of construction are very sophisticated. They are feeling margin pressure, and it continues down the food chain.” One way of dealing with this, says Wyatt, is by empowering employees more and more, giving them more responsibility. “The more they do with it, the more they earn and the more responsibility they are given,” he says. “We’re not dealing just with people in the office. It’s one thing to run a manufacturing plant, which you can oversee. But our plant is out on up to 50 building sites at one time, so you have to give your people the power and let them run with the ball.”

For its employees, the company offers and encourages ongoing training and pays for trips to various seminars or for an employee’s academic degree. Wyatt is also working with the University of Pittsburgh to improve the curriculum, so courses expand from basic engineering to incorporate more practical matters such as project management and estimating.

Of his 15-year membership in The Association of the Wall and Ceiling Industries—International, Wyatt says, “We think the companies that belong to AWCI tend to be the better companies, and construction buyers are well advised to use the association as a buying guide. AWCI offers a whole host of services and presents a good image to the outside world, so it should be supported.”

Both brothers are married and have two children. Richard, 49, has two daughters, ages 16 and 13, while Wes, 47, has two boys, ages 17 and 14. Richard
describes them both as being one-time workaholics, but now, because they’ve surrounded themselves with good people, they have more time for their family and leisure. Both enjoy golf.

The brothers tend to split the business in two in terms of their involvement: Richard, the more reserved, handles the financial side, and Wes, the more outgoing, the marketing. “Our personalities fit our roles,” Richard says. “Many brothers don’t talk to each other after being in the same business for a few years, but after 25 years in business together we’re still best of friends. I don’t believe either of us alone could do as well as both of us together have done.”

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About the Author
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