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Managing growth

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Fisher & Arnold, Inc., has a new leader with a familiar face.

Jeff Arnold is now president of the 20-year-old company following the retirement of Bobby Fisher at the end of September. Arnold has a new growth strategy and experience to build on, but he describes the intent of his transition in one word: seamless.

Company growth is something Fisher & Arnold is used to. The company started in its first year with revenues of about \$300,000 and has increased those annual revenues to more than \$9 million. Arnold says that increase has been steady and the company is now bringing in more work than ever.

Now employing about 85 people, Arnold describes the company as "the strongest it's ever been." While Fisher & Arnold ramped up its employee count steadily in the 1980s and early '90s, it hit a growth stride in the mid-90s that shot employment to over 100. The company got too big, too fast.

"Our focus on getting all (the business) we could get took our focus off doing all that we could do," Arnold says.

Fisher & Arnold will continue to grow, but will be more careful in achieving it. The engineering firm opened a Nashville branch about six years ago and acquired a firm in Chipley, Fla., at the beginning of 2005.

Learning from earlier mistakes, Arnold's plan is to "manage the company in preparation for the growth, rather than manage and realize you've grown," he says.

Fisher & Arnold has expanded its service offerings over the years and now has architecture, engineering, environmental consulting, interior design, landscape architecture, planning, surveying, transportation consulting and electrical engineering. The company's newest service offering is geospatial information systems, which is computer hardware designed to store, update and analyze geographical information.

Arnold expects growth to occur in the GIS, high-voltage electrical engineering and transportation fields, but will seek to broadly grow revenues, employees and locations.

Fisher and Arnold met 28 years ago, when Fisher hired Arnold straight out of engineering school to work in the Shelby County engineering office. After five years with the county, the two left to work for a Memphis branch of a local firm. They bought the branch a few years later to form the company in 1985 with a third partner. Each partner was responsible for bringing a portion of the cash to the table and Arnold says they were able to recoup that money within the first year.



Alan Howell/MBJ

Jordan Northcross, Jeff Arnold and Tim Verner look over a project's plans.

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Launching a company at 28 could scare some people, but through careful prayer and deliberation, Arnold and his wife Sharon were at "perfect peace" with the decision.

"I was probably too ignorant to know any better," Arnold jokes. "But there's no question in our mind that (the decision) was clarity in answer to that prayer."

Arnold is now the company's primary owner, and employees Rick Gafford, Tim Verner, Stan Moore and Shang Pan are minority owners. Arnold says the minority owners will step into a greater leadership role in the future.

He can't speak about the company without placing a huge emphasis on his employees. He knows that opportunities have to be available to retain good employees and attract young talent, and he has taken those ideals to heart.

"If you want to be the best, then you need the best people on your team."

Ed Haley, town of Arlington superintendent, has worked with Fisher and Arnold for about 25 years. Haley worked in Shelby County's engineering office before a stint in Millington and now Arlington. Fisher & Arnold is currently working on Arlington's new \$14.5 million wastewater treatment facility, a job the firm won based on its experience, accountability and qualifications.

"Not only their business, but their personal integrity and honesty in dealing with folks has been their hallmark," Haley says. "My experience has been really good with Fisher and Arnold in every area that I've dealt with them."

Fisher & Arnold built a 30,000-square-foot headquarters facility in 2004 at 9180 Crestwyn Hills Drive.

Fisher's departure is bittersweet for Arnold. The partners remain close friends, and as the company leader, Arnold is thrilled about having his chance to lead.

"I am more excited about the next 10-15 years than I have ever been."

jdonahoe@bizjournals.com | 259-1727

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