

# “THE EMPHASIS IS ON TEAM”

BY PAUL KNOWLES

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*Septimatech is experiencing unprecedented growth*

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Let's start with the name. Sharron Gilbert admits that most people pronounce “Septimatech” wrong, first time around.

“The emphasis,” she says, “is on ‘team’. It’s ‘sep - TEAM - a - tech’.”

“Team,” it turns out, is a very important emphasis at the company. The concept keeps coming up throughout the conversation with Gilbert, who is President and CEO of the Waterloo business that is experiencing significant and ongoing growth.

In fact, the name really reflects the original Septimatech team – the company was founded in 1993 by seven people (“septima” comes from the Latin for seven), including Sharron, and her father, Peter D. Fenton, the original President, who passed away in 2001. His portrait greets everyone who comes through the doors of the Septimatech building on Randall Drive in Waterloo. “We started this company from the ground up,” says Gilbert. The original group of seven came with “varying skill sets.” Her personal background included administration and sales.

Sharron Gilbert has led the company since her father died – she says that while she was being groomed for that position, Peter Fenton’s death after battling cancer thrust her into the President’s office sooner than expected. “When we started the company,” she said, “my father asked if I would be interested in being president. But it happened a lot quicker than anticipated.”

Clearly, though, they had the succession plan right. Today, Septimatech is experiencing unprecedented growth. In the past year, the number of employees has grown by 38%, to a total of 44 – about 70% of them in engineering, manufacturing and service roles, the remain-

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*continued on page 16*





*Sharron Gilbert, President and  
CEO of Septimatech.*





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*The "team" at Septimatech grew by 38% in the last fiscal year, with more growth anticipated in 2007.*

In the past year, the number of employees has grown by 38%.

der in administration and sales.

And just what does Septimatech design, manufacture and sell?

**Capabilities**

"We are in the packaging industry," says Gilbert. But they do not manufacture packages – "we engineer and manufacture capabilities."

Which means? Septimatech designs, manufactures, installs and services parts for packing and bottling lines at compa-

nies such as Clorox, Bacardi, Unilever, Proctor and Gamble, and their newest major client, the brewer Anheuser-Busch.

They are one of only a few North American players (they have no major Canadian competition, says Gilbert) in a very specific field. When Anheuser-Busch, for example, changes the shape of their beer bottle, their automated bottling line has to be adapted to fit the new design. Septimatech designs, builds, and installs the



plastic and stainless steel adapters that allow the line to carry the new bottles.

Of course, with the emphasis on lean manufacturing, and quick turn-around, the challenges can be larger than that. Septimatech has recently developed a design that allows a company to change among four different packaging shapes without changing parts on the automated line.

The engineering and manufacturing area contains quite the array of bottles and packages that present the design challenges Septimatech meets on a daily basis.

Most of their product is exported to the United States. Gilbert explains that 80% of their business is export. But although they are a thoroughly international operation, with agents in the north-eastern United States and in Quebec, "we service right from Waterloo." That's home for all of their team.

This is a team which includes not only CEO Sharron Gilbert, but also her brother, Andrew Fenton, in quality control; her sister, Sandy Kimpel, in marketing; and Gilbert's husband, Allan Lopers, who works in the sales department. Lopers and Gilbert met at Septimatech; in March, 2006, they celebrated the birth of their first child, Isaac.

Gilbert notes in passing that she had

planned to take official maternity leave, but eventually found a way to do most of her CEO work at home, thus combining motherhood with presidential responsibilities.

She obviously handled it well, because Septimatech's sales in that fiscal year reached \$6.35 million, a 32% increase over the previous year. That continued a sharp upward trend – the year before had seen 20% growth, and the projection for

can stay connected with the customers."

And when she talks about her company's accomplishments, she is quick to praise the team, as well as the suppliers and customers that are essential to Septimatech's operation.

The CEO admits, though, that they do not rely on reputation alone. "We are working quite diligently on landing corporate accounts," she adds.

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the coming year is 15%, which would carry them over the \$7.3 million mark.

Gilbert believes one factor surpasses all others in explaining their success: "our reputation... we are highly regarded in our industry."

She knows this first hand, because when Septimatech team members attend industry trade shows – a major marketing thrust for the company – Gilbert is often on site, lending support and seeking feedback from clients, prospective clients, and suppliers. She does this, she says, "so I

#### "Engineering intensive"

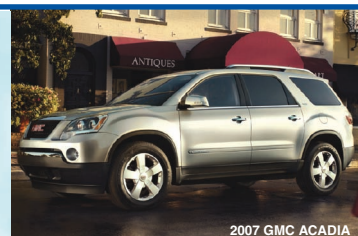
Gilbert heads a company that she describes as "engineering intensive." And it must be, because every new order presents a new design challenge. Most of the engineering and design staff – as well as the tradespeople who work in the machine shop – are graduates of Conestoga College. Gilbert says that Conestoga is one of the big reasons why Septimatech is happily located in Waterloo region. She, herself, is also a Conestoga grad, from the materials management program.

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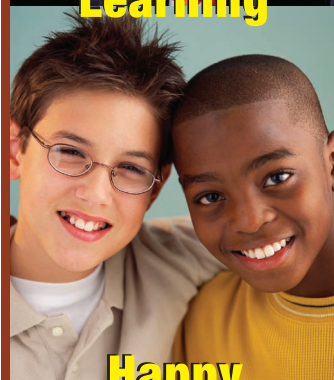
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Staff increases present unique challenges for a business that Gilbert agrees is evolving from a small business to a medium-size enterprise. Staff are not only trained for their specific job, but there is also "a lot of cross-training," she says, since there are still specific job descriptions that apply to only one employee. If that person is away or leaves, someone else must be able to fill in; thus, the emphasis on cross-training.

The Septimatech team still includes four of the original seven founders. Today, there are actually 12 shareholders in the privately-held company. And it is not quite that simple, because there are two Septimatech companies – Septimatech Developments, which is the landlord that owns the Randall Drive building (which has other tenants), and Septimatech Group, the manufacturing and engineering business.

In 2001, when Gilbert became CEO, the Developments part of the enterprise was also involved in other investments. That left "the company challenged with a lot of issues," she says, and the decision was made to focus on Septimatech's "core competencies." That's a phrase heard often in the corporate world, but in this case, it was a practical reality.

Gilbert remembers those years as terrifically challenging, as she dealt with the pressures of her new position in the shadow of the loss of her father. But she says, "his spirit allowed me to get through it all," and his presence is not forgotten – in addition to the portrait in the foyer, the board room is named the Fenton Room.

### "Challenges aren't any different"

In 2006, Gilbert participated in an event called "Entrepreneurship – a Woman's Perspective," which also included CEOs Vivienne Ojala, Pat Quinn, and Carol Leaman (see Exchange, May 2006). At that time, she suggested that "leadership is leadership," unrelated to a CEO's gender.

During the interview for this story, more than a year later, Gilbert commented further on that theme. Asked if there are challenges specifically related to being a woman and a CEO, she said, "In any role as President and CEO, you are going to have your challenges. Mine aren't any different than my male colleagues."

But she admits that the environment has changed, from a gender perspective. "Particularly in the packaging industry – when I first started going to packaging shows in 1989, it was all men in business suits. Now, I see a lot more women involved, which is fabulous."

What are the challenges she faces as a



CEO? "With our growth comes a lot of change," she says. "Finding the right staff. Training and developing your staff." But she adds, "We have fantastic staff here. It's the people who have made it so successful."

The team commitment is evident to anyone walking down the corridor from the foyer to Gilbert's office – the wall is adorned with posters made by staff teams, each focusing on one area of corporate culture, from financial management to sales and marketing (depicted by a clever collage of carrots and rabbits).

Another challenge brought by growth involves physical space. The Septimatech Developments building covers 40,000 square feet; Septimatech Group occupies 14,000 square feet. The rest is occupied by tenants, with whom the company has a great relationship.

Some of the space challenge was solved by internal renovations that enlarged a mezzanine which now houses the cafeteria. But beyond that, "we are looking to expand" by about 4,000 square feet within the building, says Gilbert. They have used the services of a consultant "to help us map out flow."

The team will continue to grow – they anticipate adding five or six employees



The Septimatech management team includes, from left, John Kanold, CAD Designer; Quinn Martin, VP Customer Experience; Sharron Gilbert, President & CEO; Jim O'Keeffe, VP Marketing & Sales and Allan Lopers, VP Special Projects & Quotes.



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this year. Although finding the right staff is always a challenge, as Gilbert noted, she adds that the Waterloo Region, with its diverse industrial base, does offer a strong labour pool. For instance, when area industries related to the automotive sector saw weakened markets, Septimatech hired several auto industry veterans.

The company also works with co-op pro-

their Waterloo base, they can consult with the customers, turn complex jobs around quickly, and deliver according to just-in-time demands. She says that in their industry niche, the only competition comes from a few American firms – there is no present-day threat from offshore because of the timing, customization and service issues.

*“I love it here... It’s exciting to see where we were in 1993, and where we’d like to be in the next five years.”*

grams in high schools; at time of writing, there were three Listowel high school students on co-op placement at Septimatech.

All members of the team must be able to adapt to change. Gilbert says, “The technology is changing from an ongoing perspective.” And that is not the only change that impacts Septimatech. “The demands from customers are changing,” she adds. “They want things more quickly, they want it right the first time, they want it when they want it!”

She insists that this gives Septimatech an advantage in the global market. From

### “I love it”

Gilbert is unequivocal about her job. “I love it here,” she says. “It’s the people, and the challenge of it. The customers. It’s exciting to see where we were in 1993, and where we’d like to be in the next five years.”

Where would that be, exactly? “More expansion of our product line,” says the CEO. “More innovation.” Capturing “more of the industry segments we are in.”

And internally? The President and CEO plans to “continue to challenge the organization to be the best, in terms of quality, service and delivery.” X



Sharron Gilbert with the portrait of her father Peter Fenton.

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