

CRAFT WORK SOLOMEO

Preface: Translating inspiration into soaring profits is an imperfectly understood art but cashmere specialist Brunello Cucinelli has cracked at least part of the code. And by putting the skill and contentment of its artisans at the heart of the product, it is remaking and re-energising the notion of the factory.

Company: Brunello Cucinelli
Location: Solomeo, Italy
Founded: 1978
Number of employees: 1,000
Number of premises: 2 (Solomeo’s castle and an industrial cluster of restored buildings)
Start-up cost: 500,000 lire to produce the first samples
Family members involved: 4 (Brunello works with his wife Federica and daughters Carolina and Camilla)

Quote: *‘We are a source of inspiration for new entrepreneurial generations’*

At the Brunello Cucinelli factory in Umbria, lunchtime for workers is an hour and a half long. In the canteen, a former farmhouse, the staff sit down at a long wooden table to a subsidised meal of regional produce. The owner, who shares his name with the factory, believes that lunch is a sacred ritual – *il pranzo è sacro* – and one that ups the creativity and fosters familial cohesion.

It is an unusual set-up for a luxury clothier listed on the Milan Stock Exchange with a worth of over €1bn. But while turning a healthy profit, Brunello has crafted a business with an overtly humanist ethos. “Ethical capitalism means that we have to respect workers’ dignity, culture, art and beauty,” he says. “This is a founding principle of our collections. We believe that giving economic recognition to the people who work for us allows us to preserve the high level of craftsmanship and quality of product.”

The village of Solomeo, the company’s headquarters, has about 750 employees working in its restored interiors. Its buildings house production of the ready-to-wear collections; a 14th-century castle complete with wooden beams, stone fireplaces and frescoed walls is home to workshops and the quality-control facilities for cashmere production. Every element of the environment has been chosen to “elevate” staff.

The project includes a theatre and there is a school of craft, a vital part of Brunello’s long-term plans, that teaches everything from mending to cutting and assembly. The aim is to usher in what the company calls a “neo-renaissance” in Italian manufacturing: to regenerate the status of craft as a noble profession and inspire a new generation of artisans. In pursuit of this vision, Brunello believes a high wage is crucial to changing attitudes and pays his staff accordingly.

He also sees the way the company operates as setting a precedent: “We are a source of inspiration for new entrepreneurial generations,” he says. “This business model – based on authentic Italian craftsmanship – is thanks to contemporary creative artisans. It can be replicated and it can have a significant future.” — (M)

Why it works: Striving to elevate and inspire your workers can, in turn, help elevate the product. Brunello Cucinelli’s share price is proof that beauty and ethics need not hinder growth. The company’s strength is in its artisanal talent, which is why it is committed to training and longevity. The school of craft and favourable working conditions enjoyed by staff ensure that, once skilled, the workers who have developed within the firm stay with it for many years.

