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For Hartkopfs, furniture is a family affair

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Natalie Hartkopf, the CEO of the small-but-growing Seattle office furniture company Hightower, soon will join her sister Rachel on maternity leave.

The sisters founded the company with their father, Scott, 16 years ago when they were students at the University of Washington.

The women show no signs of stress over temporarily relinquishing control of their design and manufacturing company, though.

"It's because we have a team behind us keeping the wheels on the bus," said [Rachel Hartkopf](#), who is the board chairwoman for the company and is having her first child.

She will be a stay-at-home mom at the board level. Her CEO sister is expecting her second child.

Located in Seattle's Smith Tower, Hightower's clients include high-profile technology companies like Microsoft, Google, Amazon and Facebook. Hightower has facilities on the East Coast and the Midwest and collaborates with San Francisco design firm Most Modest while also partnering with manufacturers in Scandinavia.

The company's revenue is under \$100 million with 20 percent annual growth most years. Hightower is in a building phase now and expects to grow by double digits this year, [Natalie Hartkopf](#) said, adding the company will start considering international exports.

Hightower sprang from the sisters' design sense and their father's work as a division president at office furniture behemoth Steelcase. As kids they visited [Scott Hartkopf](#) at work and went with him to the factory. Their house was full of nice pieces, and at hotels they often flipped furniture over to see who made it.

But neither expected to go into the business.

When they did, they wore most of the hats, overseeing product development, outside sales, project management, logistics and partner relationships.

They moved to San Francisco, then Hightower's top market, where they lived together and worked long hours while shifting into higher leadership roles.

They commemorated this intense bonding experience by getting matching tattoos, each a pair of tiny birds on their right wrists.

Nine years ago, Seattle became Hightower's top market, and today the company operates out of the refurbished Smith Tower, which the local Building Owners and Managers Association chapter named one of its 2018 TOBY (The Outstanding Building of the Year) winners.

"Smith Tower won the TOBY for the historical category, and Hightower's space was instrumental in a part of this process," said Lynda Collie, director of Real Estate Services for Unico Properties, which manages and partially owns the 42-story building. Collie said Hightower's contribution was showing how tenants can blend a modern, clean look with the classic fixtures of the iconic tower.



ANTHONY BOLANTE | PSBJ

Hightower founder and CEO Natalie Hartkopf (left) and her sister Rachel Hartkopf are part of the company's leadership team and are pictured in their swank Smith Tower offices in Seattle on February 21, 2019. The furnishings displayed here are some examples of their business products.

The Hartkopfs like what they're seeing on the skyline. By one count, Seattle still has more construction cranes than any other city in the United States.

"It's a huge indicator," Natalie said. "It's looking good through 2020."

Hightower, which also operates in the higher education and hospitality markets, is preparing for the eventual downturn by diversifying its offerings, exploring new markets and planning new product categories, which the Hartkopfs declined to discuss.

They said the open-office concept will continue to evolve. Clients in general, but millennials in particular, want comfort and flexibility.

"Choice is what it really comes down to," Natalie said. Offices need both open spaces and quieter, private places, so Hightower develops variety in its offerings with a focus on acoustics.

Working together has been good for the relationship of the sisters, who are three-and-a-half years apart. They complement each other's skill sets.

"This has been our big collaboration," Rachel said. "We've leaned on each other."

Hightower

Designs and manufactures office furniture

Founded: 2003

Employees: 100, plus 50 outside sales reps

Headquarters: Seattle

Other operations: Manufacturing plant and distribution center in North Carolina and customer service center in Kansas City

Lessons learned

Listen to others, absorb their feedback and reflect on your decisions, even if you would make the same choice again.

Stay in front of your customers.

Trust your intuition.

Strategically partner with nice people that you genuinely like.

Well-defined metrics plus clear communication are essential for success, especially startups because you're often moving so fast.

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