Few manufacturing and assembly companies can say they have thrived for over four decades in one community while being part of a century-old global and family-owned business. Viessmann Canada has not only done that, it is now transitioning the company’s products into a whole new and exciting digital era.

The company’s most recent iteration involves an expansion of its research and development facility to develop new and innovative digital interfaces for the sleek, internet-connected heating control systems that the modern-day North American market wants.

“Digital is now at the forefront for us,” says Harald Prell, President of Viessmann Canada, who has been with the company since his family immigrated from Germany in 1980 to take over the management of the facility in Canada.

The company is part of the Viessmann Group, a family-owned international manufacturer of heating, industrial and refrigeration systems that was founded in Germany in 1917 and has grown to have 23 production companies in 12 countries, subsidiaries and representatives in 74 countries, and some 12,000 employees around the world. It is now in its 4th generation with Maximilian Viessmann as Co-CEO of Viessmann Group.

In 1978, the company set up its first location outside of Europe in Waterloo where it had a cast-iron boiler manufacturing facility. Over time, this operation has shifted its operations from manufacturing and assembly of boilers to designing and engineering the electrical controls for a range of Viessmann products.

EMBRACING TECH TO MEET THE MARKET

Heating has become a high-tech business and Viessmann has become a technology-driven modern manufacturing company. North American consumers want digital interfaces that are intuitive and comfortable for them to use, so Viessmann recently decided to grow its research and development team in Waterloo.

“What we want to do in the next number of years is specifically develop products for the North American market to meet future demand,” Prell says. “In the past, we have taken the European products, modified them and sold
them over here, but the future for us will be in developing and engineering products for the market over here.”

Lukas Loidol, who has been with Viessmann since 2011 and came to Waterloo about a year ago as the Director of Engineering for North America, says “we are really focused on developing features for North America and developing the user experience and user interface tailored to the North American applications.”

The company’s lab has been around since the early 1990s and now includes an impressive array of equipment such as a climate control chamber used for efficiency testing and certification, a CSA accredited test lab and NOx (nitrogen oxide) test equipment.

The lab will now add more equipment related to the development of digital products. The research and development team is also growing, starting with a couple of recent open positions and eventually growing into a team of perhaps over a dozen people, he says.

The company’s goal in North America is to not only sell more integrated energy efficient heating, ventilation and air conditioning (HVAC) equipment but also to help the various customers provide end-to-end solutions so that they can offer greater control and predictive maintenance services to the home owner.

“They home owner is no longer just happy with heating appliances. They want to be able to remotely control the appliances and to not have to think about when to get maintenance. We can use artificial intelligence to take care of that and integrate the equipment into the servicing network so that you don’t wake up one morning under a cold shower,” Loidol says. Contractors also want to have a more intuitive user interface for commissioning, “so that they can do that on an iPad from their home office couch, instead of standing right in front of the boiler.”

THE WATERLOO ADVANTAGE

Prell is not exactly sure why Hans Viessmann, son of founder Johann Viessmann, chose Waterloo for the company’s first North American market foray four decades ago. He assumes it had to do with the community’s Germanic roots coupled with the University of Waterloo’s engineering school and a manufacturing sector with well-trained tradespeople.

There was simply a good availability of talent for the company to draw from and that availability of good talent is what is helping to drive the company forward today.

Although Hans Viessmann could never have guessed that Waterloo was going to become the “Silicon Valley of the North” with a large and impressive pool of digital talent, “it very much plays into our game now,” Prell says. “Waterloo is definitely the place to be, absolutely.”

He says the region is also in a good location as a hub for the Viessmann North America operations that include a facility in Langley, B.C. and one in Warwick, Rhode Island in the United States.
Loidol adds that not only is it a community with a great talent pool to draw from, but it is also a great ecosystem with hundreds of startups and support organizations like Communitech, the Accelerator Centre and Velocity.

**AN EXCITING JOURNEY**

Prell, who plans to retire next year, says he sees an exciting and successful future for Viessman’s operations in Waterloo. He attributes Viessmann Canada’s staying power to its ability to innovate as technology evolved, working to be first on the market with products like electronic boiler controls and thermal solar panels for heating and cooling systems.

Talented employees, the quality of the products and support for contractors are big factors in the company’s ability to grow and expand across Canada’s huge landscape.

Loidol, at the other end of his career, is excited to be part of the digital transformation of a long-lived manufacturing company in such a dynamic tech ecosystem. “I am an active contributor to that change,” he says. “It’s an exciting journey.”