As they work to upgrade their terminology and capabilities, family business owners and executives appear well-aware of the unique opportunity they have to out-perform competitors based on a comprehensive set of factors that extend beyond process and technology. Seventy-five percent of the respondents to PwC’s family business survey indicated that having a clear set of values creates a competitive advantage.

Aging leadership marks a perennial challenge and one that family businesses have made strides in addressing; still, much more progress is needed. Until recently, a disturbingly high number of companies did not have a “drop-dead plan” in place that laid out how to address a founder’s unexpected death. Now, as more family businesses invest in formal succession planning capabilities, savvy leaders realize that these plans should extend beyond ownership and well into the management ranks. “If the owner of your family business is 65 years old, there’s a good chance that the COO and CFO are also in their 60s,” Rivers says, “and most of the executives at the senior vice president level are probably in their late 50s.” For this reason, Flack prefers to use the term “continuity planning” when describing the leadership development and succession planning capabilities his team is helping family businesses get in place.

2. Technology

“The family business community has traditionally been 10 to 15 years behind when it comes to investing in bleeding-edge technology,” Rivers says. Family businesses, he adds, tend to wait to invest in a new technology until it has been proven to deliver value and has been adopted as an industry standard or best practice. This approach proved wise for decades (it was savvy to pass on a Second Life storefront a decade ago), but it has become problematic as the pace of technology advancement has accelerated. In PwC’s survey of 2,900 family businesses, 80 percent of global respondents identified digital disruption as their company’s No. 1 challenge. Only 25 percent of the Deloitte survey respondents indicated that their company has completed a strategy for the use of digital technologies. One way to keep pace with technology’s march, Downing says, is by partnering with other organizations to develop new products and services. Business consolidation can also help, mergers not only give family businesses access to new products or services, but can also deliver new talent and cutting-edge technology. Family business leaders also might consider a less cautious approach to investing in relatively low-cost new technologies, such as cloud-based software and services and robotic process automation (RPA).

3. Continuity

Aging leadership marks a perennial challenge and one that family businesses have made strides in addressing; still, much more progress is needed. Until recently, a disturbingly high number of companies did not have a “drop-dead plant” in place that laid out how to address a founder’s unexpected death. Now, as more family businesses invest in formal succession planning capabilities, savvy leaders realize that these plans should extend beyond ownership and well into the management ranks. “If the owner of your family business is 65 years old, there’s a good chance that the COO and CFO are also in their 60s,” Rivers says, “and most of the executives at the senior vice president level are probably in their late 50s.” For this reason, Flack prefers to use the term “continuity planning” when describing the leadership development and succession planning capabilities his team is helping family businesses get in place.

As they work to upgrade their terminology and capabilities, family business owners and executives appear well-aware of the unique opportunity they have to out-perform competitors based on a comprehensive set of factors that extend beyond process and technology. Seventy-five percent of the respondents to PwC’s family business survey indicated that having a clear set of values creates a competitive advantage.
At his first job after college, Soren Bjorn drafted a list of ideas to improve the company. When the list was presented to the board, they thought the ideas were so good, they gave him a promotion. A big one. He became chief executive officer at the age of 29.

“That was a good lesson that you need to be careful what you say,” Bjorn laughed. “If you have good ideas, you should speak up. But you should also be prepared to follow through on those ideas. I would say I definitely wasn’t ready at 29, but it was an experience that shaped my career.”

That “follow through” mindset not only secured him an executive position before his 30th birthday, but more recently, it placed him as one of the agriculture industry’s leaders in the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) discussions, the new trade agreement proposed to replace NAFTA, and now, U.S. immigration policy reform discussions. “You’ve got to speak your mind, but once you do that, you have to get involved,” Bjorn, who joined the USMCA discussions as a board member for the Produce Marketing Association, said. “I don’t have all the answers, but I can tell a lot about the impact the proposed new immigration policy would have on the U.S. food supply. I feel I have an obligation to share that, but I also have to offer possible solutions.”

His younger brother Thomas is a professional golfer in Denmark. After attending university in Denmark for three years studying Economics and playing on the Danish National Golf Team, he earned an athletics scholarship to Baylor, thanks to the father of one of his teammates who would later help him get his first job too. (Yes, that first job that eventually turned into a CEO position). Bjorn lettered in golf both of his eligible years and captained the team his final year. That year, he also decided he would pursue a business career instead of a golf career. After he graduated in 1992 and during his first job in the food industry, he went back to school for his MBA at TCU. He’s been working in the food industry, and the U.S., since his graduation from Baylor.

“I didn’t think I was going to America to live there the rest of my life,” Bjorn said. “For me, America was the land of opportunities. There’s almost no chance something like this would have happened to me in Denmark. I am incredibly grateful.”