

insight

Issue 4
September 2009

Corporate Social Responsibility in Practice



In a series of 10 interviews with Business Leaders in the Czech Republic, Mark Hamill (pictured), Global Managing Director for SpenglerFox, an Irish Executive Search organization and external partner with UNICEF across the CEE markets discusses social, professional and corporate social responsibility challenges facing business leaders in these demanding times.

Alexis George is CEO of ING Insurance Czech and Slovak Republics. I met with her on the top floor of the ING offices on Nadrazni in Andel. Alexis resides in Pruhonice with her husband, 2 children and their two dogs.

When time allows, Alexis enjoys relaxing in the local Pivovar in Pruhonice, and from time to time also comes into Prague and enjoys walking by the river. She loves the great choice of restaurants and bars in Prague and has a weakness for sushi, thankfully she has found a great sushi bar close to her office for her weekly indulgence. On summer evenings she also enjoys the food and splendid view from Hegertova Cilhena restaurant.

While she enjoys spending time downtown, and riverbank walks with a coffee stop at Slavia Café she is most relaxed close to home in Pruhonice. Her favorite day trip is to visit Kutna Hora or Marianske Lazne, as she has already done Karlovy Vary many times. Alexis expects that her home will convert into a Bed & Breakfast over the next four months with lots of friends and family visiting to enjoy and experience Prague.

Alexis, while not speaking much Czech has loves words such as 'spatny' because it just sounds exactly like it means, and 'zmrzlina' because it means ice cream and is so tough to say.

When it comes to the Czech people Alexis really likes them, although at first they can appear quite frosty, once you get to know them they are warm and genuine. She believes them to have a high willingness to learn, to change and adapt, along with being hardworking and committed.

According to Alexis the challenge for a manager is to open the eyes of their reports to the opportunities, as in her experience, when they are committed they deliver the results. She has noticed that Czechs are still very respectful of authority, and that they need to learn to be more confident to challenge those above them. In turn managers need to be able to let them know it's alright to make mistakes, and that taking risks is a part of business.

Regarding the current economic crisis, it is clear that the Financial Services sector is being heavily affected. Locally though, Alexis is confident ING have taken the right measures to steer the business successfully through these very challenging times. They have also been able to change their strategy to focus more on the short term, to educate their customer base, and to engage in open discussion to change their product range to include less high risk assets. Alexis is currently spending a lot of time on the road, meeting with colleagues, explaining the current strategy, engaging in Q&A sessions and getting some excellent feedback from them.

Regarding her advice to first time managers, as someone who has seen a few recessions already, Alexis advises that after each recession there comes a period of growth, so you need to protect your business, look after your customer base and look after your internal talent. She also advises not to panic and to make decisions to enable your business to be stronger when the markets bounce back.

Alexis has had several mentors throughout her career, although back then mentoring happened more by accident, whereas today it's a clear part of companies HR process. Her best advice from a mentor was to 'believe in herself' and to 'take the risk and have a go – don't stand at the back of the queue'.

Alexis backpacked around the world for a year following university, when she returned to Australia the market was in the middle of a recession, she took a job beneath her skills and experience to get her foot on the ladder but quickly became frustrated. A colleague told her to either "get on with it, or get out" – which was excellent advice, as she says 'all jobs are boring at some point' – nevertheless you should always plan to do your current job to the best of your ability and not just plan a move to your next position. Alexis advises people to enjoy their job, be good at it, don't be stressed about being the best, be memorable, make an effort to stand out and take risks!

When on holidays Alexis turns off her blackberry, although she did say she will sneak in 30mins work in the mornings before her family wakes up – it helps being an early riser! She feels it's crucial to have time away from work and spend with your family to get a bit of perspective. If there is something so urgent, people will you! When it comes to managing her emails, Alexis has three levels of priority folders: action, later or delete, to be effective in the current business environment it is important to be highly organized. Alexis hates going home with unanswered messages in her inbox, but knows when she must switch off.

When growing up in a small country town in Australia, Alexis aspired to be a Doctor; however a less than motivating teacher told her she was not smart enough! This motivated her to prove them wrong, and though she got the right grades to gain acceptance to medicine, Alexis thought the idea of 6 years study with no money was suddenly less appealing!

ING is a global partner with UNICEF, but locally they are not so active together, Alexis is certainly hoping to change this and help get her and her team involved in the local UNICEF activities. When in Australia she saw how business and charities can really co-operate for the greater good within communities, and hopes to do the same here.