

insight

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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.

Chris Hunt is GM Red Bull Czech & Slovak Republic and has been in Prague since 2006. He has two young kids aged 5 months and 2 and a half years old. Chris' 2nd child was born in their house in Prague and delivered by Chris, with the aid of lots of Red Bull. As a family in his spare time they really enjoy spending time in the local parks, their favorites being Petrin and Landronka.

In the quiet moments Chris enjoys going downtown for either dinner with his wife either to Baroc or L'angolo although they try and avoid the same place twice! Chris rarely has a dilemma where to go and hang out as his work and social life combine, and he often checks out Red Bull's presentation in HORECA (hotels, restaurants, café) market with his team. It's a tough life for Chris with a ready made legitimate excuse go into every bar in town!

When Chris has family in town or is looking for a short get away, he enjoys going to Cesky Raj – which he describes as 'Paradise, the prehistoric rock formations make for a stunning landscape and it's a great place for summer picnics'.

Having been here for 2 years Chris still finds the language very challenging, but his favorite Czech word is 'Nazdar' he particularly loves the way it's emphasized between friends, particularly later in a night out when the drinks are flowing. I must say I totally agree with him on this, for foreigners it really is a great 'greeting', and has an excellent ring to it.

The best thing Chris appreciates about Prague over other cities he has been to is lunch by the river with his family in the summer which makes them feel so lucky to actually live in such a

beautiful city. No surprises that the taxi drivers are bottom of his list for least favorite things about Prague, it seems that this reputation is struggling to disappear, although it does seem to be getting better.

One of the best things about living in Czech, according to Chris, is that there is still a sense of respect between people. Chris believes the Czech traditional family unit is still more intact than in other areas resulting in more disciplined and discreet behavior. He greatly appreciates the sense of outdoor culture here, and loves to see all the bikes on top of the car roofs heading for the pension at the weekend!

When asked regarding an area he would like to see improved, Chris who sees his product being handled in the service business on a daily basis, says that it would be great to see more consistent levels of customer service, sometimes the experience is fantastic, sometimes less so.

From a professional perspective, Chris feels very lucky at Red Bull CK/SK to work with a young & highly motivated team where levels of passion and commitment benchmark very well with other European markets that he has experienced. Chris still feels a slight difference in the recruitment market – in the UK for example the onus is very much on the candidate to sell themselves whereas in the Czech market the balance has been a little more in the candidates favour - he believes this will change as consumer markets tighten and the employment arena becomes more competitive.

Regarding the current market conditions, internationally Red Bull has decided to focus on maintaining their assets and infrastructure with a focus on retaining the quality of their people and the integrity of their teams. The price is some inevitable but appropriate restrictions in S&B and a focus on sensible budgeting and efficiency. Locally they remind themselves that in times of crisis people still need energy! – so continue to focus on delivering the Red Bull brand in the most efficient way possible in every channel where they operate. The choices they currently have to make, striving to maintain or improve very high delivery and execution standards in more cost efficient ways, can only make them a healthier business in the long run.

I asked Chris about what advice he would give to ‘first time’ business leaders out there, and his clear recommendation is to focus on the quality and motivation of your people. The best people, set clear, transparent and appropriate goals have the highest chance of success.

When asked about his favorite business mentor and what lessons do you still remember and use on a daily basis, Chris replied that he was always impressed by Greenspan & Co just for the raw intellectual horsepower they applied to market dynamics – all the statements about how fiscal markets are self managing sounded so impressive for years when business was in good shape. Clearly we now know that’s a flawed theory. As he gets a little wiser he tries not to follow one mentor or single philosophy, there is no big theory of ‘how to do things right’ so he recommends to try and pick and choose to construct a blend of common sense principles – but that fundamentally good business is about common sense commonly applied.

Regarding 'work/life' balance and how to manage downtown Chris definitely is a big Blackberry fan, he would be lost without it, but tries to avoid it when with the family. Chris receives between 70 – 150 mails each day which he finds manageable. Chris' advice is, just deal with them once, avoid leaving things open so they keep bouncing around.

Chris finds it easier to achieve the work/life balance while living in Prague where he lives 20 minutes from the Red Bull offices. In UK he would be away through the majority of the week. He tries to get home to put the kids to bed and dedicate the weekends 100% to his family, with maybe a trip to the gym if he can squeeze it in.

In terms of childhood dreams, Chris fancied himself as a Jazz musician or International rugby player, he played for 25 yrs, with a international career cruelly cut short only by a lack of pace and ability!

Regarding CSR, as a global business, Red Bull supports a fantastic cause which is the 'Wings For Life' Charity which follows the principal aim of promoting research worldwide in order to expedite scientific and clinical progress towards a cure for Spinal Cord Injury (SCI) Paralysis.

When asked about UNICEF in the Czech Republic, Chris very enthusiastically knows that it's a super worthy cause and that he and his team would like to get involved more.

Chris believes that in the short term employers will set the tone and tempo as unemployment has risen fairly starkly, many people, particularly in the US, will focus primarily on regaining their former 'status' but inevitably markets will stabilize over time and a meaningful CSR agenda could still prove to be a strategic advantage in getting and keeping the best and brightest.

Finally we turned the question to advice Chris would pass on to those who currently find themselves without employment. Clearly some uncertainty remains due to current global conditions, not least the outlook for the crucial manufacturing base, but when compared to many other European regions the long terms fundamentals for business still look relatively positive in the Czech market. GDP is forecast to be somewhere between 2,5-4% (depending on who you listen to) and whilst this represents a clear decline it's still a lot better than in many other Euro regions. From an FMCG (fast moving consumer goods) perspective there is still major investment from Major Grocery Retailers in terms of infrastructure and new stores, which is an indication of long terms faith in the market.

Finally Chris recommends if things don't always work out there is ready access to the best beer in the world and of course Red Bull to get you back on your feet!