

Susan Christensen in Slovakia – streamlining steel plant accounting

Toronto was half a world away from the Slovakian steel-making city of Kosice, so Susan Christensen naturally felt isolated and homesick at first. However, staff at the VSZ a.s. Kosice steel plant were instantly considerate, making the adjustment easier. During her 15-month stay she replaced a home-grown, outdated and batch processed accounting system with the advanced financial software Computer Methods International Corporation (CMiC) sells to some of North America's largest companies.

Susan returned to CMiC in North York last summer, to resume her career as a senior business consultant, grateful for the learning experience in a challenging Eastern European business environment, but pleased to be home.

Allen Berg, CMiC's chairman and founder, secured the contract to install its financial system software at partially-privatized but mainly state-owned VSZ. The company is the largest hot and cold-rolled steel mill enterprise in the former Czechoslovakia and Eastern Slovakia's largest employer. Kosice is the country's second largest city (population 250,000).

Susan, a CMiC staff consultant for about two years when she left, recalls: "We worked through each of the modules, which took time because VSZ has so many departments within a collection of more than 100 subsidiaries. They make steel for cars, gas tanks, radiators for houses, pipe fittings ... all kinds of products."

It wasn't easy. As VSZ groped its way from an eastern style of financial accountability to the western standard of income/expenses, profit/loss accountability, there was much to explain.

"I was amazed at the way VSZ handled the changes and fascinated watching the westernization of Kosice's overall lifestyle," Susan commented. The business office was not on a LAN, but what Susan calls a "sneakernet". Employees with PCs downloaded to a diskette, took it to another machine where somebody would download it, possibly walk it over to another workstation and so on.

"We made everything electronically accessible and organized one database instead of several. With the software we've loaded for them they can now have many companies running the same software and on the same machine because we use Oracle's database.

"They've merged subsidiaries' financials into the same accounting package, making reporting and adjusting statements much easier and presenting a truer picture. They no longer have to figure out that account 'a' from one company equals account 'c' in another because everybody is using the same financial structure.

"With the new system they will always know exactly where they are, in any of the companies, fully-owned or subsidiaries. General ledger, accounts payable and accounts receivable are now on-line."

VSZ programmers also received further training at CMiC's office, partly because VSZ wants to be a reseller in the expanding Eastern European market for CMiC. For that they will have to support and modify the software in an increasingly competitive market.

The software was translated in Slovakia, using Oracle's multilingual code.

Susan lived in a standard Slovak apartment, socialized with new found friends, played tennis, skied in the nearby mountains, explored the city and made short trips outside in the Skoda car provided for her.

Kosice is "five hours from anywhere" by car so that serious touring called for more planning and time, like her visit to Prague, 11 hours away, then Vienna, and Bratislava, the Slovakian capital. At one point she visited England before returning to Canada.

Susan graduated from Laurentian University in Sudbury with a B.A. and became involved with a retailer employer's computerization. Her fascination with that field led to a two-year course in computer programming at Toronto's George Brown College. For ten years after graduation she worked for software development companies before coming to CMiC.

Susan was barely back in Toronto from Kosice when she was assigned as project manager on a contract to install CMiC's financial software at Ontario Hydro Technologies in Etobicoke. This time she didn't have far to go – she lives in neighboring Mississauga.

Would she go back to Europe on another posting? "France or England, like a shot", she laughed, "but not further east than Prague." With VSZ as reseller and Eastern Europe a hot market for western financial (and other kinds) of software, maybe she should keep her passport up to date.

East meets West, at STEELMAN

STEELMAN sponsored Peter Mizik, deputy general manager at VSZ, and Vladimir Rabatin, director, at York University's annual East-West Exchange program last summer. It exposes Eastern European managers to advanced North American management techniques (and was co-founded by the university's Enterprise York and STEELMAN).

Vera M. Petrashkewych, a client services consultant at STEELMAN, provided a tutorial for Peter and Vladimir, on business applications, customizing reports and executive decision support models.

