



By Camille E. Acey

Bringing Foreign Managers Into Slovenia's Business Community

An interview with Klaus Schuster, the president of the foreign managers section of the Managers Association in Slovenia



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You could say that Klaus Schuster is a manager with two hearts, the first that of a foreign businessman, an Austrian living outside of his mother country, and the other that of someone devoted to his adopted country of Slovenia. Formerly of Volksbank Slovenia and Volksbank Serbia, Schuster left that company in 2006 to form his own consulting companies in Serbia and Slovenia, both of which are called Klaus Schuster Consulting. Considering his expertise, commitment to the region, and enviable command of Slovenian it's no surprise that when the Managers Association of Slovenia was looking for someone to take the lead on a project last year, they approached Schuster.

The Managers Association, which is headed by Gorenje CFO Franjo Bobinac, is an educational, resource, and advocacy group which organizes conferences, seminars, and networking events for its over 1,000 members. The association also boasts a subgroup or "section" of women managers and another for young people in management. Klaus Schuster was vaguely familiar with MAS but not a member, he'd never been asked to join and just assumed that the almost entirely Slovene group was not for him. However, it turned out the association had been looking for an opportunity to reach out beyond the boundaries of the Slovene-speaking management community and draw foreigners into the group. Schuster fatefully visited the association's office, and as he puts it, "I came in with a question and left with a mission." His mission was to help create and lead the third section of the association, the Section of Foreign Managers.

Mr. Schuster abounds with ideas for this project and recently spoke to SBR about his plans as the president of this exciting new

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group.

► *Can you tell us about any specific challenges that you've noticed that foreign managers face in Slovenia? Do you have any personal stories?*

Schuster: One of the reasons why we started thinking about setting up the foreign section is that one barrier is always the language. The Slovenian language is not the easiest to learn. I had this same experience; you come as a foreigner and you usually have an assignment for one to three years, and you have to deliver certain results to this subsidiary and maybe to your head office as well, and there usually isn't enough time to spend learning the language. So, due to this one issue – the language barrier – many foreign managers don't really get in touch with Slovenian managers. This is the piece of the puzzle that we would like to provide as the Section of Foreign Managers, to integrate foreign managers into the Slovenian business environment.

► *Are there groups already active for foreign managers and workers in Slovenia? If so, what makes this one different?*

Schuster: Of course, there are several groups active already, starting with the groups around the embassies and the chambers of commerce, but what makes us different from them is that they are very much related to each nationality, and in our section we invite all of them, across all the nationalities. When I came here as an Austrian, I just met Austrians. That's not to say that I don't want to [meet them], but I can also talk with them in my home country. I would like to use the opportunity here to talk to Slovenes, to the Frenchmen, to the Italians,

whomever, because this makes sense when you go abroad as a manager; you broaden your horizons and your knowledge.

► *What are the major challenges in the Slovenian market now? How do you think this cross-cultural dialogue will help address some of them?*

Schuster: How I see it is, I have two hearts my body, one is that of a foreigner and the other one is the heart of a person who has lived here now for a long time. Foreigners usually are not so familiar with Slovenia's economy

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since the country is quite small, but when you come to Slovenia they see a highly-developed market and this is also a challenge for a foreign manager. Because usually you assume it will be a small market and let's say some 15 years after being separated from former-Yugoslavia. It's really highly competitive; in many cases you can already compare Slovenia with countries like Austria or Germany, especially when you take into account the labor market for instance, so it's not easy to do business here. Especially not as easy as if you would go further east, to markets like Serbia. I think this is where many foreign managers coming to Slovenia for the first time are surprised.

► *I'm interested to hear more about your vision for the section and the role you think the section can play in familiarizing new managers to the country.*

Schuster: The vision of the foreign section is to connect foreign managers with the Slovenian business environment and to share experiences in both directions. So we have three approaches: one is the events, where we try to bring someone from one of our home countries who will give us their view from another environment. We invite both Slovenian and foreign managers to those events and afterwards we have a possibility for all the participants to do networking. The second thing we would like to establish is a so-

called "think tank," to transfer the best practices from abroad – from our home countries – to Slovenia, but not [to imply] that we, as foreigners, can show how good we are abroad and what Slovenians should learn from us: no. We would just like to provide this to the Slovenian government, business environment, and media. The third thing is a platform for foreign managers, an independent platform which we just route them through. For example, you come here as a foreigner with your family [and you have questions like]: Which schools should our kids go to?

Are there certain associations that I should join? If I would like to go to the mountains, which mountain? These are practical questions, really, so we would like to have one platform available to foreigners, this is simply the idea.

► *With the foreign section, more so than with the other sections, you are dealing with a very transient group, people here on short assignments of two to three years. Is the group structured in such a way that you accept that people are coming and going all the time?*

Schuster: This is just what we understand. Foreign managers are usually not the owners of the company so it's not on them to decide how long they will stay here, but it makes no difference. Every manager and every owner-manager is welcome.

Want to know more?

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Everyone's Welcome (Now)

The Slovenian Manager's Association opens its doors to foreign managers

When thinking of Valentine's Day, most people conjure up images of roses, candles, and romantic dinners. But on this particular Valentine's, quite a few of Slovenia's top managers found themselves staring, not into the eyes of their beloved husbands or wives, but rather at an Austrian professor, Dr. Helmut Karner. The distinguished prof was giving a two-hour lecture (provocatively titled "I Read it for You") focusing on that always-stimulating topic, business literature. In addition to providing a valuable crash course in the latest business trends, it also served as the memorable (if not romantic) inaugural event for the newly-formed Foreign Section of the Manager's Association of Slovenia.

The association, which in Slovenian is called Združenje Manager, currently boasts over 1,000 manager members. It serves as a hub for advocacy, advancement, and networking amongst the Slovenian management community. To that end the association organizes national and regional conferences, organization-wide meetings, educational seminars, and social events. In addition to its central membership MAS has boasted two special subgroups (called "sections") that cater to smaller demographics within its membership: the Section of Young Managers and the Section of Women Managers, for example. Until now, however, membership to all of these groups has been limited to Slovene nationals and the small number of Slovene-speaking foreigners. Given the ever-growing number of foreign managers coming to Slovenia every year, either as short-term contract workers, investors, or entrepreneurs, it seemed an exciting prospect that MAS might be able to create a group to serve these foreigners and their nuanced needs. Accordingly, late last year, after a series of conversations between MAS managing director Sonja Šmuc and the Slovenian-based Austrian businessman Klaus Schuster, a third "Foreign Section" was finally formed.

Though still new, the presence of a Foreign Section has already begun to shake things up within MAS. In addition to the section's own planned educational and social events, which will be conducted in English, simultaneous English translation will now be made available at all the association-wide events, and soon most of MAS's website and distributed materials will be bilingual. According to Šmuc, "Foreign managers surely have different experiences and issues than their Slovene counterparts, but most of the issues are the same, because running a business is running a business whether you do it in Slovenia, Germany, or New York. The basic rules are the same and these basic rules are the things that connect foreign managers to the rest of the association, while their special interests connect them to their section." She was, unmistakably, sending an invitation – a valentine, if you will – their way.