

WORKING ABROAD

An MBA's experience in Germany and Denmark

By Dustin Dumas

HAVE YOU EVER THOUGHT ABOUT WORKING IN A DIFFERENT COUNTRY? DOES THE THOUGHT of learning a new culture or language seem interesting? Do you seek the challenges that accompany working in an international environment, where your native tongue is the second or third language? My answer to these questions was "yes." In May of 1996, I graduated with an MBA from the University of Texas at Austin. I was excited about using my degree internationally, which was something that I had decided on before I entered graduate school.

Prior to pursuing my MBA, I worked at the Chicago Board of Trade's exchange floor for four years. I worked with many international clients, and saw that the people who understood the differences in corporate cultures were the ones who were most successful. Before graduating, I interviewed with firms that were uncertain of future international opportunities so I decided to pursue them on my own. I was successful in finding employment with financial institutions in both Germany and Denmark—each place affording me many surprises and learning experiences.

In Germany, I was employed in the treasury department of one of the country's largest banks. The corporate culture there is very formal and bureaucratic. I was addressed as Frau Dumas, never Dustin. When I wanted to see how other departments complemented my department, I could not contact those departments directly. Instead, the personnel department set up all appointments. Personnel departments play an integral part in one's career progression, from salary increases to promotions. Salary increases above a predetermined range for certain positions are forbidden. German banking laws dictate that similar positions be compensated similarly.

In addition to the bureaucracy in the banks, Germany has strong employment laws and labor unions, which make it difficult for companies to "downsize." Employees must pass a six-month "probation" period. Upon completion of this period, it is extremely difficult to terminate individuals. As a result, there are individuals who continue to perform exceptionally well and there are others who decide that they are now above scrutiny. I noticed little politicking in the bank. The bank's main concerns are with your performance and production capability and less with which university you have attended or who you know.

In Denmark, I am employed in the investment banking department at one of the largest banks. Investment banking is relatively new to Denmark and there are only three "pure" investment banking firms in the country. It is an excellent opportunity to see the industry develop first-hand and I am curious to see the impact that the bank will have in the marketplace as it continues to become more globally competitive.

Communication within the bank is done predominantly in Danish. Being forced to speak such a challenging language takes a bit of diplomacy and a lot of humor, but it is absolutely necessary to assimilate into the corporate culture and gain the respect of colleagues. In addition, it is important to have a command of the language; otherwise everyday tasks can become difficult. For example, my colleagues take finding information on the bank's central computer system for granted, but I am still finding information with the assistance of my English-Danish dictionary.

Danish banks are efficient, but nevertheless bureaucratic. When I discovered new methods for contacting American clients, I could implement these methods only after the approval of several managers. Danish banks are more conservative than American banks. The banking system is smaller than the American system and is not designed to take the same types of risks. Danish banks are more likely to explore opportunities in other parts of Scandinavia than in developing countries in Africa or Latin America.

Denmark is more technically advanced than Germany, but it is not like the United States. Computers are accessible at public facilities in Denmark free of charge. On the other hand, in Frankfurt, there was only one public facility (the library) with computer access, but computer cafes (you pay to access the Internet) are flourishing.

Information technology is growing in Denmark, but the banking sector is still behind its international competitors. We use Lotus 1-2-3 (the 1991 version) and there is only one Internet station available in my department. Learning a defunct software system in a foreign language gives new meaning to the word "challenging." But things are changing! My bank recently introduced a program where employees can purchase computers at a discounted price with the new Microsoft Office software. I have not seen a program like this except in

the computer industry. This is definitely a step in the right direction.

Why would a Danish bank need me? It is an advantage for the bank that I see things from a different perspective due to my educational background and work experience. I can offer ideas that may force my colleagues to think differently. In addition, I have the opportunity to learn from my colleagues. It would have been more difficult to adjust to the working environment if my colleagues had not been receptive to the different skills that I bring through to my position. In addition, my skills complement those of my Danish colleagues so there is never a conflict regarding which method is "right or wrong."

My colleagues are helpful and we do not compete against one another. The culture does not dictate that in order for me to succeed, my colleagues must fail. Everyone has the opportunity to succeed.

But my colleagues are also ambitious. Everyone works many hours, much more than 37.5, which is considered full-time in Denmark. People are driven, but not to the detriment of their personal lives.

Danes and Germans truly believe in work-life balance. In both countries, everyone is given five weeks of vacation a year by law. In Denmark, there is no stigma associated with having a child as a career woman. Mothers and fathers are allowed a combined seven months of maternity leave for each child. The time you spend with your family is just as important as the time you spend with your firm.

Denmark has very high taxes (about 50%) that support the social welfare system, which I am reminded of every pay period. These taxes make owning a car unaffordable; therefore, bicycles are a common mode of transportation. In return for paying high taxes, Danes receive many benefits. They have free education and are even paid to attend university. They receive a stipend, in addition to their educational expenses, for housing and living costs. This stipend is not extremely large (about \$500 a month) but it does not have to be repaid. Taxes also fund the health insurance system. The same level of care is available to everyone, regardless of income.

When considering working abroad, you must think about the corporate culture and the social environment of the country. As a guest of that country, the burden is on you to be understood and to accept the culture. Working abroad is not easy and the romantic idea of living abroad wears off rather quickly once you are confronted with the same obstacles you would face at home—and many more. ■