PASSPORT

Making Marks

How to ease your way working in Germany.

By Sabrina E. Hicks

Ironing. No one likes it. Uschi Plötz and Anne Koark aren't exceptions. But after receiving a 6:30 p.m. call from a client in desperate need of help to iron 500 just-arrived, wrinkled t-shirts for a trade fair the next day, Plötz, Koark, and their staff of 15 women completed the job in no time flat—even though it isn't part of their usual service. Such flexibility is not typical of the German business environment. You see, Plötz and Koark run Trust in Business, a service firm in Hallbergmoos, Germany. The mission of TiB is to help foreign companies set up German subsidiaries as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Plötz, a German, and Koark, a British citizen living in Germany for the past 15 years, founded TiB in June 1999, www.trustib.com and they've astonished the German business world with their quick success. TiB has won awards, most recently the Breakeven Award 2000 from the German maga-

zine *Breakeven*, which celebrates women who start up a business without many advantages. www.breakeven.de Plötz and Koark have been asked to appear on business television programs such as "*Mutmacher*"("Courage Makers") and "*Existenz-Wege zum Erfolg*" ("Existence: Ways to Success"). The two women have a knack for helping non-Germans come to grips with working and living in Germany, so who better to answer this question: What steps should non-German businesspeople take to make their transition as smooth as possible?

Step 1: Know the quirks.

"We give a full intercultural training course [to clients] on the personal idiosyncrasies because that's what hits them first, and that's what distracts them from work," says Koark. Things you should know to survive the daily German work environment:

- Germans have a habit of constantly shaking your hand.
- They are formal in their speech, preferring to call co-workers by their surnames. It can take years for German co-workers to refer to each other by their first names, if ever.
- They use the formal *you* when talking with co-workers.
- German's formal speech sometimes leads others to perceive them as standoffish.
- Birthdays are celebrated at the office with sparkling wine, not cake.

Step 2: Know the language.

"Managing the German language, which you need to understand to negotiate," says Koark, "is the number 1 issue you should concern yourself with before leaving your home country." Her advice? Nehmen Sie eine Klasse (take a class). Language classes, such as those offered by the Goethe Institut, not only review the language, but they also introduce the culture and customs. Once in Germany, however, you'll find that many Germans speak English and love to practice on you. Of course, that can become tiresome if you'd hoped to perfect your German.

Step 3: Know what's required.

There's nothing that can totally prepare you for living and working in a foreign country, but Koark advises you to call your local German consulate and the consulate in the town you plan to live in to get what she calls "way of life" information. "It's imperative that you contact the local German embassy and the Bavarian State Ministry because they can provide information that will save you shocks," she says.

The hassle associated with relocation is one such shock. TiB offers a relocation service to help clients jump beaucratic hurdles, especially if your German language skills aren't great. Koark provides the following advice:

Know what's required of you. When attempting to obtain your resident and work permits, you need to know when, where, and in what order to turn in the permits and other requirements. Koark notes that "civil servants [who] deal with paperwork for foreigners sometimes overstep the limits of the requirements." At a minimum, the consulate suggests you provide these documents:

- proof of means of subsistence
- your contract with your employer
- a valid passport
- two passport photos
- two application forms.

You may need to provide additional documentation depending on your situation. Finding out the required information up front enables you to identify unnecessary requests and saves a lot of time and aggravation.

Get documents stamped. Koark says that she can't overstate the importance of getting the required stamp when applying for your permits.

"Stamping pieces of paper is a very important part of the German culture," says Koark. "If there's no stamp on a piece of paper, it's not an interesting piece of paper. The stamp signifies 'officialdom' to Germans."

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Be prepared to answer questions from landlords about your lifestyle. Landlords are entitled to ask personal questions because disturbance laws are strict. German authorities are so concerned with minimalizing disturbances that until recently, it was illegal to shower after 10 p.m. A landlord can ask how many people will live with you, what kind of hobbies you have, and how many visitors you expect. To ensure against disturbances, landlords try to

rent to people they believe will live harmoniously together in the same building.

Step 4: Know your net.

TiB employees talk salary with clients after the way-of-life discussion. If you're offered a position based on a gross salary, Koark advises that you determine the net salary before signing an employment contract.

According to the German consulate office in Boston, Germany's wage and income tax can vary from 19 to 56 percent (depending on the salary), and a social security tax of 12 to 13 percent is added on top of that. Koark suggests that you calculate your net salary and contact the consulate in the town you plan to live in to learn about the cost of living there.

As a commercial company, TiB can't offer tax or legal advice. For that, you'll need to hire a tax adviser or lawyer. Koark does suggest you get clarification from the appropriate professionals if the following topics are crucial to your business in Germany:

- company taxes
- intellectual property issues
- trademark or patent coverage
- business or product liability insurance
- stock options as part of your employment contract.

Step 5: Know office procedures.

Regarding daily work routines, Koark notes, "People are used to dropping their pens at the end of the day." At 5 p.m., most employees leave, though it varies depending on the industry. Offices that deal with American counterparts tend to have more flexible work hours.

Another characteristic of the German work environment is how German employees respond to project status requests. Unlike American workers, who tend to spell out the evolution of a project when asked for a status report, Germans are apt to give a short reply beginning with, "The status is…." But that also varies, says Koark, depending on how much the company is involved in international business.

Plötz and Koark spent many years working for companies in startup situations. They've seen firsthand the hardships people face setting up in a country where they're unfamiliar with the language and business and social customs.

Plötz and Koark offer this bit of final advice: Oktoberfest isn't in October. Get there by the middle of September or you'll miss out on all of the fun.

An American Expat View

By David Beadles

For the past two years, I've worked as an American expatriate in two different European capitals. I've traveled to all of the major European cities for business and fun. I've eaten delicious food, drunk exquisite wine, met all sorts of people, and even managed to save some money. But I'll soon be unemployed and must make a decision: return to America or make my own way here in Europe? It's a predicament because, in a way, expats have it all: paid moving expenses, housing and cost-of-living allowances, full U.S. salary and bonus, tax equalization, trips home, and even a car and gas.

If you want to work in Europe, your best bet is to land a job in America with an international company. Work hard, make your goals clear, and seize the opportunity when it comes along. Or you can move to your favorite European city and look for a job upon arrival.

Here's what you'll need to do.

Find an employer. If you think your college education, 10 years' professional experience, and basic Spanish mean a lot to Europeans, forget it. You're in the job market of the European Union, which pulls people from all over Europe, including Ireland, Spain, and Greece. These people are better educated, speak more languages than you have fingers, and are inexpensive labor. You had better have an unbeatable skill or contact.

Get your work permits and resident authorization. So, you found a job. Great, but if your company isn't greasing the skids, you'll spend hours and days in bureaucratic lines to get the right forms.

Negotiate your salary. After nearly a decade of unrivaled economic growth, American salaries are fat. The typical U.S. manager makes twice as much as his or her European counterpart.

Figure out the taxes. Europe is made up of progressive nations looking out for the common good. They do that through taxes of 50 percent or higher. On the bright side, you get four to six weeks of vacation. Just be sure to pack a tent on your bicycle, because that's all you'll be able to afford.

Even so, I still recommend working as an expat in Europe. Where does that leave me? Simple: If I don't find an employer soon who can come close to my current package, it's bon voyage. If I can't afford the food, wine, and travel, why stay?

David Beadles, *originally from Washington D.C., is a telecom marketeer with past working stints in Munich and Geneva. He's in Brussels now, but hopes to take on a new opportunity in Berlin soon.*