

Should Western I.S. Professionals Be Doing More to Help Russia? (if so, how?)

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Most Russian organizations, both state agencies and private companies, urgently need to bring their operational and financial activities under firm control. To succeed, any large organization must utilize much more modern business systems than were generally known in the Soviet Union.

Some of the expertise and resources to effect such systems are plentiful in Russia. Russian computer programmers, for example, are second to none in technical sophistication. Once a set of computer programs is clearly specified, Russia has ample talent to develop and maintain them.

However, other critical skills and expertise needed to effect good *systems* are in short supply in Russia. They include:

- **Systems analysis** skills to evaluate an organization's needs and prepare specifications for systems to meet those needs.
- **Project management** skills to plan and control the development and start-up of such a system (whether or not it requires custom software development).
- **Organizational** skills to help establish internal information services functions and orient key people to their on-going management responsibilities.
- **Standards and methodology** experience to help establish disciplined approaches to various aspects of information systems and to train professional staffs to work effectively within such a framework.
- Broad knowledge of consulting to train Russians to provide the above expertise themselves, thus multiplying the skills.

There's clearly a huge need in Russian organizations for short-term assistance in these and similar areas. Were it not for one major obstacle, much of that need could be met by top-quality western consultants working with Russian organizations in assignments ranging from a few months to a few years.

That obstacle, of course, is money. Western-based consultants are used to being paid in hard currency at rates far beyond what Russian organizations will be able to afford in the near future. To get around this obstacle will require two things:

First, consultants must be willing to accept most of their fees in rubles. For that to make sense they must actually live in Russia during the term of their assignments. They can then spend their rubles in the Russian economy where prices, despite severe inflation, are still low by western standards.

Given the isolation and lack of amenities, this is hardly a commitment that the typical European or American family can easily undertake. I believe, however, that many people who have no family responsibilities would be intrigued by the adventure and the professional satisfaction that could come from such an assignment. I, for example, as a mature widower with many years of consulting experience in these areas, would be greatly tempted.

Second, there must be some organizational umbrella to help such consultants ease the hardships and deal with bureaucracies that accompany daily life in Russia: negotiating contracts, finding housing, and obtaining decent food. What kind of organization can do this?

Richard Nixon and others have called for a kind of "Marshall Plan" for east Europe, to be sponsored by western nations. Within the limits of already strained national budgets such a program would channel some direct financial aid. More importantly, however, it would provide a structure for finding, placing, and supporting western experts in temporary assignments where they could make the maximum contribution.

But amid declining western economies it's unlikely that such a government-sponsored endeavor will be undertaken. Who, then, can fill any part of the need? A professional society like the ACM? A multi-national corporation like IBM? A consortium of universities? An aggressive international consulting firm? Funding would be a serious problem for any of them. With strong cooperation from the Russian government, however, such organizations might well be able to tackle significant subsets of the problems: particular skill specialties, industry areas, or geographic centers. We need to launch initiatives to explore these possibilities.

The foregoing comments apply not only to Russia, but also to most other East European countries. Russia is the big opportunity, however, with its huge, 99-percent literate population and vast natural resources.