

INTERVIEW

GERMAN VALENCIA: IT IS GOOD TO KNOW THE BALANCE

German Valencia, the Managing Director of DHL IT Services, comes to Prague once a month. In this interview, he talks about the company, the international environment, and the importance of person-to-person communication. He also details today's main technology trends within the IT market, as well as his personal sentiments about Prague.

What are your hobbies and passions? What would you do if you weren't working in DHL?

If I wasn't working for DHL, I would probably be hiking in the mountains, playing tennis, or perhaps I would have become a professional soccer player - these are my passions and I try to find a lot of time for them. I wake up early every day, around five o'clock, and then I go running, bicycling or do something similarly active. From a work point of view, I leave the office at 17:00 to maintain a healthy balance between my personal time and work life.

How do you manage that? Any tips?

First of all, I don't block any meetings before 8:00 in the morning and I don't allow any meetings after 17:00. I also try to manage my time very carefully - after all, the only asset we all have is time.

Chief Officers often have a strong impact on the company and its employees. Can you see the same in this field? Do your employees also manage their time carefully?

I encourage all my employees to strive to find a healthy work/life balance. To give you an example, this year, I asked all my employees to join me in a "Go Healthy" campaign during which we walked a minimum of 10,000 steps per day to promote wellness within the workplace. Our Prague facility is located in Chodov and I asked my employees to walk from Chodov back to the Prague Old Town; that's a two plus hour tour, and we had plenty of time for great conversations along the way.

You are the head of a global company. What is it like to work in such an international and multi-cultural environment?

My organization has 3300 employees; we are physically located in 27 countries and we have over 80 nationalities. Here in Chodov, we have more than 70 of these 80 nationalities. It's a very young and vibrant workforce. The average age in my organization is 33 years, so you can feel a lot of energy and enthusiasm. My privilege is to use this energy to achieve our objectives. That's where I see my role.

And how do you do it?

We have a very simple vision: to be the proud, passionate, business technology partner of choice. You have three critical words there: *pride, passion, partnership* – the "Three P's". That's a holistic view on how we do things.

There is a big discussion regarding culture among Czech companies – is company culture more than just buzz words? Why do you think it's so important to have these 3 P's?

There is often a disconnect between intent and what actually happens. I try to be very consistent in what I am saying, doing, and thinking. To give you an example: we set a goal that we wanted to be the best employer in Prague. That goal was set three years ago and this year, we won the award. According to PwC and Sodexo, we are currently considered to be the best employer in Prague and the 3rd best employer in the entire Czech Republic – it's a journey that started three years ago. The employees have expectations and my responsibility is to drive my organization along that path to success.



Photo: Jan Branč

There's a lot of competition in this industry with IBM, Dell, Samsung, Apple, etc. We really have to be our best to ensure that we stay at the top.

DHL IT Services is known for very strong internal communication and a very strategic approach.

In a service organization, the most important asset is our people. You can rely on traditional, digital means of communication but person-to-person communication is extremely important. That's where you connect the digital and human worlds. In our organization, we have 3300 employees and my personal goal is to know the name and some information about each of them. After 2.5 years in my role, I feel that I know something about 1,800 people. So, I still have a long way to go!

You mean by name? How did you manage that?

Every time I see someone I don't know, I make a point to get their name and remember something about him or her. I start from the name and face. Once a month, we have an "Employee Town Hall" where we gather everybody on a volunteer basis - we normally have about 1,000 people show up. It can be a little tricky to schedule, but the time is set to accommodate time zones in North

America as well as Asia-Pacific. Aside from this, I have a concept that I call "Walk & Talk", which means I block times in my calendar every month as I visit various locations so that I can just walk for 2-3 hours and talk to the employees. They don't come to my office - I go to them and try to establish a dialogue with them.

What differences can you see between the people here, in the Czech Republic, and other parts of the world? Can you identify some specific characteristics of people from this region?

As I have already said, there are over 80 nationalities in my organization. What do I think of the Czechs? They are very proud, very professional, committed people and they have a good understanding of work/life balance. At the same time, sometimes they need to be convinced, as they seem to be naturally skeptical. One of my roles is to target my communication in such a way that I can remove this skepticism and convert it into positive energy.

Is skepticism a specific attribute of Czech people?

Yes. When I go to Asia, it's a little bit different. The employees are equally committed and proud of what they do, but they don't act or do unless the manager is doing.

The Czechs are less focused on the boss or manager, so it's important to target my communication according to different cultures.

Your company came to the Czech Republic about 10 years ago. Why so?

DHL IT Services established its office in Prague in September 2004, so this year we are celebrating our ten year anniversary. There are two reasons why we came here – first, it was a very attractive market with a lot of skilled workers, and second, there were some taxation and financial benefits in coming here. Concerning the first reason, we have 1,100 employees here in Prague, 80% of which are Czechs or Slovaks. While it was the opposite at the beginning – with 80% foreigners – in these 10 years, we have been able to transform the Czechs and Slovaks into the core of our employee base.

And where do you want to get in the next ten years?

The next 10 years are also very promising. The Czech Republic enjoys a very nice geographical location between the Western and Eastern parts of Europe. It's a very beautiful country and people love coming to Prague – you don't have to convince anybody to come here; it's a very appealing city to come work in.

What do you see as the biggest current trends in the IT business?

Technology is very promising. There are some major shifts going on now – a good example is the “Internet of things”, which means everybody will have devices that they can connect to from any location at any time. For example, my 10 year-old daughter is already connected and the next generation, 10 years from now, will be further connected. Technology is becoming a part of our lives. Another big shift that we often hear about is “big data”, which refers to the ocean of information coming from connected devices that are constantly generating new data. Who will analyze and understand this data? Our privacy is also being exposed because of this issue. It will be very interesting to observe, in general, what technology will drive the next generation of business models.

Imagine that it is the year 2064 and we are looking back. What will we think of 2014?

In 2064, we will celebrate our 60th anniversary of DHL IT Services in the Czech Republic. Aside from that, I think that 2014 will be the year of birth for the mindset of the “Internet of things” – the realization that the Internet is a pervasive force in our lives.

DHL is mostly known as a logistics company. What is the most fascinating aspect of your work?

DHL is a global logistics provider that operates in 220 countries or territories. In my role, I am fascinated by the question of how to enable technology to allow these territories to participate in logistics trade. My responsibility is to provide the technology to make that happen. It's very dynamic. When I come to work in the morning, New Zealand or Australia have already been working for 8 or 10 hours. When I get to work, it's almost the middle of the day within the 24 hour time zones, so I get really excited to know what happened in the hours before I got to work and what's going to happen in the next eight hours, because the world is changing so much. I have the privilege and responsibility of making sure that technology allows this movement.

How can someone become a good manager? What is the crucial skill?

For me, there are four dimensions: You need to know the facts, you need to know the people, your customers – who are you serving and what value are you creating for them – and also to know yourself, your own strengths and weaknesses. A great leader is somebody who knows how to balance these four dimensions.

What do you think about education, can it provide any of this experience?

The role of education and academia is to be one step ahead, creating the mindset of students – to prepare them for what's coming. Within DHL IT Services, we have a very strong “learning and development agenda”. The key component is that everybody, including me, must participate in 5-10 professional days dedicated to learning and development per year – to stay current. Academia plays a big role in making sure that there are suitable programs for this purpose. Universities need to bring us trends that are meaningful and relevant, so I think the academic world should be more connected to the business world.

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