

# Training Experiences from Eastern Germany

NOVEMBER 1994 INTERNATIONAL TRAINING SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP MEETING HIGHLIGHTS

**V**erena Visser, an international business consultant and the former Assistant Director of a *Unified German* government project to investigate and trace the assets of the former East German State and expedite the processing of the property claims, shared her experiences working with and training the people of eastern Germany.

Prior to spending over two and a half years in the former East Berlin, Verena lived and worked in Houston where she was a member of the local ASTD chapter. She received her bachelor's degree in Communications Studies from the Pennsylvania State University. Verena got her start in the international business field over fourteen years ago and has developed and provided management, professional and personal development seminars and workshops. Currently, Verena resides in Hackensack, NJ and assists international firms in New York City with their marketing, sales, and public relations needs. Her experience in Germany has two phases.

In 1991, Verena spent a month in the former East Germany on a Rotary International Scholarship. During this trip, Verena learned a lot about the people and industry.

Specifically, she said: "We got to see companies that had been taken over by the Treuhandanstalt (a new German governmental agency). She learned that often there was no competition—sometimes their products were exclusively made for export to other Eastern Bloc countries.



VERENA VISSER

In many cases, they were the only company in the country that produced that product. After the wall came down, they lost their contracts overnight because the ruble was no longer acceptable. "The eastern Germans really need to learn marketing!" said Verena.

Several months after Verena's first trip to eastern Germany, she made a second trip. Verena was offered a position with the German governmental agency, the Treuhandanstalt.

Working with an international staff gave her that invaluable opportunity to learn, firsthand, more about the nuances of the language, culture, attitudes, and the German brand of humor.

"To know a country is to know its humor and its expressions," Verena said. To that end, Verena keeps journals. She filled 34 journals in less than three years. Verena increased her vocabulary and developed a store house of German phrases and jokes (one liners!), too. She could explain things to others by referring to journal entries.

In addition to her governmental research work, Verena was also responsible for training individuals in research techniques and computer skills.

She went to professional development training, herself. "It was really exciting to participate in programs conducted in German and get feedback. They really liked my American style. They want permission to laugh. It seems, if they get permission to laugh, they learn more!" Verena observed.

Perhaps the eastern Germans are natural business partners because they are nice to deal with, have a sense of humor, and are not skittish, according to Verena.

## TRENDS

"Less than half the workforce in the industrial world will be holding conventional full-time jobs in organizations by the beginning of the 21st century. Those full-timers or insiders will be the new minority."

"Every year more and more people will be self-employed. Many will work temporary or part-time—sometimes because that's the way they want it, sometimes because that's all that is available."

—CHARLES HANDY  
*The Age of Unreason*