

INTERVIEW

BRANISLAV ŠEBO: EACH ACTIVITY THAT DOESN'T BRING ADDED VALUE TO THE COMPANY, HARMS THE COMPANY

Branislav Šebo is the Country General Manager of IBM Czech Republic and leader for the central region, including Czech Republic and Slovakia. In this interview, he talks about the main trends in business, in particular in the IT industry. He also highlights the specifics of Central Europe from the managerial point of view and the quality of educational systems in this region.

What are your hobbies?

I have many hobbies, but my favorite one is spending time with my family. In general, I love to wake up in the morning and look forward to a day with my kids and my wife. This makes me happy. We do a lot of sports together, like climbing, horse riding, basketball, tennis, football, etc. I also appreciate spending time with my parents and other members of my family, which is relatively big as I have three brothers and many nephews and nieces – and, of course, with my friends.

What would you be if you weren't in the position of a general manager?

I like sports, nature and climbing, but those are only hobbies. If I left IBM, I would probably run my own business again, in a segment that is dynamic, fosters innovation and puts together a lot of interesting people.

What is the business world today and what are the main trends in business?

Business principles always remain the same, it is just the nature of business that is more and more dynamic. Before working at IBM, I used to run my own company, which allowed me to see business from two different perspectives. In my opinion, the thing which is significantly impacting business is the amount and structure of information we have. We at IBM say that data is the new natural resource and I personally agree with that.

I believe that it really influences how people interact, how they profile themselves and how they shape their opinions, spend their time and so on. So definitely, business is changing, roots to the markets are different and innovation advantage today looks completely different. Companies will have to follow huge trends if they don't want an advantage become a disadvantage.

As you already said, if you weren't the manager of IBM, you would run your own business. What part of the market would you exactly focus on and where do you see the biggest opportunities?

If I had a really clear idea, I would probably leave IBM to start my own business. In IT, there is significant potential in the area of cloud solutions, analytics, social and mobile. I am fascinated by the way mobile technologies and social networks are changing the business world and social interactions among people. These are the areas in which I can imagine investing my money and time.

These trends really shape business and there is a lot of money there.

They are the future; they also represent one of the main challenges. If we are talking about mobile technologies, one of the hardest things for us and for our customers is to calculate business cases exactly as we used to do in business revolving around infrastructure, software solu-



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tions or customer development. With mobiles, the impact cannot be quantified as we don't have historic data we could use for analysis. There is, however, significant potential for the future and it will become a part of any aspect of business life. Of course, the financial potential is significant as well.

What do you see as the main difference between running your own business and working in such a big company as IBM?

The difference is huge. When you run your own business, you have the ultimate responsibility and flexibility. It is more rewarding when you try to get a deal and you win. The joy of the victory is more personal, but also the pain from losing is also much more personal and intense. On the other hand, the advantage of a big company like IBM is the extreme complexity of solutions you can get engaged in. The solutions you can offer to your customers are almost endless and the complexity of our projects is enormous. This had a huge positive impact on my personal career. IBM is a leader in the IT industry and has been one for more than a hundred years, so you

can have the advantage of meeting the best people in the field and working with them in one team. Of course, there are also some disadvantages: large companies are much more process-oriented and they are managed globally, which leaves you less freedom for decision making on a local level than I would appreciate.

How can a private entrepreneur survive in such an extremely big corporation as IBM? I suppose these are completely different worlds, attitudes, rules. What are your secrets for success in such an environment?

As I said, being an independent entrepreneur offers you the space to make decisions more flexibly but on the other hand, the impact of failing and taking risks stays also with you. Having this experience and coming to a corporation, you look at opportunities from another perspective –meaning not considering all the processes that stop things from getting done or going wrong. You simply do your best for the client and try to succeed. Sometimes it is difficult to understand why this or that cannot be done in a simpler way. It is true that big

corporations like IBM are more process-oriented, which has an impact on their flexibility; but imagine running such a huge business on the worldwide level without any rules or guidelines that help the team be able to act as one. My secrets? I always look at the glass as half full and encourage my colleagues to do so as well. I also use common sense to differentiate between priorities and what is right or wrong.

Do you think there is a difference between the Central European region and the rest of the world?

There are huge differences. Every region has its specifics. We have experienced the communist regime, when clever people were not able to progress. Now when we have opportunities and the freedom to succeed, we should not forget our previous experience, which can make us stronger. Also, the Central European region is very successful compared to the global market. I am mentioning this because we are the largest IT employer in the Czech Republic and Slovakia and we have thousands of people who cover external and internal clients worldwide, and each year we are taking part in mini-tenders, in which we are compared to other countries such as Mexico, China, India, Poland or Romania. We are successful in getting these job opportunities. Of course, the cycle of such advantages is getting shorter and shorter, and now it's largely dependent on the quality of the educational systems and people's qualifications.

What makes this vision different? Is it how people think, or how they behave?

I will give you an example: in recent times, when we have had shared service centers, we have become a very relevant and reliable partner. We are not competing with price only, but we managed to climb up in the value ladder and to attract qualified and skilled people. I think the combination of skills and reliability makes us a strong candidate on the global market. On the other hand, there are things which we have to challenge and sometimes we have to address people in other countries.

We often say: someone for design should be from Italy, someone for cooking should be from France, so for what should someone from Central Europe be? What are the people from this region known for?

This is a difficult question. Local people, at least from the perspective of IBM, are known for pretty advanced technical education and reliability in their jobs, which I have already mentioned. What they are not known for is flexibility and open-mindedness when facing risks. Also, the number of startups in our country is very low. We need to foster innovation and startups for students – if we don't, this could become the biggest weakness of this region in the new millennium.

Are Czech students well prepared or should they be retrained?

I am generally not satisfied with the quality of education in these countries. I think it's quite rigid. It's not just the fault of governments; we – the companies – also share the responsibility. I think there is a triangle of subjects involved in the educational process: parents and students, the State and Ministry of Education, and companies. However, education is still disconnected from real business. I believe that students should leave school better prepared for their professional life and in IBM, we spend a lot of time training people to get them to the qualitative level that we need.

What kind of manager are you? How would your colleagues describe you?

I think I am pretty simple. I run my business with common sense and I always say that there are two things I care about: to have the best team of people with high personal integrity whom I can trust, and to fulfill the needs of our customers as they are in the first priority.

Your personal motto?

"Each activity that doesn't bring added value to the company, harms the company."

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