The Berlin Wall has crumbled. The Soviet Union is broken apart. Third-world countries are becoming economic superstars. Vietnam is now a trading partner. It seems that all the rules have changed. This ‘wide, wide’ world appears a smaller place. Ordinary people are “talking” and doing business with people half a world away. Communication links are making geographic boundaries obsolete. Even passports seem destined for disappearance—just like Disneyland’s once-coveted “E-tickets.” So, maybe Uncle Walt was right: It is a small world after all.

“Americans traditionally don’t design for other markets... We were the world economy after World War II. We simply made products that we needed then offered our surplus to others.”

DANIEL BRENNENSTUHL
“Digital information technology has created a world where everything is moving and changing rapidly,” says Daniel Brenenstuhl, an ASU professor of business management. “For instance, with the worldwide application of Lotus Notes, Andersen Consulting employees can request information from their worldwide database. That means any Anderson employee, in any country, facing any circumstance, can now get instantaneous and inexpensive advice on what’s worked best,” he explains. “As such, even relatively underdeveloped countries can quickly surge ahead of the trading curve.”

That technology also means that just about any person, company, or country can become—or cease being—an economic factor overnight. Almost every job or market trend can start or wind up anywhere as well.

Brenenstuhl points to India—the latest Mecca for software development—as one example of this process. He says that technology has also allowed banks to outsource their backroom work to countries like Ireland, as well as allowing ordinary people throughout the world to “talk” via E-mail and the Internet.

People are doing much more than talking. Experts predict that once someone truly figures out how to safeguard electronic payment transfers, a world of wares will, literally, be available at your fingertips—as well as the fingertips of every other wired person on this planet, regardless of their geographic locale.

Although some Americans are preparing for a world in which they no longer dictate all the market rules, Brenenstuhl says there is still much work to do. Such preparation is his specialty. He runs a series of business seminars that place college students in direct, sustained contact with foreign business executives.

“Americans traditionally don’t design for other markets,” he explains. “That’s because we were the world economy after World War II. We simply made products that we needed then offered our surplus to others.”

Others, like the Japanese, have risen to economic prominence by designing with the world in mind. For example, Japan has made billions selling left-hand-drive cars to Americans—even though the Japanese use right-hand-drive vehicles. It was only a year or so ago that an American carmaker made a right-hand-drive car in the United States that could be exported to Japan, he says.

Brenenstuhl is one of many ASU professors who have dedicated themselves to preparing people for a wired world that is virtually wide open thanks to technology. He has spent seven of the last 20 years overseas conducting business immersion seminars. The seminars take students to both the factories and boardrooms of foreign companies.

“The whole idea,” Brenenstuhl says, “is to let business students learn first-hand the realities of other lands. To let them see that the business, manufacturing, and social practices of the French, for example, are very different from those of the British.”

Such understanding and adaptability, he says, are the real keys to helping people succeed when dealing with different people.

“The very technology that’s enabling us to communicate more globally is also making improved people skills an absolute necessity,” adds Greg Moorhead, a management professor who just returned from Macedonia.

The Republic of Macedonia is the southernmost of the countries that were formerly part of Yugoslavia. Moorhead and an ASU professor Josef Brada, who is a Czechoslovak native, are working to strengthen business and management programs in Macedonia as part of a three-year grant program. The duo are part of a team that is helping Macedonian universities better prepare students for work with free market economies.

“Free since just 1992, Macedonians are struggling with two major changes simultaneously—the switch from a totalitarian to parliamentary system, and the switch from a tightly controlled to free market economy,” Moorhead explains. “We’re talking about a government that owned every business and dictated everything, from what was made, to how each was made, to how many were made. The things we take for granted here in terms of how to motivate, manage, and pay for performance are entirely new concepts for Macedonians.”

Dealing with such different backgrounds and starting points quickly taught Moorhead the value of applying a “listen and learn” approach when working with people from different cultures. That, he says, is where people skills are necessary.

“One of our biggest initial challenges was how to impress on people there that you need to keep business education flexible and in touch with the real world.”

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GREG MOORHEAD

JOHN C. PHILLIPS PHOTOS

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“Most people in the world react based upon relationships, not business goals.”

MICHAEL WINKELMAN

“Americans tend to go into other cultures, assume shared values, then try to sign a deal. With Macedonians, families and taking care of others are always the first priority,” Moorhead says. “Macedonians will drop everything and immediately give you their full attention when you walk in. You have to understand such people-oriented values and adjust just about every business practice accordingly.”

“In the former Yugoslavia, it was the government’s responsibility to provide all people with an appropriate job once they had a university degree,” explains Brada, an expert on Eastern Europe. “People were taken care of. Universities were somewhat sacred. They didn’t have to justify their existence or curriculum to society or businesses. People were simply educated in what the schools thought they should know.”

In one sense then, Americans are lucky. We just have to switch our thinking from “we dictate markets” to “everyone does so.” Former socialist countries like Macedonia have a very different starting point. They have to learn the fundamentals, such as exactly what markets are and how they work.

“One of our biggest initial challenges was how to impress on the people there that you need to keep business education flexible and in touch with the real world,” Brada says.

Think about how difficult that concept is when you have lived your entire life in an environment where most of your information and decisions were controlled. Brada says his team had to begin by showing Macedonian professors what was going on in U.S. education and businesses, then start providing concentrated access to such gold mines as textbooks, trade journals, and newspapers.

“It’s been very much a two-way learning process,” Brada adds. A SU professors like Moorhead have gained absolutely critical firsthand experience by going to Macedonia. Likewise, Macedonian professors have been coming to A SU in groups of seven or so each semester for the last two years. Each has been placed in a one-to-one relationship with a SU professors and local businesses.

“There’s absolutely nothing like going into a country and really seeing it firsthand,” Brada says. “The subtleties, like having Macedonian professors observe the value of group projects and business case studies when they’ve traditionally relied on straight lectures, and having American professors experience that sense of oneness, of family, that drives the Macedonians, just can’t be captured any other way.”

Brada says that in the end, international success depends almost equally upon having good fundamental business skills and being both flexible enough and exposed enough to understand the real impact of each group’s international politics and history. Both are necessary in order to adapt business practices accordingly.

Brada thinks A SU’s Dual Degree Program, which places MBA candidates in sister schools overseas during their second year, is invaluable.

“In obtaining a dual degree from a foreign institution, students absolutely prove that they can function in that environment. They also spend a full year cultivating friendships with people who will be that country’s business leaders in a few years.”

Contacts like those, he says, will yield contracts down the road.

The Macedonian program is a three-year program funded by the United States Information Agency. For more information, contact Josef Brada, Ph.D., College of Business, 602.965.6524, or by E-mail at atjcb@asuvm.inre.asu.edu