

An Infrastructure Company

An Interview with Brigitte Ederer,
Cluster Chief Executive Officer, Central and Eastern Europe, Siemens AG



Brigitte Ederer

EDITORS' NOTE Brigitte Ederer assumed her current post in April 2008, after serving as Chief Executive Officer of Siemens AG Österreich since December 2005. She has served as a member of Siemens AG Österreich's managing board since January 2001. The recipient of a degree in economics from the University of Vienna, she began her career in 1977 with the Austrian Chamber of Labor.

COMPANY BRIEF With global headquarters in Munich, Siemens AG is one of the world's largest global electronics and engineering companies with more than 480,000 employees in over 190 countries throughout the world. Founded 160 years ago, the company (www.siemens.com) is a leader in the areas of medical, power, automation, transportation, communications, lighting, and building technologies; water technologies and services; and home appliances.

When and why did Siemens form its Central and Eastern European business cluster? Has the so-called cluster been a success thus far?

In 1994, after the fall of the Iron Curtain, Siemens gave Austria responsibility to build up functioning local companies in Central and Eastern Europe. We started with Slovakia, Slovenia, and Croatia, and it is really a success story.

How important is it for Siemens to coordinate seamless services and similar messaging around the globe?

The coordination is very important. I have daily contact with our colleagues all around the world, which is necessary because we give them knowledge for difficult projects that enables them to represent Siemens in a very positive way. It's how we can find solutions for the customer, as well.

How do you define Siemens' target customer base in Central and Eastern Europe and is there a particular segment you are looking to for growth?

We are an infrastructure company now, because telecommunications is no longer a part of the core Siemens portfolio. So infrastructure is our core business, and because these are former Communist countries, they have a lack of functioning infrastructure. They need a lot of new power plants and electrical systems, and industry has to be renewed. So this is really a fast growing market and a really good challenge for Siemens.

Is there a focus on health care within those markets?

Yes, but health care is a little bit behind the infrastructure investments, because you need to start with power plants and railways, for example. But in Slovakia and Slovenia, there's a fast-growing health care market.

Is the market competitive in those countries?

The market is very competitive. We meet the same competitors that we meet in Western Europe; there is not a real difference. We have to work hard to win, and we also have to present our customers with what they want and help them to find excellent solutions.

Have you been happy with the talent you've been able to assemble in those markets, and are you looking to hire local people to deliver your services there?

There are excellent people there, and a lot of universities. One problem is that there is a brain drain toward the Western European countries and the U.S. In particular, people from Romania and Bulgaria go to those countries, and we have a problem finding well-skilled workers because they are not there to be found.

Your time is pulled in many different directions. That said, is spending time with clients a key part of your role?

I like to meet with clients. Every time I meet a client I learn a lot. So I try to meet with clients when I'm abroad and when I'm in the Central and Eastern European countries.

Many people who look at Siemens' business and the industry may not feel that it attracts senior- or executive-level women employees – that women may not have a major presence. You've been very successful within Siemens. Do other women within the organization have similar opportunities to excel in their careers?

In Austria, very few women have technical backgrounds. So Siemens, which is a technological company, only has the chance to ask few women to come into the company, because there are few female technicians in Austria.

Throughout your career, you have been a leader in many different areas, including the government sector. What made you feel that the opportunity to run this part of the business suited you well, and has it been what you expected?

I changed from politics to private industry, and I did it on purpose, because it was very interesting for me to get to know how a private company works. If you have the chance to work for a leading company, it's both interesting and exciting.

In many parts of the world, there is an increasing emphasis on corporate social responsibility. Are Siemens' employees in Eastern Europe involved in giving back to the community?

Siemens, in many countries, is a big player, and it's economically important to Central and Eastern Europe. I think it's crucial that our representatives all over the world are part of their communities.

Looking out a year or two, what are your priorities for Siemens' business in Central and Eastern Europe? What areas will you focus on to ensure the business continues to grow and be successful?

One real advantage for us is that some countries in this region are becoming members of the European Union, and this membership is accompanied by funds from the European Union for infrastructure. So this helps us a lot.

Many business leaders talk about the importance of a work/life balance. For you personally, how challenging is it to turn off the business? Do you ever really get away from it?

Sure. I think you have to relax. I went to the theater recently, and after two hours, I had a free mind and my mood was much better than before. ●