

Cultivating Relationships

An Interview with Bernd Wosgien,
Founder, Executive Search International

EDITORS' NOTE Bernd Wosgien, who founded Executive Search International (ESI) in 1977, is a native Berliner and was educated in Germany, France, and England. His apprenticeships took place in prestigious hotels in Europe and South America, and he has held senior management positions on unit, regional, and corporate levels in the United States and the United Kingdom. He graduated from the Hotel School of Berlin; and attended Cornell,



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Northwestern, and Roosevelt Universities. A member of the Savoy Gastronomes of London, he received the Waldorf-Astoria Distinguished Alumni Award and the 1976 Ivy Award for outstanding hotel operations. He is a member of the Global Hoteliers Club, having worked on three continents, as well as a member of the Confrérie de la Chaîne des Rôtisseurs. He is fluent in English, German, Spanish, and French.

COMPANY BRIEF Executive Search International (www.esiglobal.com) is a worldwide search and recruitment company that has served the hospitality industry for over 30 years. Headquartered in Orlando, Florida, Executive Search International collects intelligence by maintaining constant contact with a core group of top talent, from department heads to the chief executive officer, around the globe. This information gathering allows Executive Search International to refer candidates who will significantly enhance profitability and strengthen company teams. Target markets include the United States and the Caribbean; Asia (Southeast Asia, especially China, its special autonomous regions, and Singapore); Canada; Central and Latin America; Europe; and the Middle East. The company focuses on five-star properties and groups, niche resorts and casinos, and some larger multinational chains, primarily for overseas regional management.

You used to be in hotel operations. What made you feel that creating ESI was a good opportunity?

Operating hotels was my passion, but I was attracted to the search business for a couple of reasons: I remain closely involved in

the hotel business, and I'm also very active in the human resources arena; and I'm a German immigrant who came over with \$36 in my pocket and realized the American dream of having my own business, which will be 32 years old next May.

Have your services remained relatively consistent?

Our services, yes, but the business model has changed over the years. About 7 to 10 years ago, we changed our fee structure to enter the retainer market and work exclusively

with engagement fees up front. That was like taking the skin of my company and starting all over again, meaning there were certain clients we had done contingency business with all over the world, and we had to tell them we had changed our terms. I knew if I said no often enough, and continued to cultivate relationships, eventually they'd come back to us, as a result of the relationship of trust we had enjoyed previously. And that's exactly what's happening; our terms are being met. Our continued success bears this out.

Is the business today truly global, and are there specific markets in which you've had the most success or you see the most opportunities?

For the first four or five years, our business was almost entirely domestic. About 20 years ago, we decided to expand into Asia, because I have an affinity for the region. A large share of our business is Asia-Pacific now. We did the same thing in Central and South America, and of course in Europe and the Middle East. We are now roughly 40 percent in North America.

How has the executive search business been impacted by the technology advances we have seen over the past several years?

It has changed the whole process to the extent that, with the advent of e-mail, speed has changed tremendously. It used to be a four- to six-month process to get the job done. Now, we receive an e-mail in the morning, we send back confirmations, and contracts are finalized in two to three days.

In addition, we utilize technology with regard to database revamping; VOIP/communications; knowledge sharing and collective knowledge distribution; behavior-based

interviewing techniques; built-in quality-management control; and artificial intelligence. We will also be launching our own new software with built-in quality control in mid-2009.

How much has the role of a general manager evolved?

The role has changed from a mostly operations orientation into full asset management. Now, the general manager is in charge of a multimillion-dollar real estate asset and his mission is to increase the value of that asset for the benefit of the owners, the investors, and the management company.

Are most of the people you place through ESI new clients of the company, or do you tend to work with the same people over and over again?

The industry is amazingly small. The top companies always interact with the same people. Sometimes they're the right people, sometimes not. And after a while, you identify the cultures and the managerial skill levels of the various entities at a unit level, or regionally, or on the corporate level, and we can almost always find candidates who can fill the gaps and be successful.

If I were talking to some of the people who have worked with you at ESI and elsewhere, without you in the room, and I asked what it was like to work with and for Bernd Wosgien, what do you think they'd say?

I'm a driver. I'm also suggestive and persuasive, but I know exactly what I want, and I know what the parameters are for keeping to our guiding principles of honesty and integrity. I expect top performance from everyone on our team. I show the way, and expect everyone to do likewise. I value commitment and loyalty and I know I would not be successful without our team of top professionals. I have an open-door policy and will always welcome new ideas, and I am a quick decision-maker.

How challenging is it for you to turn off the business? Do you ever really get away from it?

I get up at 4:30 AM and do my Qigong, and then I get on the phone and call Asia-Pacific. I go to the office, call the Middle East, and work myself into Europe. Many times, I'm not through there until noontime, then I start the East Coast and the U.S. That's a real challenge, but it can be managed through sheer commitment to this discipline. ●