

GETTING TO WORK

When preparing Balkan youth to join the workforce,
**STUDIO MODERNA
MEANS BUSINESS.**

INTERVIEW BY **CHRISTY MACY**



PHOTO: COURTESY OF STUDIO MODERNA

In 1992, Sandi Češko founded Studio Moderna, an electronics retailer, in Slovenia. Over the years, Studio Moderna expanded its business model across Central and Eastern Europe to encompass products, services, distribution and marketing.

In 2006, Češko was invited to New York City to participate in the Clinton Global Initiative (CGI). Led by former President of the United States Bill Clinton, CGI brings together global leaders from all sectors of society to develop solutions to pressing challenges around the world. During the meeting, Češko learned about the work of the Balkan Children and Youth Foundation (BCYF), a member of IYF's global network. IYF helped create BCYF in 2000, in collaboration with Balkan leaders in the public, private and civil society sectors.

Not long after, Studio Moderna and BCYF launched the Youth Employment Program for European Macedonia—a program focused on providing employability training to 1,000 Macedonian youth.

Recently, IYF's YOUth magazine sat down with Češko to ask him about the evolution of this new partnership and his company's growing commitment to improve employment opportunities among Balkan youth.

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STUDIO MODERNA

A CONVERSATION WITH SANDI ČEŠKO

CEO & CO-FOUNDER

Q: What sparked your interest in business?

A: My father owned his own business in the early 1960s in the former Yugoslavia, and I inherited a lot of his entrepreneurial enthusiasm. I was one of the first entrepreneurs in the late 1980s to establish a computer company in Slovenia. I've also used my father's enthusiasm to support change. In the early part of my life, I experienced a lot of positive things, both economically and culturally, that were taking place between nations that lived together in Yugoslavia. I then witnessed one of the most brutal national and cultural tragedies of any modern society.

Q: With so many urgent issues demanding attention, why did your company believe it was important to help prepare young people for employment?

A: I've always supported young entrepreneurs, from the early days of starting my own business. I also provided financial support to local cultural activities in my region. Skeptical of bureaucratic initiatives or organizations, I've put my money into activities where I was able to identify the end user.

This BCYF project is ideal for me, as it focuses on the region where I think I can help the most and deals with one of the biggest problems in the world today—youth unemployment. Also, I would like to show other companies that we cannot just wait for the international community to produce money and solutions. We know, too, that the international community is not always efficient in doing this.

Q: How did you find out about the International Youth Foundation?

A: When I was invited to join the first Clinton Global Initiative conference, I decided to go to New York City to see what the event was about. I was deeply impressed by CGI's entrepreneurial spirit. Everything was concrete. The focus was not on the speeches and resolutions but on actions. I found myself useful and proud to participate. I also discovered a lot of NGOs previously unfamiliar to me.

When I was going through the list of activities, I identified as the most interesting for me the work of the BCYF. Together with Professor Vlado Dimovski of Ljubljana University [the former Minister of Labor in the Slovenian government], as well as the supportive people of BCYF and IYF, we initiated the Youth Employability Program for European Macedonia.

Q: What do you look for in an NGO partner?

A: We have worked with NGOs before. It is important to get the right combination of commitment and expertise. Many groups are passionate about what they do, but sometimes they lack expertise. You need the energy and the resolve, but you also need to structure your effort.

Q: Why did you decide to work with IYF?

A: IYF was a logical choice. Recognizing the critical importance of the youth unemployment issue, Studio Moderna wanted to make a contribution for quite some time, and our people were screening the field. From there, it was just a step away. If you are exploring the youth employment field, it is impossible to miss IYF. Again, it is their commitment to the issue.

Slovenian companies work a lot in the Balkans, and joblessness among young people is a critical issue. Of particular concern to us is the fact that kids get out of school and don't get into jobs for years. Some will never work. Can you imagine how devastating it would be to have young educated people with no jobs? That has to change. So we wanted to invest in an effort that would be regional in nature. From there, it was easy to recognize BCYF. It is among the pioneers.

This project, together with the other programs of IYF and the Clinton Global Initiative, offers a small contribution for coping with the challenges of youth unemployment. Studio Moderna is already represented in Macedonia, and I believe that through these efforts we can contribute to Macedonia's dynamic and developing society.

Q: How do you think your support for this employment initiative could benefit Studio Moderna?

A: Focusing only on ourselves in today's world is not enough anymore. After 15 years of innovation and successful growth across Central and Eastern Europe, we have to show that we can also be one of the leading companies in the region to demonstrate our social responsibility.

I believe that whatever you do, it will come back in this or another way. We did not make any assumptions, calculations or speculations about how this program can be beneficial for Studio Moderna. However, if we are able to deliver results, I am sure public opinion will positively reward our efforts. For us, this is important, as we want to be different from other companies.

Q: Do you have any advice for other companies interested in making similar investments in youth issues?

A: I hope our initiatives will encourage more people and companies to do the same. The Balkans is one of the most complex regions in the world due to its own internal differences and conflicts. We are just at the beginning of the learning curve. The most important thing for us is that we see the light at the end of the tunnel. **Y**

the formula for change

Youth Employment Program for European Macedonia

ORIGINAL INVESTMENT: **US\$75,000**

GOAL: To provide employability **training to 1,000 Macedonian youth** and place over 200 young people in internships and youth exchange programs across the region

CURRENT ACTIVITIES: To **partner with 100 businesses** in support of the program and distribute 10 grants to training organizations in Macedonia

LONG-TERM PLAN: To expand the model over the next two years into Bulgaria, Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro and Bosnia, **benefiting 6,000 Balkan youth**

PARTNERS: Studio Moderna, Balkan Children and Youth Foundation, Foundation Open Society Institute Macedonia

LAUNCHED: **2006**

A 'WHO'S WHO' of Caring Corporations

The International Youth Foundation is a recognized leader in building corporate alliances that promote youth development worldwide. IYF currently works with a wide range of companies and corporate foundations, including:



With the support of these partners, IYF has improved educational opportunities, trained more youth for employment, supported young leaders and promoted healthy lifestyles among young people.

For more information on how corporate alliances deepen IYF's impact on young lives around the world, please visit www.iyfnet.org

