

Central European Trade Mission to Spur Collaboration

Jack L. Fischer, AIA, Secretary

To continue Gov. Jim Doyle's initiatives to increase Wisconsin exports and promote overseas investment in our state, I participated in a 55-member business trade mission to the Czech Republic from April 17-23, 2008. The Governor is passionate about international trade, and with good reason. Overseas markets have outstanding growth potential for Wisconsin firms. Our high-quality, innovative products are finding favor all over the globe. Exports have increased nearly 80 percent since Gov. Doyle took office. The Czech Republic has strong potential as an export market. Wisconsin's exports to that country registered a 24-percent increase from 2006-07.

The mission comprised both independent and group sessions, as well as group meetings. This summary is primarily focusing on the post-mission contacts and follow-up opportunities.

Overview from Ambassador/ Ministry of Industry and Trade

At the outset of the mission, Ambassador Richard Graber provided an overview of Central Europe, Czechoslovakia, and Prague, which was helpful and informative. The Czech Republic has more than 10 million inhabitants, and its gross domestic product is \$19.5 billion. The GDP's real growth rate is 6 percent. The country faces challenges in transportation infrastructure, public administration and R&D. It has not yet adopted the Euro.

We met with Vlastimil Lorenz, director, section for bilateral relations, Ministry of Industry and Trade. He expressed interest in promoting continuing contacts and collaboration between Prague and Wisconsin. The ministry wants to initiate long-term discussions on venture capital funding and possible investment partnerships and cooperation. Lorenz also agreed to post a newly-developed PowerPoint presentations promoting Wisconsin at the ministry's Chicago and Washington DC offices and on the ministry website.

Meeting with Confederation of Industry of the Czech Republic

We also had the opportunity to showcase our Wisconsin presentations to Confederation of Industry of the Czech Republic, an organization that represents a large and broad-based business group. Our host were Stanislav Kazecky, vice president, and Dana Kuchtova, director for international relations. From our discussions, we learned that the environmental, renewable energy, and medical equipment sectors have the potential for strong collaboration between Wisconsin and Czech Republic businesses.

Kazecky and Kuchtova agreed to post our information packages and provide detailed information to the business leaders in the sectors of potential additional cooperation. They will also serve as contacts for any Wisconsin businesses interested in networking, partnering, and collaborating between groups. I'm confident that the Confederation of Industry of the Czech Republic has excellent potential to reinforce our water, environmental, renewable energy, and medical equipment companies of interest.

Meeting with Rockwell Automation

We learned from Dr. Vladimir Marik, Managing Director, R&D, that there is a significant opportunity to reinforce the Wisconsin Water Cluster Initiatives and tie into Rockwell Automation expertise both in Wisconsin and abroad. Rockwell has strong, broad-based municipal water treatment and process-simulation products. In addition, Rockwell continues to collaborate with the Milwaukee School of Engineering and Cleveland University. We'll be following up with Dr. Marik on potential partnerships within the water cluster.

Meeting with S.C. Johnson

The S.C. Johnson location is a 40-person administrative/sales and management site, which represents Prague, U.K., Netherlands, Italy, and the Ukraine. This office is recording profitability and growth in the 16- 22 percent range. The primary challenge for S.C. Johnson and the majority of the companies visited was the lack of qualified employees and overall workforce capability. The meetings were cordial and furthered the connection between S.C. Johnson and Commerce.

Meeting with Harley-Davidson

Harley-Davidson has four locations in Czechoslovakia and hosted a reception for interested individuals, businesses, and trade mission participants. Sales have increased 13-fold since 2001, and the company believes it has solid potential for future growth. We met with Scott Hansen, General Counsel, and Gail Lione, Vice President, Secretary of Harley-Davidson, and both they and we are interested in continuing discussions.

Meeting with Johnson Controls

Johnson Controls primarily focuses automotive interiors and seats for the production of numerous European cars. We met with Ing. Jaroslav Binhack, General Plant Manager, and his colleague Hana Grossmanova. We had a full tour, presented gifts, and set the stage for continuing dialog. Once again, qualified workers are the most challenging business issue; the company has sought workers from countries such as Poland, Romania, Vietnam, and India to help them with their workforce requirements.

Conclusion

The mission afforded us valuable contacts and opportunities for follow up that could lead to increased exports and new and strengthened business partnerships.

-- Jack L. Fischer, AIA, Secretary, Department of Commerce