

## **BUSINESS CENTRAL**

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### **Helping Out**

St. Cloud State University professor King Banaian takes his academic and educational skills to an international market.

By King Banaian

I last took sabbatical from St. Cloud State in 1992. I went to Claremont Colleges, where I had gone to graduate school, to do some research with my old professors. They had a contract to research transition in eastern Europe and I participated in some seminars and joined a group that traveled to Slovakia, Hungary and the Czech Republic. We held conferences there and in Claremont.

When the money ran out in 1995 I came back to St. Cloud. A few weeks after I arrived I got a call from someone I met at one of those conferences, who asked if I would like to advise the National Bank of Ukraine. They had a research department with smart people, but no experience in providing research and advice. Could I train them? Having been a teacher for over ten years by then, I thought, of course.

Once one firm in the international consulting field knows you, most of the other firms find you as well. When I consult I work as a subcontractor for a firm that holds a contract with either a donor government (like the U.S. Agency for International Development, who funded my work in Ukraine) or a multinational donor agency (e.g., the World Bank). Within a few years I had transitioned from the Ukraine to work in Egypt, Indonesia and Macedonia. I had calls for many other positions, some of which I tried to get but did not, and others that I did not take because the travel was too long, or the position did not use my strengths, or because it appeared the personalities would not mesh.

While my specialty is central banking, I have had good success working with ministries of finance in many countries. Understanding finance helps. I studied public finance in graduate school, though I had done very little research in the field. But effective teaching methods can be applied to material you have known for decades and to material you just taught yourself. In my last trip I taught young Mongolians how to do cost-benefit analysis. What I didn't tell them was that I had to teach myself first. It took two months to train myself to do a two-week training for them. But I now own that skill, and a reference, if someone ever wants me to do it again.

The work is great fun, but has many challenges. You leave your family and most often the request to consult takes you to another country for weeks, perhaps months. You lose your support network. As a consultant, your support depends on the firm that hires you, and as you work with different firms you get different experiences. Sometimes a car picks you up at the airport with a guy with your name on a piece of cardboard and he does not speak English. He drives you to a hotel that both doesn't have your reservation and no one speaks English.

I can make a couple of language choices, but sometimes it is just sign language. A trick I learned in Ukraine: Learn the words "What is that?" and "I want that." Then point, ask what something is and listen hard. You learn a new noun. You have the verbs "to be" and "want", which can accomplish much. But I never did get this mastered in Mongolian.

I adore the travel. At the end of a meeting in Armenia at 4 p.m., someone wanted to take me to see an archaeological site. I could not say no, even though I had a 4 a.m. flight the next day. How do you not go see history an hour away? The next thing I know I am eating apricots under a canopy, looking across a plain at Mt. Ararat.

In Mongolia I awoke in our remote hotel to see fog rolling around the northern Mongolian mountains near the ancient home of Genghis Khan. I get paid to be here?

The work is rewarding when you know it has been successful. At the end of a project in Indonesia I wrote a spreadsheet that tracked the long-term debt consequences of government budgeting and appended it to their budget-planning tool. A few years later I got two notes: one from Indonesia indicating they still were using it, and one from the contractor in Washington telling me they had another country using it. (I do not know where.)

More often, though, you are transferring knowledge to a counterpart who becomes a friend -- the young economist who you think someday will run his department, or the head of a central bank who later becomes president of his country. In the latter case it happened when Viktor Yushchenko became president of Ukraine. I had the honor of providing advice and sitting across a table from him, and helping his staff write research he read.

Alas, the heady days of transition after the fall of the Soviet Union, when it appeared western economic policy advice was wanted across the world, has receded. Most of the work my friends do now is in Iraq, Afghanistan or Palestine, not places where a man with a family would want to go. Most of my work now is with non-governmental organizations in Armenia and Macedonia. My only hope is to get someplace between Armenia and Mongolia so I can say I've circumnavigated the globe. Only four time zones to go!

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