

## MAKING IT

# Head Hunting In Russia

By Leigh Glenn

**O**n paper, Hilary Greene and Michelle Schorr swap English lessons for piano lessons with employees of a theater on Nevsky Prospekt, a street in St. Petersburg, Russia.

In reality, the transaction masks the true relationship between the two American entrepreneurs and the theater, that of tenant and landlord; foreigners aren't allowed to rent from state-owned businesses. In St. Petersburg, succeeding in business means having not only a knowledge of Russian but also a knack for dodging red tape.

Greene and Schorr, both in their mid-20s, never expected that they would eventually set up shop in Russia when they met in 1989 as college students in a summer program at what was then Leningrad State University.

"At that time, we just knew that we loved the place," says Greene, who grew up in Williamstown, Mass., and learned

research revealed demand for an employment-placement service. That August, they launched Personnel Corps, a company that places qualified Russians with foreign companies doing business in Russia.

Greene says many foreigners see Russia as a land of opportunity and simply expect to go there, embark on a venture, and make a fortune, "when really the best way is to start off admitting that you're naive and get good advice from the Russian side."

She and Schorr relied on a Russian friend who helped register the business with the city, set up a bank account, and guide them through the governmental bureaucracy. In February, the two finally found permanent office space. They signed a one-year lease with the theater, which is technically illegal.

"You have to be very trustful of whom you're working with and pay upfront or

have to "unteach" themselves and adapt to Russian ways. With so many changes in St. Petersburg, she says, lack of experience may have been helpful.

"You can't really schedule," Schorr says. "It's difficult when the tax law change every 20 minutes and your accountant is trying to figure out how much you're going to pay."

Finding qualified workers is an ongoing challenge. Greene and Schorr discovered that the want ads they placed didn't attract people with the abilities they were looking for, such as typing, computer skills, or even a knowledge of telephone etiquette.

They found that the best workers are hired through referrals, and they have placed 85 Russians—from drivers to company representatives—in permanent positions with such employers as Procter & Gamble, Ernst & Young, Saatchi Saatchi, and the Norwegian Consulate.

Not all of their clients are English-speaking firms, Schorr says, but English is the "language of commerce" in Russia and Personnel Corps requires all of its applicants to be able to speak the language.

"A lot of people that we're placing are attracted by working for Western firms, when they can get guidance in developing themselves according to Western standards," Greene says.

Those standards are incorporated into the hiring process. For example, Greene and Schorr coach applicants on how to dress for an interview and how to sell themselves on their skills. After an interview, the women meet with the job candidates to discuss how it went.

One of the advantages of starting a business in Russia is the low initial capital outlay. Schorr said she and Greene borrowed "several thousand dollars" from their families who were paid back in the first six months.

Schorr says revenues for the first five years of business exceeded \$40,000, not much by U.S. standards but "terrific" for Russia, where the average monthly income is \$60. Greene and Schorr expect revenues to increase as more foreign companies move to Russia.

While both women feel occasional pangs of homesickness as well as qualms about the frequent political and economic upheavals, they plan to stick it out and branch into on-the-job etiquette and computer training.

"There are so many services here that aren't offered," Greene says. "If you have the guts to do it, it's a great idea."



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**Hilary Greene, left, and Michelle Schorr, who studied together at what was then Leningrad State University, operate an employment-placement service in St. Petersburg.**

Russian at Colby College, in Waterville, Maine. "We knew we'd want to come back. We wanted to really become part of the culture." Schorr, who is from Alexandria, Va., was studying at Cornell University, in Ithaca, N.Y.

Immediately after returning to St. Petersburg in the summer of 1992, the two began surveying foreign firms; their

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you don't get the space," Greene says. In Russia, "you have to be so careful. Contracts? What do they mean, really? Nothing."

Further complicating the start-up was the women's lack of a business background, although they did have some experience in employee placement. Greene once worked at a temp service; Schorr had had a job in the U.S. Navy's human-resources department.

Greene, however, says the two didn't