

Business student analyzes U.S. Steel's European Expansion

Part of a series profiling undergraduate researchers provided by University of Pittsburgh Office of the Provost.

It's not every college junior who gets to help advise an industry giant about its European business operations.

But then again, Katie Vojtko is no ordinary student — and her project is no ordinary undertaking.

Vojtko, a junior in the College of Business Administration who is studying finance and accounting, is researching information about leadership and global diversity at two Eastern European sites for U.S. Steel: one in Slovakia, the other in Serbia. After summarizing her research into a 10-page case study, Vojtko's work will be presented to two classes of MBA students from the Joseph M. Katz Graduate School of Business. Those students will review the case for two to three weeks in teams, then present their findings and solutions to both Katz faculty and U.S. Steel executives.

"There's the potential for this project to actually benefit the company," says Vojtko, who has been invited to attend the presentations.

Audrey Murrell, associate professor of business administration, psychology, public and international affairs, agrees. She serves as Vojtko's adviser and originally tapped her for the project.

"It can have real impact," she says of the research, which she plans to use for future MBA classes as well. "It's not just sitting back and thinking about leadership; it's about helping organizations add value. It may help U.S. Steel enhance its effectiveness and will definitely help us to shape future managers."

For U.S. Steel, the findings may help to complement its focus on diversity throughout the organization as it expands to meet the demands for steel products globally. The company's corporate diversity council has been looking at a number of issues that can help its business development including how to prepare managers to be leaders of a global and diverse workforce.

"While the sites are profitable, there are challenges," Vojtko explains.

As part of her research, Vojtko met with U.S. Steel's Manager of Corporate Diversity Programs and Training. He gave her the charge of learning more about the differences in the cultures where U.S. Steel operates. Both Serbian and Slovakian societies for example, place a high value on family life versus career success, while in the U.S., the reverse is often true. This difference in culture can create some misunderstandings about work performance,

commitment and motivation. Striking a balance between these two different cultures is one of the issues that Katie's case study will explore. This should spark an interesting debate among the MBA students about how to best strike a balance between the two competing cultural demands.

Though it is not Vojtko's task to draw conclusions, she is starting to form a few.

"I personally have ideas," she says. "I don't think anyone can do research and not come up with opinions."

Trying to help future leaders understand how to prepare themselves to lead a diverse global workforce is very complex and the U.S. Steel project is helping Katie to think about these issues from a perspective of ethical leadership. This is timely since Vojtko is also in the school's certificate program for leadership and ethics. She learned about the opportunity from Dr. Murrell, who is one of the faculty who teaches in the program.

Vojtko "is never satisfied with just being a participant, and she's often selected for leadership roles," says Murrell. "When you get into research projects, particularly if it's not using a defined set of data, you really do have to find a student with strong initiative."

In addition to the academic and real-world business experience that Vojtko is cultivating, she is also reaping some personal benefits. A native of Eighty-Four, Pennsylvania, she comes from three generations of Slovaks who worked for U.S. Steel. Her great-grandfather and grandfather worked in steel mills, while her father was an engineer.

"My grandfather would tell me about how different cultures would be in different parts of the mills," says Vojtko, explaining that Italians occupied one area, Poles another, and Slovaks yet another to avoid problems caused by language barriers.

Frequently, her father will ask her how her project is going, and compare her findings to his travels through Europe with another company.

"He and I have actually grown closer because of this project, which is kind of cool," Vojtko says.

After graduating, she plans to pursue a career in consulting, possibly using business models and fine-tuning efficiency. Eventually, she may pursue an MBA or other specialized graduate degree.

Murrell believes Vojtko already has set herself apart from the competition.

"She'll have her choice of opportunities," Murrell predicts. "I hope she puts graduate school at Pitt in her future career plans."



Associate professor of business administration Audrey Murrell with CBA student Katie Vojtko who is doing an undergraduate research project on leadership and global diversity at USX.

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