

Russians Need Role Models

By [Luc Jones](#)

September 03, 2012

The  **Moscow Times**

A generation has now passed since the Soviet collapse. Today's university graduates have grown up without witnessing life under the old regime, so their impressions of Soviet days can be based only on old television footage or stories recounted by older friends and family. You consequently would be forgiven for making the assumption that newly qualified employees are free from the bad habits of the Communist era, where an overall sloth had set in, thanks in no small part to people's salaries being almost completely unconnected to their productivity levels.

During the Soviet period, the majority of the population was employed in one of the following professions: engineer, economist, scientist, doctor/nurse, teacher/professor, driver, factory worker, shop assistant or "voyennye," an all-encompassing term that meant connected to the military or the KGB in some form. But to achieve the socialist goal of full employment with a guaranteed job for all, most institutions hired many more employees than they needed, and their staff was rather underworked.

Add to this the nonsense of many job titles. In a capitalist society, an economist's job is

to study specific markets and advise the organization on how best to use its resources to become more efficient, save costs and ultimately increase profits. Since making a profit was not only an alien concept to Soviet citizens but also highly illegal, one can only speculate as to what economists actually did all day.

The end of communism meant that suddenly people had to think for themselves, including seeking employment, as many inefficient and unproductive enterprises collapsed overnight, leaving employees on the scrap heap with little clue as to where to turn for help.

Then in came the multinational companies with their new way of doing things, and with them a vast array of new positions that had never existed before: sales, purchasing, logistics, PR, marketing, government relations, legal, IT, finance and HR.

Yet these firms wanted to hire staff who spoke English and boasted relevant experience, creating quite a job for recruiters. The choice hung between trying to debrainwash Soviet-style employees or starting from scratch with newly qualified graduates.

In the end, most companies opted for a combination of the two, coupled with copious numbers of Western managers sent in to set up and run the new operations.

All too often I encounter young people who have chosen a university degree because "that's what my parents told me I should study," regardless of whether they actually wanted to settle into that career path or whether any career prospects even existed in that profession upon completion of their studies. There is still a near-obsession in Russia with finding a job "po-spetsialnosti," relating directly to one's degree, even when for many positions today corresponding classwork doesn't exist. Roles in sales and business development are a classic example of this problem.

In all honesty, most young people would be much better off if their relatives gave them no career guidance whatsoever. The chance of receiving useful advice from parents who spent their entire career in a Soviet research institute or hospital is poor to say the least. Regrettably, the opposite tends to occur because business in general is even today perceived by many Russians as something negative, and there are precious few role models like Bill Gates or Richard Branson in business. Billionaires are generally viewed with disdain for acquiring their wealth in murky circumstances at best.

The general advice I would offer to newly arrived foreigners to Moscow is not to try to change Russia, because the country will develop at its own pace. Rather, act as a leader and mentor for your staff, someone they can look up to and who sets a good example. Certainly avoid ever taking the moral high ground because, not surprisingly, this will be viewed as extremely arrogant.

As Mikhail Gorbachev reportedly replied to a journalist when asked whether he planned to implement Western-style market reforms in Russia upon the collapse of communism: "It took the United States 200 years to reach where it is today. Why do you think that we can do it in 200 days?"

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