

Q&A: Deere Executive Rejoices in Plethora of Paperwork

By [Anatoly Medetsky](#)

May 30, 2013



Christopher is also enjoying the chance to experiment with the unfamiliar. **Igor Tabakov**

At least one foreign manager sees the country's stunning infatuation with paperwork as a quirk that actually helps him fulfill his sales quota.

John Deere's Andrew Christopher has experienced first hand the pervasive need for signatures and documents that grease the wheels of business here, and the forest industry equipment executive sees it as more of a blessing than a curse.

"Russia is completely different and offers many challenges, such as the massive flow of paperwork," said Christopher, who has been here for one year, serving as director of John Deere's construction and forestry division in Russia. "I can tell you, I am extremely glad that we are in the forestry business in Russia because the amount of paperwork here is overwhelming.

Andrew Christopher

Education

1990 — Brock University, Bachelors
of Economics

2006 — University of North Carolina, MBA

Work experience

2012-present — Director at John Deere's
Russia and CIS construction and forestry
division

2009-2012 — Division manager at John
Deere's construction and forestry division
for Canada, based in Grimsby, Ontario
in Canada.

2007-2009 — Division manager
for customer support for Division 3. Manager
for overseas product support development
in Xuzhou China.

2002-2007 — Manager at the dealer
acquisition and implementation division,
based in Moline, Illinois, John Deere's
construction and forestry division. Division
manager responsible for the Hitachi
Construction and Mining Products during
the integration of the North American
Hitachi Operations.

1999-2002 — Territory sales manager for the
Pacific Northwest, based in Seattle,
Washington, John Deere's construction
and forestry division

1997-1999 — Manager at the division
for service marketing, John Deere's
construction and forestry division

1995-1997 — Manager at the division
for parts marketing in Eastern Canada, John
Deere's construction and forestry division

1991-1995 — Area manager for product
support in Atlantic Canada, John Deere's
construction and forestry division

Favorite book: The Art of War, an ancient
Chinese military treatise attributed to Sun
Tzu

Reading now: Great by Choice (2011), by Jim
Collins and Morten T. Hansen

Movie pick: Remember the Titans (2000),

directed by Boaz Yakin

Best weekend getaway: St. Petersburg and Dublin

Favorite restaurant: Uilliam's.

"So it's a good thing we manufacture forestry equipment because then we can benefit from that. There's obviously a high demand for paper, and we produce machines that actually cut the trees down."

He seems easygoing about some other hardships, like being unplugged from the supply of common North American grocery products to which he is accustomed.

"Some people may get extremely frustrated because they aren't able to find that particular item that they are used to getting back home, but I look at it as an experience," he said. "I'll look at things at the supermarket and I'll say, 'Well, I think I know what that is!' and when I get home and try it, it's obviously something different. To me it's a fun experience."

Although he hails from Canada, one thing he has trouble putting up with is the Russian winter. It left such a profound impression on Christopher that he complained about the season in an interview that took place on a sunny day in May.

"I'm used to winters, but winter in Russia was a little bit different from what I was expecting. Winter in Russia is long," Christopher said. "Back home, winter has been milder in recent years and it normally ends in early March. In Russia, when winter comes, it does not end until mid April."

John Deere operates two assembly plants in Russia. The plant outside Moscow, in Domodedovo, received a high-profile visitor from the United States: Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus. He described the business as an international trade "success story" after touring the premises in February last year.

The plants import parts from countries including the United States and assemble them into final products for sale to Russian customers.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: Why did you come to Russia — and why have you stayed?

A: I had spent a couple of years in China prior to coming to here. While I was working in China, I enjoyed that experience tremendously. So, I offered my services to our senior leadership team, saying that if there were other future global opportunities outside of North America, I would be very interested. So they approached me with this tremendous opportunity to come to Russia.

While working in mature markets such as North America, the opportunity to learn the grass roots of our business is somewhat limited, and I was looking for options to expand my knowledge and experiences. I had completed an Executive Global MBA program where we

studied not only mature markets but also growth markets, and I truly enjoyed the challenges and opportunities in these new emerging economies.

I made a decision that I wanted to go outside of North America and work and live in these markets. In particular, I wanted to focus on Russia and China.

Q: What problems have you faced in Russia? What did you learn from them?

A: When you live in a foreign country, the things that you need to do every single day, as in terms of getting to work and going to the supermarket, trying to read labels and street signs, and trying to get around the Moscow subway system are a daily challenge. Obviously, you need to start learning the language and living your life as a local resident. If you see these as problems and resist the change then you will have a very long assignment.

Some people may get frustrated because they aren't able to find that particular item that they are used to getting back home, but I look at it as an experience. I experiment with things. I'll look at things at the supermarket and I'll go, "Well, I think I know what that is!" and when I get at home and try it, it's obviously something different. So, to me it's a fun experience.

Thank goodness for iPhones and apps because I use the translation apps all the time. Obviously, the translation is only as good as the information that somebody put into the program, and I have realized that even using some of the latest high-tech software, translation often doesn't work. So, sometimes you just have to go with your gut feel for things and take a risk.

From the business side, Russia is completely different and offers many challenges such as the massive flow of paperwork. I can tell you, I am extremely glad that we are in the forestry business in Russia because the amount of paperwork here is overwhelming. The signing, stamps and contracts can be overpowering at times. So it's a good thing we manufacture forestry equipment because then we can benefit from that. There's obviously a high demand for paper -- and we produce machines that actually cut the trees down.

One other observation is that people have a tendency, from whatever market they come out of, to think that if something works in their home market it should work here in Russia. That's a major mistake. It's fine for some things, but we clearly have to understand that a customer's needs and expectations are different.

One perfect example is the new product we just launched at our factory in Domodedovo, the WL-56 loader. It is the result of extensive market research and will be a better fit for customers in this highly competitive market.

Q: What advice would you offer a foreigner who wants to invest or expand in Russia?

A: Probably the best advice would be that you have to have a long-term strategy and your strategy needs to be flexible. It's like running a marathon: You obviously have a strategy of how you are going to run that race, but because you are going to be faced with many different obstacles and challenges along the way, you have to be able to react to ensure you reach your final destination. The markets can change overnight, as we learned during the financial crisis back in 2009.

Q: Who or what inspires you?

A: What inspires me every day is what I would refer to as making a difference in the world. I have the luxury of working for a company that manufactures products that can make a major contribution in the world, especially in emerging markets where the need for infrastructure and the need for food is growing tremendously. For me, it's one of the reasons why I enjoy working in markets such as Russia and China.

It gives me energy every day to know that the company that I work for and the products we sell are making a difference in people's everyday lives. In markets like Russia, our products are making a major impact on the development of the economy and a major contribution to improving the quality of people's lives.

The one person that I definitely have a lot of respect for is our previous CEO, Robert Lane. He had the vision of us being a global company, of the needs and requirements of improving the lives of everyday citizens in these growth markets. He made a significant impact on our company, and the growth we are experiencing today is the result of his leadership and vision for our company.

Q: Can you describe a significant moment in your career?

A: The most significant event that happened to me was when I joined John Deere. They sent me to the east coast of Canada to manage a group of dealers. At that time I was 25 or 26 years old — fresh out of school. In a very short period of time, one of the largest dealers in that group went bankrupt, and I went from unpacking boxes to dealing with big banks, receivership companies, the investors of the dealership and upset and concerned customers. With limited experience, I was thrown into this situation that was complete chaos, and I had to deal with some very seasoned individuals.

The learning curve was extremely steep. I felt like I was drinking from a fire hose. I would say that it was the most difficult time for me and the most rewarding as I was learning the ropes of our business in the most difficult and challenging environment. The experience that I gained really grew me as an individual. It really taught me how to work with people and make tough decisions.

What I learned during this time, I have taken throughout my entire career. I was fortunate to have a lot of smart and experienced people back at our head office for support. However you don't always have time to wait for reinforcements during a battle. A smart game plan and confidence in your abilities are your best weapons. I was very fortunate to be able to survive the battle.

Q: What was the biggest breakthrough in your industry in the past 10 years?

A: One of the biggest issues that we had to deal with over these years was engine emissions. In Western countries, governments have introduced new emission regulations. It has completely revolutionized the off-highway diesel engine business. It has really forced the inspiration and creativity of engineers in our industry to build better and more efficient engines. When you look at off-highway diesel engines today and compare them to engines of even 10 years ago, you can't believe the difference in technology and fuel efficiency they

reached while making huge steps in emissions. It's truly amazing!

Q: What are the best conditions for a good idea to pop up in your mind?

A: I prefer to work within groups. There are people who are individuals that like to be left alone to think. I am the opposite. I get my creativity and my energy from being in a group of people where we do what we refer to as brainstorming, where people are talking about different ideas, where we are leveraging the knowledge and experience of other people.

Q: What construction and forestry projects have you visited here and what impressed you most?

A: I have been fortunate to visit many projects across Russia. I visited one of our most important customers, which is the Ilim Group. I went to their operations in Ust-Ilimsk, Bratsk and also Karazhma. I have also visited many construction projects and saw mills across Russia. One interesting place was a new mill operation — Talion Terra which is located in Tver. What has impressed me the most is the investment that these companies are making in state-of-the-art technology and equipment.

Q: Is there something you can't do but would like to learn?

A: I wish I were much more fluent in the Russian language. That would make my personal life much, much better. Being born and raised in Canada, I come from a bilingual country. I learned at a very early age that my strength was not languages.

Q: What made you feel surprised, happy or disappointed lately?

A: I am very, very happy that the winter is over. I am not trying to be smart. I'm a Canadian and I'm used to winters but winter in Russia was a little bit different from what I was expecting. Winter in Russia is long. Back home winter has been milder in recent years and it normally ends in early March. In Russia, when winter comes, it does not end until mid April. I was surprised in the beginning of April when it was still snowing in Moscow. I was excited to finally see the warmer weather, snow melting and the longer days.

Another challenge is the constant unknown concerning government regulations and policy changes. It's difficult to make a long term commitment knowing that the rules of the game may change. For example, a proposal to introduce recycling tax for heavy equipment is currently being discussed.

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