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Helmut Schwarting
Managing Director, Markant Trading Organisation (Far East)

Trade career highlights	
35 years	Retail consumer products sourcing, procurement, and trading
Executive positions	Managing Director, Markant Trading Organisation (Far East) Managing Director, Worldlines
6 years in managerial roles for sales & marketing	Hard Goods Manager, Worldlines Sales Manager for Manufacturing, Continental Engineering Products
Certification	Certified Coach, Coach House Asia Behavioral Consultant, The Institute for Motivational Living

“Trade is about enriching somebody else’s life with something they otherwise wouldn’t have. It creates wealth, satisfies needs and wants, brings people together and maintains peace.”

Helmut Schwarting, Managing Director of Swiss buying firm Markant Trading Organization (Far East), said trade creates “win-win” situations that enrich lives.

“You’re helping people in one country produce something and have a job and gain some wealth. At the same time, you’re providing some help to another country by making a wider selection of goods at lower prices. So, trade is a global phenomenon engaging different kinds of jobs and this is a huge source of wealth for a lot of people. It’s basically doing something good for nearly everybody.”

Supporting industries add further to the benefits of trade

The impact of trade also creates a ripple effect to other industries. Helmut said other businesses are spinoffs from trade dealings.

“A lot of things are actually spinoffs from global trade. Very often, banks come in because somebody wants to set up a factory and needs financing; hotels pop up all over the world because buyers are travelling and need to stay somewhere! So too, a lot of other business activity has its roots from what boils down to as work related to global trade.”

Trade-related work is “very dynamic, exciting, and challenging,” Helmut says. “You need to have so many skills – it’s problem solving, it’s working relationships with people, it’s organizational skills. It’s really almost multitasking all the time and there’s a lot of motivation and job satisfaction since you are part of that story from when the idea of the product is created until the item has been purchased and used by the consumer.

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different challenges that you have to overcome every day. You also have a lot of interaction with people. In this day and age where we sit in front of computers for hours, trade still allows us to interact, to talk, to share.” Over time the mix of the human component and technology may have shifted but trade is still very interdisciplinary.

A global trade dream realized in a roundabout way

Helmut has always wanted to pursue trade as a career, but his journey took a lot of “necessary” detours. His father ran an export business in Hong Kong where his family moved when he was one year old. He pursued his studies in Hong Kong and eventually entered the German military where he studied mechanical engineering for almost two years.

“When I was growing up in Hong Kong, my father was exporting goods made in Hong Kong and China and Asia to Europe. I saw him travel a lot; we had a lot of foreign guests – so this pretty much painted a picture to me of what my working life might be like. It appealed to me because it was very dynamic. It was always very interesting.

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Helmut has been with Markant Trading Organization (Far East) in Hong Kong since 1990 and is today the firm’s Managing Director. Markant Far East operates as a procurement service center for members of Markant AG, Switzerland, for their purchases in Asia.

Markant Switzerland provides procurement-related services, centralized settlements, guarantee, logistics, marketing, communications, financial services, as well as e-commerce, for mainly food but also non-food items for their member retailers in Europe – mainly Germany. The food retailers that form the Markant Group account for about 18 percent of the total food retail business in Germany.

The Hong Kong office that Helmut heads currently employs more than 30 people and is responsible for a total turnover of more than \$520 million in 2020.

Besides the Hong Kong operation, the parent company of the Markant Group — Markant Handels-und Industriewaren-Vermittlungs AG — has subsidiaries in Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Poland, Romania and Slovakia. Markant in total has more than 1,000 employees worldwide, with over 14,000 companies supplying their roughly 150 retail partner members.

Leadership skills from military training

Helmut served the German army for six years. He attributes most of his leadership skills to his military training.

“I went through all my schooling in Hong Kong and originally I was going to go to a university in the UK. However, as I held a German passport, I’d never lived in Germany and I didn’t know my own country, I thought: ‘Why don’t I try to study in Germany?’ At that time in Germany, we had mandatory military service. Once in the military, they said, ‘Why don’t you join us for longer? You can study at our own university after serving time in the army.’ I must have been crazy, but I decided to do that.

"The military was a very good training ground to become a leader and learn organizational skills, leadership concepts, planning and caring for people that you are responsible for."

The engineering course that he took was also a blessing in disguise. Helmut said it taught him how to solve complex problems in a very methodical and analytical way.

"I'm quite happy that it turned out that way because it gave me a very good understanding of technical issues and how to break down complex situations into individual bits and solve them out in a very methodical and quantitative analysis," Helmut said.

Patience as a virtue; developing the next generation of leaders

It takes some patience to be successful in trade, Helmut said. His more than 35 years' experience also taught him the importance of being dependable and reliable.

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"To the younger generation, I would say be patient. Some things take time and development, and career progress takes time. Also, value things that go wrong because nothing replaces experience. Value change and mistakes because they are what form your experience.

"Young people always see themselves on top of a mountain, but they don't see that there's a mountain in the way to get there, and so it's the sense of 'I want that, I want to be there,' without realizing that it's a very hard uphill, long, tiring climb to get there." However, this is also a journey of personal growth full of learning and development.

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"Mentoring or coaching is good to develop talent. It is also very helpful for young people who are not sure what works and what doesn't to actually have someone to ask. It is also a great way for the company to communicate its values and beliefs to its employees and explain why they want things to be done a certain way.

"A lot of culture in Asia is a little bit closed. There are a lot of companies who don't like sharing information. Some may refrain from training someone to do a job well because maybe they'll do it better than you – and make you redundant. But I am certain that this sharing, training, helping others to grow, gives a lot of satisfaction to people in senior positions. There is an element of passing it on, helping others grow, develop, motivating others not to give-up."

At work, Helmut said trusting his colleagues with tasks has proven rather productive as employees feel more empowered. Team members become more engaged, more confident and contribute more.

"A lot of managers underestimate the abilities of the people they work with. A lot of managers micro-manage and it is important for them to realize that they shouldn't. If you let others do it, they can do it. Don't underestimate them, challenge them and bring them up to where you want them to be and help them, encourage them to climb ladders, to grow.

"When I started entrusting difficult tasks to others, I saw big changes. I suddenly realized that they get more energy when they feel empowered. They feel more responsible because they are not just being told what to do; they actually have to decide how to do it and then do it. Hopefully, they achieve their desired result. When that works, they feel happy and rewarded and satisfied. Happy people do better work."

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A good trade leader should be people centric. "Leadership qualities are pretty much the same everywhere. In trade, however, you have a lot to do with people. Being a good people person is a must since you need to build a lot of relationships with people you deal with. You need to come across to all of them as being sympathetic, reliable, professional, dependable and accurate. Technology is a huge resource today, but the "human touch" is still critical and cannot be replaced (yet) by technology.

"Be dependable, be approachable. You need to be able to manage figures, numbers and be analytical and recognize opportunities and all sorts of related skills, but you can learn all of that. To be a successful leader, you should gain the respect of others and they should enjoy working for you and helping you achieve your shared objectives."

Servant leadership

Helmut said his personal leadership style is "servant leadership."

"A lot of people can become managers, but not everyone can become a leader," Helmut said. "A true global leader inspires and motivates and cares for their people. A leader serves his team; the leader is there to make sure that the team can effectively and efficiently do their work. A leader is not just out there saying, 'follow me.' A leader is actually walking side-by-side with them, making sure the team members can all walk at the same pace and they're in sync and looking out for each other, all while achieving the agreed objectives.

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Helmut said change is the biggest challenge in the trade sector and failures should be seen as learning opportunities.

"Things are always changing. It is one of the biggest challenges and sometimes comes with painful consequences because it may also impact existing relationships, but we must adapt with change. You cannot resist change. In terms of failure, good judgement comes from experience. Experience comes from bad judgements. One of the great things about failure is you can learn and bounce back'. In fact, I prefer to refer to it not as a failure, but rather a change that you have to deal with. You did the right thing at the right time, but because of change, you need to do things differently."

Advice to future leaders in global trade

"The most important lesson to be successful in trade is to be true to your word. Be reliable. Keep your promises."

"The most important lesson to be successful in trade is to be true to your word. Be reliable. Keep your promises. Because whenever you say, 'I'll take care of that,' people have an expectation that you will take care of it. If you say 'yes,' then it means, 'yes, we will see it through,' not 'yes, I heard you.' So, be authentic, be real and keep promises.

"Be patient. Know where you want to go and how to get there," Helmut concluded. "If you like interacting with people, if you like challenges and doing a wide variety of tasks, global trade is a great industry to be in."

About the Hinrich Foundation

The [Hinrich Foundation](#) is a unique Asia-based philanthropic organization that works to advance mutually beneficial and sustainable global trade. Sustainable global trade strengthens relationships between nations and improves people's lives. We believe the most effective way to advance sustainable global trade is to invest in informing and training the people engaged in trade.

It supports research and education programs that build understanding and leadership in global trade. Its goal is to build a network of next-generation trade leaders by partnering with universities and corporations across global value chains.

Its team of global trade experts and practitioners apply their deep knowledge and experience in trade, economics, policymaking and education to deliver the Foundation's programs. Key initiatives include:

[International Trade Rankings](#)

Created in partnership with educational rankings expert QS, the International Trade Rankings provide a data-driven list of the world's top international trade-related graduate programs

[Hinrich Trade Educators Center](#)

The Trade Educators Center provides educators and students access to a collection of free classroom discussion guides, reading lists, whitepapers and videos focused on real-world business and policy scenarios

[Global Business Scholarships](#)

Annual scholarships awarded to people with a passion for pursuing or advancing their careers in global trade through master's study at Georgetown University, London School of Economics, Nanyang Technological University, INSEAD and the University of Auckland.

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