

Driving success

Heike Auerbach is putting T-Systems North America on the map.

You could almost say Heike Auerbach lives in paradise. Her garden, in a suburb of Phoenix, Arizona, backs on to the lush green of Starfire Gold Club, a part of Scottsdale Country Club. The Arizona Mountains rise up on the horizon. "I don't really need to travel anymore," laughs the 41 year old, multi-lingual manager. "I live where others come for a vacation."

Heike Auerbach has a sunny disposition that fits in well with her new home in the American southwest. "I've got the best job in the world," she says. Originally from Stuttgart, Auerbach has so far spent 12 years overseas. She's been in Phoenix since the summer. Before that, she spent a year in New York, two in the motor city Detroit and eight in Johannesburg, South Africa. She explains the benefits of her nomadic lifestyle: "My time abroad has been incredibly interesting. I've experienced a great deal and got to know many different cultures. My family lives in Germany and I have friends all over the world, but thanks to today's communications technology, it is easy to stay in touch."

The right lady for the job

Living in the suburb of Scottsdale, Phoenix's golf mecca, does not make Auerbach nostalgic for other places. Quite the contrary: she's hooked already. Her first impressions: "The people have a laid-back attitude to life, and are easy to get to know. I think I could live here forever." And she could actually do just that – because after a record time of just nine months, a much sought-after green card arrived in her mail box. "I could stay as long as I like. But who knows where my next task will take me."

In all her years as an expatriate, Auerbach has not been able to lose her southern-German Swabian accent. Even though she now feels more at home speaking English than her native German, a soft hint of her heritage comes through. What's more, Auerbach has retained the relaxed way of talking also typical of her region. But her laid-back manner should not be misread: this lady means business. For the past year, she has held two roles at T-Systems North America: Managing Director and Head of Finance – and all at a time when the company was battling to get back into the black. "The entire team put in night shifts and weekends to steer the company back onto the road to success. I didn't have much time for my beloved trips to the golf course."

In Auerbach's job, with its busy schedule, you can't afford not to tell it like it is. "That's why I take a direct, honest approach to communications," she says of her management style. "It's important to tell people where there is room for improvement. But it is just as important to recognize outstanding achievement. I see myself as a team coach." And every quarter she meets with the entire management team and informs employees how business is developing. "But communications shouldn't be one way," she says. "I want my employees to tell me where they see problems and what they think managers could do better."

Auerbach is already making an impact. Since the start of this year, T-Systems North America has been recording positive earnings. "Now that we're making a profit again, we will focus on rapid growth." But she concedes,

"We can't win every deal. We're still relatively unknown on the vast US IT services market. So when it comes to bids, we're sometimes still the underdog. But we're going to change that over the next few years."

A true pioneer

When she speaks, the keen golfer reveals an enthusiastic, hands-on attitude that would perhaps be expected from the boss of a mid-sized enterprise. And to an extent, that's how she sees herself. Auerbach explains her own role as part of a larger organization: "T-Systems North America has 600 employees. We are part of a global network, but we are small and agile enough to respond flexibly to our customers' specific requirements. We have the best of both worlds." Auerbach deals with a broad customer base, including oil giant Shell, sister company T-Mobile, carmakers Daimler and Volkswagen and Canadian aircraft manufacturer Bombardier.

To maintain existing contacts and forge new ones, Auerbach practically lives out of a suitcase. "My office is the airport and vice versa," she laughs. "On average, I'm on the move four or five days a week." Her trusted companion is her BlackBerry – mobile office, telephone and alarm clock in one. "I have a pretty much paper-less way of working," she says. She only deals with written documents if they require a signature. "When I arrive at my hotel late in the evening, there's usually an envelope waiting for me."


This mobile world of work is far removed from what Auerbach encountered when she arrived in Johannesburg in 1997. "Back then, we had three employees, no office and I don't think we were even registered with the chamber of commerce. We had to build up the business. It was an exciting time." When T-Systems expanded following an acquisition, there was more groundbreaking work to be done. "There was no underlying support structure for the new employees. There was no HR or legal department, no marketing team." Auerbach and her team had to find practical, effective solutions – and they were successful. "By the time I left the country in 2005, we had moved up to position number 5 in the ICT provider ranking. And the colleagues in South Africa are currently working hard to make it to number 1."

It was during her time in South Africa that Auerbach discovered golf. "It really is a fascinating sport. You can only play a good round if you remain focused and don't lose confidence over a few bad shots." She continues, "And just like in business, you are more successful at golf if you have a sense of humor and keep things in perspective."

Auerbach doesn't believe in a one-size-fits-all formula for personal success. In fact, she says, "I don't think you should plan your career too precisely. People who are too focused on one particular path miss opportunities that arise elsewhere." Auerbach thinks her strength lies in her ability to cope with change. "I can fit into an environment even if the conditions or circumstances aren't perfect. I'm an optimist through and through," she says smiling.

MATT SLOAN

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A woman with blonde hair, wearing a blue polo shirt and a black skirt, is captured in the middle of a golf swing. She is holding a golf club with both hands, and her body is turned away from the camera. The background is a clear blue sky with some greenery and mountains in the distance.

The 41-year-old's garden backs on to her favorite golf course in Phoenix, Arizona. She enjoys the sport because it requires stamina and confidence: "You can only play a good round if you remain focused and don't lose heart over a few bad shots."

Heike Auerbach, originally from Stuttgart, has lived overseas for 12 years. She loves a little spontaneity:

"People who are too focused on one particular path miss opportunities that arise elsewhere."