



# Alexander Hughes

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## EXECUTIVE SEARCH CONSULTANTS

When starting in a new company as a CEO, experienced or not, the first days are crucial for the newcomer and for the organisation. When this integration takes place in the abnormal situation created by COVID-19, the integration becomes an unreal exercise and a one-time, unforgettable experience.

**Mr. Senko Judin** was placed with the intermediary of Alexander Hughes Croatia as **the new CEO** of the Croatian subsidiary of the **Berner group** and took over the position on the 1st of April 2020. Apart from the humorous aspect due to this specific day, Mr. Judin has agreed to share with us his extraordinary experience of starting his new role in a new company, without meeting his new collaborators. (interviewed by Ludovic Coquillet and Martin Tisanić, Alexander Hughes Croatia).

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**Mr. Judin, thank you very much for participating in this interview. You took over as CEO during the Coronavirus pandemic. What was it like to start a new position remotely, especially as a CEO where your physical presence is, often, requested on site?**

As I have 18 years of experience in the branch, I did not expect a large challenge. There was a break of 7 and half years and during that time I was working in another branch. As you do not forget how to ride a bicycle, you do not forget how to solve all the challenges connected to the branch. I was prepared for everything that I think I could expect, but nobody could be prepared to take over a company during the Corona crisis.

When I joined Berner on the 1<sup>st</sup> of April, I came to the office. I knew I would not find many new co-workers in the office since most were working remotely from home. First month I was working partially in the office, to feel the atmosphere, go through the written materials and have a chance to talk to, at least, a couple of people that were daily there. I was taking materials and files needed for further work with me and rest of the day I have worked from home.

**When you took over, how did you introduce yourself to your subordinates, since when you came to the office you only managed to see two or three of them? How did you make yourself known to everyone who works under you?**

I was introduced to the management of Berner Croatia by my Austrian superiors. They organized a Skype meeting the day before my first working day in Berner where they introduced me to five-six people informing them that from tomorrow I am their new CEO. After the introduction, I have made my first address to them. Afterwards, in the next three to four working days, I literally called everyone in Berner Croatia.

In Berner, a majority of activities are connected to and turnover is coming from field sales. That means that 80% of the team are salesmen and their sales groups leaders who daily visit customers in the field throughout whole Croatia. Without a chance to visit them in their areas, as traveling was prohibited and fieldwork was not possible, one of the most urgent tasks for me was to ring everyone and tell them that I'm here, pointing if they need any help to give me a call.



**The face to face impression, especially in a trading company, is always very important. In this occasion, you had to do this over the phone. What was your personal feeling when introducing yourself to all the members over the phone and what could you have gained from their approach to you, since because of this distance, you could not assess their reaction?**

Well, you always miss body language, things you can observe when you talk to someone in person. You can precisely detect if they are more friendly or more interested. Although new media have some limits, it was the best I could do - at least to hear the voice or read and write texts in the form of posts and e-mails. I have been in Berner almost a month and half now, but I still have not met the majority of my team members. I still haven't met 35 of my 55 new colleagues face to face.

**What does your typical day look like these days?**

I had and still have to check-processes here. In general, I am familiar with them as I believe all the companies in the branch have similar challenges, similar problems, and similar opportunities, but some differences which I have to be aware of, exist. Part of my working time is related to learning how the company was doing in previous business year. I am also learning about people in the company as much as I can through personal calls.

**This next question is one that many businesses have come to terms with. How do you, and can you assess productivity in your employees when they are working from home, and when you can't oversee them directly?**

I think you do not need to control working hours or who is working productively six, seven or five hours a day in these circumstances. For the company it is important that all usual tasks that must be done are done. This company has a good organized hierarchy with leaders leading their sales teams and internal departments for years now, so I didn't have to measure the salesmen's performance myself but I trusted my team leaders who know their people, and could see much better who was performing more and who was not good. At the end all of tasks were done, and I can only say "thank you" to all members who were really working from home as seriously as in normal circumstances.

**The pandemic has shined a lot of light on the digital side of most businesses. You have become at least partially familiar with the web shop and other administrative processes that are mostly digital based – do you see any needs to work on digitalization or improvements considering the pandemic?**

A couple of years ago Berner management has recognized the importance of digitalization and business intelligence, as well as all these modern, not necessarily new, but newly in focus possibilities which IT brings you. Just before I joined, transformation from normal work in the office or in the field to remote work was done in a couple of days. IT environment needed for work from home, for remote conferences, for data exchange between national companies and headquarters, getting the data when you needed – was enabled fast and smooth.

We have a Web shop as well. It is definitely more valuable than before, but in our branch, salesmen visiting working sites of our customers and taking orders directly from them is still the most effective way that will not disappear. We will continue to improve and promote our Web shop although it's role still would not be so important as web shops are for B2C companies. For some of them in last weeks it was the only sales channel.



**Once this pandemic is over, do you think there will be some lasting changes in the way people work, considering the way you were working half and half when you took over, do you see your own hours or approach changing permanently in any way?**

I think that we have all learned that even if this situation was stressful in terms of the environment we were working within, that slowing down, when we had more time for our families or some other things, was not so bad. We shouldn't work with so much stress as we did in the past. Performing our tasks and being successful should not be so connected with this hurry and speed that we are used to work with. I do not think we will work less productively if we are just little bit more relaxed and less stressed. Concentrating on the things which are important and working in less stressful conditions will be a major gain for workers and managers.

**Connected with your leadership skills – despite your long years of experience you faced a challenge of your leadership skills, to establish trust and motivate people remotely without having an official and a face-to-face start with your team. What would you recommend to a new CEO or leader starting in a normal situation, what should they focus on?**

From my experience, there are a couple of important things. First, all of us changing the job and company you work for, come with some ideas - what to change, what to do. It is very important not to start changes before you have seen the real situation before you have talked to the people in the company. First listen, ask, sample information, make your own picture and then based on that you can start changes.

Second thing is which comes with experience - follow your instincts. Although in some situations you will not know why exactly you want to do something, but later when you succeed you will know why you wanted to do it that way. If you fail, you learn. If you have good instincts, you will not fail so much.

Trust your colleagues, trust your instinct, and develop a good picture of the company first. Also, if you want to change something, make it together with your team. If you explain changes to the team and convince them showing why is it important, they will follow you and promote new solutions. Success is guaranteed.