

Taylor Guitars Stays Close to Home to Find Global Talent

WORKFORCE: CFO Leverages Connections With SDSU, UCSD, USD
By Emmet Pierce

Friday, February 6, 2015

In addition to having a reputation for making quality musical instruments, Taylor Guitars is known as a local company that has successfully embraced an international business strategy. It has developed relationships with the largest universities in the county and continues to cultivate talent through internships and staff hires.

Barbara Wight, Taylor's chief financial officer, oversees the El Cajon-based company's foreign operations.

Staying on top of changes in the international marketplace means constant learning, said Wight, who has lectured on international business at San Diego State University, the University of San Diego, and the Rady School of Management, University of California, San Diego. Some of her students have become interns and full-time employees at Taylor.

Taylor, which has more than 700 workers, produces hundreds of guitars daily at factories in El Cajon and in Tecate, Mexico. Its dealer network includes more than 800 retail outlets in North America and international distribution to 60 countries.

Taylor's Amsterdam facility is a sales, distribution, warehousing, and repair center that services all of Europe, the Middle East and Africa. In Cameroon, a country in Central Africa, Taylor has an ebony mill that produces guitar fretboards and bridges. The company has operations in Spain, Africa and Mexico.

"You have to be prepared for changes all the time," Wight said. "Recently, distribution laws changed in the European Union, and we had to change all of our distribution agreements with dealers there."

A Good Corporate Citizen

Mark Ballam, managing director of the Center for International Business Education and Research (CIBER) at San Diego State University, said Taylor has developed a keen awareness of the need to protect the environment.

In 2011, Taylor and Madinter Trade, S.L., an international distributor of guitars and tonewoods used to make instruments, purchased Crelicam, an ebony mill outside of Yaoundé, Cameroon.

"They have done an exceptional job of being a good global citizen, protecting the environment, helping the people they do business with, and all the while ensuring their own success," Ballam said.

Understanding other countries won't help you succeed internationally unless you also have something that people want to buy. Seth Kaplowitz, a lecturer at the SDSU College of Business Administration, said the main ingredient that has ensured Taylor's success around the world is "the quality of the product they make."

Cultures and Customs

International business requires a deep knowledge of local laws and customs, even if the currency now is common, such as in Europe. Learning another language can help you understand a foreign culture, Wight said.

"I will give you a good example for Spanish," she said. "We say, 'I dropped my keys.' The grammatical way to say it in Spanish might be, 'My keys dropped themselves from me.' That tells you a lot about a culture. It is an embarrassment" to acknowledge making such a mistake.

"There is a lot of adventure, and it's exciting," she said. "There is a lot of traveling, which at first sounds romantic, but often you are going from the airport to the car to the conference room, back to the car and back to the airport. You are there to work and you want to maximize your time. For me, it's wonderful. I love it, and a lot of people do."