

Internship Program Offers Orphans a Fresh Start

By Anna Smolchenko
Staff Writer

Dasha and Andrei are likely the most unusual interns to work in the Moscow office of one of the world's biggest accountancy firms.

Dasha Rumyantseva, 22, who works in the company's mailroom, was trained to restore stucco molding. Andrei Komarov, 20, who joined the IT department, was until recently a plasterer.

They are among the current batch of 120 interns who have been fortunate to land a paid training position with PricewaterhouseCoopers. Competition at the firm is rigorous and graduates of the country's leading universities often start out working at reception.



Dasha Rumyantseva said her friends had noticed a big difference in her since she started her internship at PwC.

But Rumyantseva and Komarov come from a slightly different background. They are part of the International Finance Corporation's "A Chance for Work" program, which aims to give orphans a fresh start, help overcome prejudices against orphans in Russia and encourage businesses to help. The program began in Washington in 1997 to assist the homeless, then moved on to Cairo, Egypt, and came to Russia in September 2003.

IFC earmarked more than \$250,000 for the program and joined forces with the Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs to spearhead the first coordinated effort by Russian business to integrate orphans into society. A total of 17 companies currently employ interns under the program.

With the help of a half-dozen charities, IFC finds, selects and teaches orphans to draft resumes and prepare for job interviews, said Ksenia Britikova, the IFC's program coordinator.

Achieving "a sense of self-worth" and "sense of identity beyond being an orphan" is crucial for such youngsters, IFC said in a statement.

Experts said orphans have a hard time adjusting to an independent life after leaving orphanages, usually at the age of 18, and often struggle with low self-esteem.

Natalya Nazimova, an educational specialist with Souchastiye v Sudbye, or Partners in Fate, one of the charities working with the IFC on the program, said that the youngsters were "often depressed, as feel they are somewhat different." Nazimova, who has worked as a counselor at an orphanage, said her students went to a regular school but still felt alienated. "They felt different from the other children, whom they called 'family types,'" she said.

Alexei Golovan, children's ombudsman in Moscow, said orphans were often afraid of the world at large and tended to trust other orphans more than anyone else.

According to official statistics, there are more than 700,000 children living in orphanages across the country. In Moscow, 5,700 children live in more than 40 institutions. Federal law entitles children to a free, brand-new apartment when they leave a children's home, but only affluent Moscow has enough money to provide its disadvantaged youth with housing, experts said.

The law also gives orphans under 23 the chance to enter university for free, but few wind up taking the opportunity because they lack motivation, experts said.

"The problem lies in the system of all such institutions in Russia," Golovan said, adding that staff in orphanages were more concerned with orphans' day-to-day activities than what careers they would follow.

Yury Sergiyenko, 26, realized he needed a university degree only when he was nearing his 24th birthday. His parents abandoned him as a toddler and he spent his entire life in state institutions.

Now Sergiyenko has worked for almost a year and a half with the IFC, where he has helped on the organization's corporate governance program. He started with basic tasks and later took on more substantial responsibilities, such as preparing presentations and maintaining a database of corporate clients.

When his contract expired last month, he landed a job two weeks later with the Flex recruiting agency, he said, adding that he dreams of eventually joining the office of the children's ombudsman in Moscow.

"I know the system from the inside and a lot needs to be changed," he said, adding that when aid was allocated to his orphanage, only a fraction reached the children.

A total of 70 orphans have so far undergone professional training through the program, and 29 have landed internships at 17 companies and 21 found jobs themselves, Britikova said. Five interns have gone on to become permanent employees, Britikova said.

Nikolai Koksharov, 20, said he didn't know what to do with his life until he learned of the program two years ago, but after a three-month tryout at Raiffeisen in 2003, the bank hired him as a courier. Koksharov can now pay for his university education, he said, adding that at first he did not believe things would work out for him.



Vladimir Filonov / MT

Andrei Komarov has just had his internship in the IT department renewed.

Neither did Rumyantseva and Komarov, they said. Their supervisors at PwC said initially they also had some concerns and didn't know whether orphans would be able to blend in. Boris Bobrikov, Komarov's supervisor, said he took the news that the youngster would join the IT department "guardedly." But "from day one he became part of the team" and has since made "colossal" strides forward, Bobrikov said.

Both Rumyantseva and Komarov have been doing fine, supervisors said, and their initial six-month contracts have just been renewed.

Friends who see Rumyantseva now cannot recognize her, she's so changed, she said. Wearing a two-piece suit, she acquired a professional demeanor and mastered the industry's

parlance. "I cannot disclose that information," she said when asked how much her intern's stipend was.

Komarov said that during his internship he learned not only "how to launch Windows properly" but also not to skip meals, which he did before to save money. In the future, he said, he wants to be a system administrator. Rumyantseva said she wanted to work in the tax and finances department.

Both said they dreamed of staying on with the company.

Olga Novikova, who heads the firm's human resources department, said: "If everything goes well, in six months they will be taken on as full-time staff."

For more information about the program, call Ksenia Britikova at (095) 748-4197, or go to: www.ifc.org or www.achancetowork.ifc.org