

Penny Ricas

Freight Forwarding and Customs Brokerage Firm

Meet Penny Rica

I'm Penny Ricas. I am a Vice President of Business Development for the Eastern Region of Barthco International. (Audio problem) I had an idea of what I wanted to do when I grew up, but it was an idea that my father was not real thrilled with (chuckling) because I wanted to go to New York and be a Broadway star so that was not (chuckling) that was not really in the cards for me. So, to tell you the truth, I went to school because I knew I had to go to school. I really didn't have any goals. I took a job as a bank teller, which was challenging for about two weeks and that's how I kind of fell into this job. I fell into this and really found something that I knew I could grow with and that's pretty important too. When you're making career choices, it's one thing that gets a job that pays well to start, but is there any chance for you to really set a career path for yourself? That's what you got to look at when you're deciding where you're going to take a job.

Explain what you do. Talk about an average day at work for you.

A customs broker is responsible for preparing and submitting to customs documentation necessary to secure a release of international cargo so that it's free to come into the commerce in the U.S. Everything that comes into this country must clear U.S. customs, essentially because customs are protecting U.S. citizenry from potentially hazardous materials or anything that we would not want in our country. We typically represent companies who are importing. If you look around at your Macy's, at your Ikea, all these companies that we're going in and buying their wares, they're importing that material and we are the conduit to getting that material from the port into the commerce of the U.S. by clearing through customs and other government agencies. So, a lot of telephone work, a lot of computer work, special programs, PowerPoint, Excel. We do a lot of analysis so that we can prove to potential clients that we would be of good value to them in their current situation. So it's definitely a position where your day flies by. You're constantly moving. You're constantly doing new things and no day's ever like the day before. They're all different.

How did you prepare for this career? How did your career begin?

When I left college, the only job I could find was as a bank teller, and that was not particularly stimulating to me after about two months. And we had a family friend who told us he was going to start his own business importing wine ... asked if I would like to come along. He really knew not very much about what he was doing, but could I come along and be the office manager-type person for him and I jumped at the opportunity. So we had to start learning imports and we hired a customs broker and I just got the feeling, during the course of my year there, that my customs broker knew so much that I didn't know. And it seemed all so mysterious to me that I took a course that was designed to help people who wanted to get there customs brokerage's license and it was to help them prepare for that license and I had no intentions of getting the license but I wanted to know

what my broker knew, what was so mysterious about customs. So I think that kind of really whetted my appetite and I ended up, I actually applied only at Barthco International and I had to apply for my job three times before I was hired, but I had decided that it was so interesting, I really wanted to kind of move in to the customs brokerage, and that's how my career started.

What personality traits or interests can be a good match for this career?

I have found, through the years that the people who are most successful in this industry and are happiest in this industry are people who have a very good math aptitude and that doesn't mean calculus, or anything, just a simple math aptitude. We're often determining volume. We're reporting quantities in terms of kilos. We've got to make some conversions sometimes. A good math aptitude ... someone who likes to multitask, can and enjoys multitasking, because you typically are doing that throughout your day and really enjoys working with people. Your customers are your book of business. You maintain those relationships under the umbrella of the company you are working for. But that's who you are working for is your customers. So you got to enjoy providing the service and enjoy creating and building relationships with those clients.

What parts of your education do you use most often in this career?

When I look back I think that the courses that helped me most were certainly business management classes. You don't need many, but you need a very good concept how business operates. Not only are you working for an international business, but your clients are also international business owners and understanding the real operation of how businesses run is invaluable. Your math absolutely, your algebra, even your geometry, although nobody believes they're ever going to use geometry, it definitely comes into play each and everyday. Really, you know, the only thing other than that is your English classes are very important because they help you portray yourself. Most of your customers you never get to meet. Most of your customers you have relationships with over the telephone. Your customers may be in Los Angeles and you're in Baltimore where their freight is. So you really need to sell yourself. You really need to be an effective communicator and those courses, I think, really gave me the confidence to be able to speak with people and issue emails that were straightforward and well-written so that I could communicate effectively with my clients.

What has been the career track that's gotten you from your first job to where you are now? What special degrees or licenses did you need to get along the way?

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They sat me at a desk and they handed me a pile of files and they said, "These are the shipments you're going to be working on, and we'll help you through them." And someone sat with me and kind of walked me through the rules and regulations and offered me ideas of what I should be reading. Definitely, when you start in this business, you're going to be picking up a lot to read just to familiarize yourself with what we're doing, what the regulations really are ... they're lengthy but you just need to be aware that they exist. So there's a lot of reading. It's really vitally important that you have

someone that's really interested in mentoring you and helping you grow, and I did have that. I was very fortunate. Within three years of working at the desk, learning the business and being quite productive (that's always very important), I was promoted to an import manager and I managed the import staff ... about that time it was about a dozen of people and that was even more learning because then I was exposed to many more commodities. Each commodity has its own little requirements and it was definitely a learning experience in that I was exposed to more things and I was also managing people for the very first time. So managing yourself is much different than managing other people. So that was a great learning experience for me. I managed the import department for about two years and then was promoted to the branch manager, at which point I really had to learn freight forwarding because we had a department that did both and I was managing the entire operation. So, again, every promotion came with a new learning experience. Now I am managing business development for the whole east region for the company and definitely learning (chuckling) more, too. So you never stagnate in this industry. You're always learning something new, just because the industry is always moving; the industry is never stagnant. There's always new regulations. There's always new policies, and new procedures. The industry is evolving and we evolve with it so, certainly never an opportunity to stagnate in this business.

A customs broker license is required if you're going to manage a department. A license is not required to clear shipments or to prepare documentation, but a license is required to oversee that operation. So, for someone who is in the industry, maybe he's been in the industry a couple of years and would like to grow, that would be the next logical step would be securing that customs broker license. The license is given by Customs & Border Protection, twice a year. It's a very, very, tough test. Most people don't pass it the first time. But once you pass that test what you have is extremely valuable, and very necessary to grow into management positions within a customs brokerage firm.

What is the best part of your career?

What keeps me excited about this job is the fact that it changes every day. I am learning something new every day and I am fortunate enough to have a job where not only do I keep my hands in the operational end of what's happening in our industry but I also get to work with clients directly. And I have many, many clients whom I really consider personal friends of mine because I've been able to develop those relationships through this business. And you combine the fact that you're challenged everyday with something new to the fact that you're really working with all of your best friends, I mean you can't imagine work that would be any more appealing.

How has your work changed over the years? What role has technology played in those changes?

The biggest change since I started in this business would be technology. When I started in this business, we hand-wrote all of the documentations and then we hand-delivered all of that documentation to another person in the Customs House who reviewed it physically and ran it through different departments before it got a stamped release on it. Then a

runner, a courier, would send it back to me, and that might take three or four days. In today's world, we get documents in electronically. We prepare an entry electronically and, typically, we can have a release back in fifteen minutes. So productivity has skyrocketed. We're doing most everything electronically today and there really is ... paper is the thing of the past. So where maybe when I started in the business, you were a terrific account rep if you could process fifteen entries a week. Now account representative are probably processing twenty-five entries a day. So productivity has skyrocketed due to technology and that's the biggest change.

How does your work fit into the larger framework of the work at the Port?

A customs broker or freight forwarder is really the one entity in the whole supply chain that reaches out to everyone. We're on the phone. We're talking not only to our customers. We're talking to the steamship line that brought that product in because the steamship line has to release the cargo. We're talking to the stevedores because they get the shipments ready for movement. We're talking to Customs. We're talking to many different players everyday because our job is to pull all of those actions together so cargo can move. So if there's one entity that talks to everybody in the Port, it's the customs broker/ freight forwarder.

What advice would you have for anyone who wants to have the kind of career you have?

I would recommend one of the first things that somebody do is go out to the Customs website, Customs and Border Protection.gov. There are some publications out there that are just invaluable, that really tell you about what it is you're going to learn. *Importing into the United States* is a publication that you can print right off of the web from their site. You can see what were involved with daily. Make sure it sounds interesting, piques your interest. Then I would recommend, make sure that you have secured knowledge in accounting ... that you're well-spoken because you do work with the public everyday. Make sure that this is something that you're definitely interested in doing and then you would go to your local broker's association who could ... and we have and it's called the Baltimore Customs Broker and Freight Forwarders Associations. We're listed in the Yellow Pages, and you contact us, tell them you're interested in a career in this business and we can tell you where there are some openings in the industry. There are many brokers in this area and any local association --regardless of where you live-- would be happy to help you find open positions.