

Telemarketing programme for blind and partially sighted (Connie Hasemann) -- 1999

**CREATING GOOD JOBS FOR VISUALLY IMPAIRED PEOPLE IN NEW AREA OF BUSINESS
To make a difference!**

**Business Enterprise "Tele-trading House"
-a new career for visually impaired people**

Education and enterprise within the same project

To strengthen the efforts for education and employment

How did it begin

The goal for the work done at the Institute for the Blind and Partially Sighted is to strengthen the efforts to enable people with severe visual impairments to handle ever more areas of work.

Labour market prognoses suggest job development in service and trade, with marketing as a part of the future growth area. The target group was unemployed, young and adult men and women with a visual impairment.

The Horizon Employment Initiative and the National Social Fond granted money for product development and establishment.

Intentions and achievements

We wanted to investigate the possibilities for establishing a non-academic continuing education in the areas of service and trade, aimed at persons with a visual impairment.

We wanted to see if it was possible to secure work and jobs in an expanding area. Work that would enable the individual in the right setting to work on more equal terms with others in the labour market.

An ongoing process

Today, a continuing educational programme has been developed, and an enterprise has been established:

- Telemarketing education
- Tele-trading house
- Telemarketing software programme

What made a difference? The Students

The project selected students who showed a special interest and skills in relation to the project. Students who, to an especially high degree, possessed the will, skills and not least the courage to make a big change in their life.

What made a difference? The trainer team

The project has managed to gather a unique team of trainers who represent great professional knowledge of telemarketing, company management, teaching, expertise concerning education for blind and partially sighted students, communication, project development and an approach concerning the whole person.

Introduction and outline

A one year long educational programme in telemarketing is developed, anchored directly in the business world with a career plan for each participant.

The enterprise "TELE-TRADING HOUSE" is developed as a co-operative company, owned by the employees. During the programme, it forms the basis for the daily work.

With the TELE-TRADING HOUSE as a basis, a continuing educational programme has been developed, primarily for visually impaired people with previous work experience.

The values and culture of the company give the participants experience with the value-based management of modern companies, like, for example, the learning organisation.

Why telemarketing

In telemarketing, the knowledge of human nature and worldly wisdom are valuable elements. And people who have gone through crises – like, for example the loss of sight – are very resourceful telemarketing employees. They have often acquired great insight and ability for empathy, which are very important skills when dealing closely with other people.

In recent years, telemarketing has been one of the greatest growth areas in the U.S. and Europe in terms of employment. At the same time, it is a very versatile trade, because the method can be used in every business area and at many levels.

There are flexible possibilities for jobs that match the ability of the individual person, both personally and professionally. At the same time it is an area where part-time work and working out of one's home are viable possibilities.

The choice of methods

Principle for the educational programme:

“REALITY-STUDY” based on methods and attitudes linked to:

- a) the apprenticeship-principle
- b) "learning-by-doing"
- c) "the whole person ".

Practice and theory in the project means:

- That the programme has been centred around solving practical marketing tasks from the planning stage to the execution, delivery and invoicing the client.
- That the theoretical level in the programme is relatively high, around the level of bachelor of commerce in selected subject areas.
- That the teachers are experts in their respective fields – with or without graduation papers at M.Sc. level. This meant in practice that some 8 freelance trainers who had had business successes were associated with the programme.

Who was recruited

During the total period, the Telemarketing education has taken in **31** students. Of these, 30 have gone through to graduation.

The project has encouraged both women and men to apply. Nevertheless, only 9 out of 31 students were women. The Telemarketing education is primarily a continuing educational programme. This is reflected in an average age of the students of around 30 years.

Presentation of software development project

Problem definition

Controlling telemarketing tasks, on a computer or manually, requires a high level of systematic ability. A direct telephone dialogue with only 10 different subjects, for example, will often have uncovered at least 50 pieces of information.

The information is typed into a software program during the conversation and is then available for statistical analysis and for transferral to relevant partners who may use the information about the individual subject for, for example a sales visit.

In addition, telemarketing is often used for actual analyses, where the purpose is to analyse the subjects' needs, interests and knowledge of a given product or service.

In order for a VISUALLY IMPAIRED person to be able to work at a computer monitor with a telemarketing software program, the vision-related assistive technological aids (speech and enlargement programs) must be able to function with the given program.

Conclusion

After testing several telemarketing and database programs, our conclusion was:

The telemarketing programs that we had tested were, first of all, not developed systematically (so that the screen reader could access the information). In addition, they were lacking facilities that in our experience are very important in assisting blind and partially sighted users in handling telemarketing assignments. For example, we find it a "must" that the program manages the customer contact automatically, so that the subject pops up on the screen at the time when the telemarketing consultant has specified that renewed contact should take place. It should not be the telemarketing consultant's job to manage the subjects.

On the way to a solution

During our tests, we came across the Crosstab analysis program (a DOS-program) by Feldborg Informatik. The Crosstab program largely proved able to support speech and enlargement (Zoomtext), and as it was also extremely user-friendly, we introduced it as a standard program in the training.

Crosstab was developed exclusively for analysis tasks, so other types of telemarketing assignments had to be planned in such a way that we could handle them through status queries. This was far from optimum, but a great step in the right direction.

For the information of the readers, we can add that the first telemarketing assignments were solved via WordPerfect with all the control problems that this entails. To have to begin with word-processing and, later, an analysis program requires investments. The EU project enabled us to try to develop the optimum telemarketing software for blind and partially sighted users, which, in addition to being the perfect tool, provided some possibilities of job development.

Our assessment of the situation was that having a telemarketing program that was developed primarily to work with vision-related assistive technological aids would provide the individual student with the tool for succeeding on equal footing with other telemarketing consultants.

Development organisation

From 1st September 1996 the educational programme entered into serious considerations of developing the most professional telemarketing software in the market, that would always be able to function together with assistive technology software.

It had to be developed for a Windows environment and with the ability to support the latest versions of screenreaders (JAWS) and enlargement (Zoomtext) in the Danish and English market.

Feldborg Informatik became actively involved in the development concerning programming and the development of the telemarketing software.

We chose Feldborg Informatik on the basis of our positive experiences with the user-friendliness of the Crosstab analysis program from Feldborg Informatik as well as the company's flexibility in the co-operation concerning Crosstab, where, among other things, they carried out continued changes of background colours in the program - a problem for many partially users, and finally the company's interest in constructive co-operation.

In order to secure the optimum screenreader compatibility, a computer expert was involved in the continued development and testing of this aspect of the program. The expert uses screenreader and speech synthesis himself and has previously been actively involved in professional software development.

A thorough knowledge of the problems that visually impaired people encounter when working with computers, 8 years of experience as director of an agency, a good knowledge of pitfalls and troubleshooting in telemarketing, and, not least experience in developing a telemarketing software program, have provided a necessary and essential basis for the project.

Status

During the development and testing of our new program, it turned out that having a trans-national development group provided a flexible team, whose strength was both the broad knowledge of visual impairment and the knowledge of development work and telemarketing.

2/3 into the development of the software program, the new screenreader JAWS 3.0 was released, and this meant that the previously designed script for JAWS had to be verified and altered, so that the objective of being on the cutting edge could still be met.

We further decided to integrate all the analysis facilities in the previously developed analysis program so that the telemarketing consultant got the possibility of obtaining segmented analyses with crosstabs and segments selected on the basis of filter questions.

Impact on job opportunities

The development of the new program opens new doors to the telemarketing student:

- 1) The telemarketing consultant can bring a complete telemarketing program for Windows to the company, both in the project period and for new employment. The consultant can thus bring his or her own functional tool for solving all sorts of telemarketing assignments for the company.
- 2) The telemarketing software program enables a visually impaired consultant to become the manager of the entire function, controlling an assignment via the program and getting others (possibly fully sighted) to make the phone calls. This enables the visually impaired consultant to take on a managerial or supervisor role in the department.
- 3) With an optimum software program the telemarketing consultant may direct almost all of his or her attention on the conversation with the subject, not having to worry about navigating the computer program. This frees up resources for thinking more creatively, thus rethinking the function.

Presentation of the telemarketing education

Structure of the Telemarketing education:

The programme is built around 4 modules, of 3 months duration.

Module 1: Introduction to marketing

- Personal values
- Personal career plan
- Mentor system
- EDB training - Microsoft office, assistive technology and telemarketing program
- Telemarketing training in practice
- Communication/voice training I
- Communication/sales training
- Communication theories
- Company visits at telemarketing agencies and companies' telemarketing departments and address supplier
- Qi-gong introduction course (Chinese energy workout; a training method used by astronauts today)

Module 2: Practice module

- Voice training II
- Sales training/communication, continued
- Course in Windows programs: word processing and database
- Course in using a scanner
- Business letters
- Telemarketing training in practice
- Telemarketing training on the telephone for 5 weeks in a company of one's own choice
- Evaluation of training

Module 3: The company's functions and management

- Personal career plan
- Telemarketing training in practice
- Courses and training in:
 - company accounts
 - planning and carrying out direct Mail
 - questionnaires
 - database handling
 - the functional and management basis of companies
- Introduction to the graduation project
 - what is going to go into the written report?

Module 4: Graduation project

- Each student works 3 months in an individual company solving their graduation project.
- Evaluation of the graduation project

Co-operation with companies

One of the strengths of the Telemarketing education is the close co-operation with the business world. The students have a 5 week trainee-period in the middle of the programme and finish the programme with a 3 month graduation project, also in a company.

Usually the project is selected by the student based on his or her interests. That means it is always new companies that are selected as project places and partners.

We see company managers who meet us with openness and interest. They work hard to make the student settle in and feel welcome in the company.

The close co-operation and continued contact to company managers mean that managers come to give presentations on current topics to the students. For example, "how does testing of potential new employees take place", or "how to create and maintain a database".

The broad-ranging co-operation with the business world, with frequent company visits during the programme, provides an openness and understanding that work both ways.

The graduates' results

It has been characteristic that almost all the students have been offered job upon their graduation from the programme. Jobs in private or government companies, related to their degree and personal background and skills. Another characteristic is that several students have changed jobs during the project period.

To some graduates, finding employment is the result of great personal effort. Most, however, have been offered jobs in companies that have become acquainted with the project and the programme. Some graduates, we should mention, have declined job offers due to commute time, working environment or tasks.

Today 80% are employed.

Job opportunities tomorrow

The tendency for companies to use telemarketing is on the increase.

The opportunity for customer contact via dialogue marketing with direct mails and telephone contact continues to create new jobs based on the use of the telephone.

With a broad telemarketing educational programme, where the training for telemarketing consultant includes the supervisor element, and where the focus is on management and control, one will have the potential for many different types of jobs.

At the same time, it is possible to have a part-time job exclusively on the telephone. Increasingly, the work station may function both in the company and in the employee's own home. There are job opportunities to match the individual person's unique situation.

When a telemarketing consultant can handle outgoing marketing campaigns, he or she will have relatively easy time handling customer inquiries during "quiet periods".

Our conclusion is:

There are jobs available for telemarketing consultants with high professional and personal competencies.

Presentation of the company Tele-trading House, Ltd.

The Tele-Trading House is a co-operative company - owned by the employees, who are primarily visually impaired people. It is a "social company" in its purpose, but it is run as a telemarketing agency on normal commercial terms with a project manager as director.

The employees do not want the company to function as or be known as a social enterprise. We wish to be known for a high level of professionalism and great human expertise.

The company has provided a realistic and real setting for the teaching method "reality studies" and "learning by doing". Especially for visually impaired students, the "hands-on" experience is important and a training that enables the graduate to apply his or her skills directly in the business world - in a very literal sense.

For the TELE-TRADING HOUSE, in comparison to ordinary company foundings, the project has meant an advantageous start position through the integration with the Telemarketing educational programme.

The company has independent status with direct hiring, own installations, telephones and operational costs, except for rent which in the future will be included into the "barter" that is a natural element in the relationship between the educational programme and the company.

Interested parties

The primary interested for the TELE-TRADING HOUSE are the students, the staff, IBS Business and KIC.

The link between TTH and IBS-Business shows that there is a benefit in thinking differently. An unusual combination, where a unit with its own company culture is placed in the setting of a public institution.

The company is managed by an enthusiastic executive board comprising dynamic business leaders and persons who live up to and provide a blue stamp of the ethical values that the Tele-Trading House strive for.

Ties between the education and the Tele-Trading House are strengthened by the fact that the director of the Tele-Trading House is also the project manager of the education. That contributes to a proper balance between the two units.

Tele-Trading House company

So far, the Tele-Trading House has solved telemarketing assignments for private individuals as well as businesses. In addition: the qualification of potential customer subjects, appointments for sales visits, fundraising, booking meetings, selling high quality magazines etc. The work has been done to a high degree with the TTH as the outgoing company. A discipline that is seen as the most difficult in telemarketing.

The future

An internationalisation on network basis is expected before the turn of the millennium

As a co-operative the company places great importance on self-financing and consolidation. A high price/high quality strategy is sought, both for profitability reasons and in order to constantly spur the employees on to do their best, creatively and professionally.

Transnational dimension

The project started as an EU initiative under HORIZON I - Employment.

The initiative emphasises the strengthening of social solidarity, equal opportunities, new qualifications for human resources and economic integration = access to the labour market.

On this background, a partnership was formed between:

- Coo.S.S.E.L., Cooperativa Sociale, Reggio Calabria, Italy
- Action for Blind People, Liverpool, England
- The Institute for Blind and Partially Sighted People, Copenhagen, Denmark
- The partnership period was from 1st September 1995 to 31st December 1997.

Summary

The work with realising the project has been very much a learning Odyssey, which has given both structural and, not least, process know-how.

Many of the ideas that we have developed and tested, we are happy to make available to others. Other, and more important areas, it is simply not possible to share. The real icing on the cake is the software program, the value of which cannot easily be, described in measurable units.

The telemarketing project has been carried out with people who not only have taken continuing education, but who also have a lifetime' experience of about running a company, telemarketing and human development, as well as interdisciplinary know-how concerning training and education.

We believe in dialogue and development together with others. We would like to see this project description as a bridge that leads to further communication and reflection beyond the project itself.

The telemarketing education and Tele Trade House are still working side by side which gives synergy and ongoing possibilities.

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