

**Educational, Extension Training and Flexible Working Institute of MEOSZ**  
**Interviewee: Dr. Mihály Derera, Director**

**The organization's activities and business situation**

The National Federation of the Associations of Physically Disabled Persons (Hungarian acronym: MEOSZ, which we will use in this paper) rallies 82 member associations with a total of 192,000 members. It maintains the Institute for Education, Extension Training and Flexible Working, which is a non-profit organization without legal personality. MEOSZ runs it partly from its own resources and partly from government sources obtained by competitive tendering. The institute was formed in 2001. In 1998-2000 MEOSZ realized several educational projects under the umbrella name of HAPINET. HAPINET was so well received that a decision was made to create a permanent agency that specializes in education and training. The institute organizes training courses to improve the chances of the physically disabled to find work. It is no accident that the word "flexible working" is included in its name. Flexible working, it is convinced, can be a great help in ensuring work for the physically disabled.

**The institute's personnel policy**

Full-time employees number three, there is a lady secretary employed part time and about ten teachers as outside workers. Their hardware has recently been largely upgraded: it now has two servers and 24 PCs. The computers are located in two training halls. There is an Internet café in one of them, where MEOSZ members may use PCs free. During training courses future projects can be simulated and practised in the training halls.

**The motivation behind opting for flexible working**

Preparations for flexible working began several years ago because flexible working is ideal for the physically disabled. However there is not enough work to go round. One would expect call centres to employ physically disabled people to answer the phone. But most often call centres are difficult to be accessed – many of them are at the basement level.

The project that is described in this case study began when it was realized that it was no longer a requirement that those answering phone calls should be on the premises concerned. Hungary's Ministry of Employment Policy and Labour (FMM) has recently allocated considerable funds to support the employment of physically disabled people, not least because of Hungary's forthcoming accession to the EU. During discussions with officials of FMM, Mihály Derera showed 14 proposed project ideas that would offer work for physically disabled people. One of them suggested that physically disabled people could be involved in answering enquiries about competitive tendering for state grants. That is why it was decided that when tenders were invited for support to flexible working projects in October 2002, enquiries should be answered from a call centre outside the ministry and staffed by physically disabled people.

The call centre has thus been established at the commission and with the financing of FMM. FMM transfers to MEOSZ the funds that cover the cost of communication, wages and related public dues. Six employees have been selected by MEOSZ, and the institute trained them with the guidance of Mihály Derera. The hardware that is needed for the operation of the call centre has been ensured and maintained by MEOSZ, as for instance, Internet connection is assured via the institute's server, etc. The call centre operates in the following way: those making an enquiry about the invitation to tenders related to flexible working projects dial a green number. The call is then forwarded to the home of the flexible worker on duty.

### **Selection and training of flexible workers**

The call centre has six full-time employees. They work six hours a day and get the legally defined minimum wage. All of them had been unemployed and were selected from the database of MEOSZ. Four of them had attended this or that extension training course of the institute. All of them are computer and Internet literate, which means they needed no extra preparations. Possession of a PC was a criterion. The database carried at least 200 persons who met the admission criteria, which means selection of those six was not easy. Initially twenty were selected and interviewed. Requirements were as follows: good communication skills, above average intelligence, ability to make quick decisions; empathy and patience to talk with clients who might feel prompted to tell their whole life story; and self-discipline. Although calls are directed to the flexible worker's home, the caller must not find out that the professional answers to his enquiry do not come from an office. While the flexible worker is on duty, he has to sit at the phone, and has to answer the call with a standard introductory sentence. None of his family members may answer the call. The six persons take turns in being on duty according to a precise timetable. They heard an in-depth briefing and detailed written information about the invitation to tenders related to flexible working so that the call centre should be able to answer all conceivable enquiries.

### **Experiences about the day-to-day operation of the call centre**

Signing the contract with MATÁV (Hungary's principal telephone company) caused major initial difficulty. Under the law on telecommunications, once the call centre is made operational, MATÁV is obliged to connect all calls to it irrespective where the call is coming from. However, during the negotiations MATÁV insisted that it would only assume responsibility for calls initiated from MATÁV subscribers. Although regulations covering green numbers are clear and unequivocal, MATÁV was reluctant to abide by them. If members of the management of the call centre had not been so well informed about the technical aspects of the question, MATÁV would have installed unnecessary equipment in the call centre, and it would have defined strict qualification requirements as to who may work in the call centre. Fortunately, those problems have eventually been sorted out. If members of the management of the call centre had not been so familiar with those issues, that would have been a stumbling block.

Every employee received an e-mail address, so they could communicate among one another. That was of immense value. Occasionally one of them could not answer an

enquiry and asked for help from colleagues by e-mail. At the end of each working day a summary was made about experiences and incoming enquiries and it was shared. Their superior informed them about any new developments also by e-mail. From time to time he drew up an account about work done, and sent those summaries to the FMM by e-mail. The institute maintained a password-protected website, where staff members could learn about news and new tasks.

No special problem arose in connection with the call centre also because the information that had to be disseminated was not especially complicated.

In the beginning when a staff member on duty could not answer an enquiry, he promised to call back the caller. It soon turned out however that such cases were numerous because often enquiries rambled from the competitive tendering process and/or callers asked for assistance related to various matters (like "I'm looking for a job, can you help me?"). That is why later on callers were asked to phone again or a promise was made to answer them by e-mail.

As the assignment was rather homogeneous and the members of the staff had very similar skills, one could hardly notice any difference in their performance levels. In fact, it would have been quite a problem if there had been differences because a call centre is supposed to render standard quality service for each caller.

From time to time random test calls were made by both the institute and FMM to check if staffers answered the phone as they had to, and no problems arose.

When one of the staff members dropped out, a stand-in smoothly replaced him.

### **Hierarchy between flexible workers -- and related lessons to be drawn**

Staff members were prepared for work by their superior, who also liaised between the call centre and FMM and maintained the password protected website. Intra-company communication occurred via that website and/or by e-mail. There was no sub- or superordination among the flexible workers; they worked in turns, shifts of two persons.

### **About the future of flexible working at the company**

The time limit for that particular tendering process has expired but the call centre is still in operation as FMM continues to finance its work. The new assignment is as follows: to grant information about the distance learning programme of MEOSZ, give further information about flexible working, about planned future invitations for tenders, etc. Even if that particular tendering phase is over, interest is still keen because of the wide media coverage. The call centre gets plenty of enquiries from seekers of flexible working jobs. The day after a newspaper article about the call centre comes out, telephone lines are burning, which proves that the call centre fulfils an important mission by disseminating information about flexible working. FMM is maintaining the call centre also because it plans to launch another competitive tendering process in the foreseeable future. The head of the call centre is attempting to



find additional clients, perhaps in the private sector. The present capacity could be easily enlarged, which means the present system could be adjusted to new orders.

The head of the call centre – who has several years of experience in flexible working – says flexible working has an immense potential for physically disabled people. Note however that, contrary to the popular belief, only a limited percentage of the physically disabled people are highly qualified as access to the educational institutions is itself a problem for most of them. Those with high qualifications get work relatively easier, it is the less qualified majority that poses a problem. Fortunately, with the spread of computers and the Internet, demand for such type of flexible working is growing, which means more such jobs are generated. For the time being, the flagship entity in that area is the FMM. As that is a government department and not a player in the private sector, the result is occasionally divorced from day-to-day economic reality. In the interviewee's opinion, the flexible working projects should come under the auspices of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Transport, and their evolution should be tuned in to the spontaneous progress of e-business and economy as a whole.