

An unusual human resource management challenge

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**Employment of persons with reduced capacity to
work in the Hungarian census call center**

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I. INTRODUCTION

The 15th Hungarian Population and Housing Census was held in October 2011, during which the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (HCSO) installed an information center with a toll-free phone number providing assistance, information and answers to the questions of the general public.

Before the installation we discussed different variations of customer services, even the option of call center outsourcing. Finally, we decided to invest in an own call center, which could serve as a basis of development for the information service on the long run and it also meant a hardware-software upgrade of our internal phone system.

Recognizing the importance of supporting people with reduced work capacity to find a job and to maintain a foothold in employment, the HCSO **primarily aimed** at employing people with disabilities as call center operators. This was a kind of **project with no precedent** in the HCSO: an unusual human resource management challenge indeed, thereby a very special task for the Human Resource Department. The census call center of 2011 was the **closest and most intense contact with the public**. Being an operator actually meant being a representative of the statistical office: it was such an important job for which we had to define serious application requirements and a comprehensive training as well. On the other hand, we intended to **help people with reduced work capacity** and take into consideration that they are a group with probably the most difficulties regarding the employment field. It was a **question** whether these people would be able to overcome their physical obstacles, rapidly master the professional knowledge required for the job and to fulfill their tasks with good quality. Moreover, the situation turned out to be **more complicated** as we had to face an unexpectedly high level of workload of over 230.000 incoming calls in total over a period of 44 days.

This paper summarizes experiences of the above mentioned project, with special attention to important aspects of human resource management like recruitment, selection and training of persons with reduced capacity to work, also designing suitable and supportive work environment. The call center provided positive and useful experiences considering the employment of disabled people, while the further employed five operators for different positions in the HCSO demonstrates the success of the project. Drawing conclusions and examination of possibilities to provide jobs for more persons with reduced capacity to work is included in the paper as well.

II. HUMAN RESOURCES

The toll-free number was active from 8:00 AM to 8:00 PM between 28th September 2011 and 8th November 2011, weekends and public holidays included. Originally, we planned to work in two shifts with 20-25 operators, but due to the enormous amount of incoming calls we needed to significantly increase that number. Almost 70 people participated in the call center project altogether, several groups with different tasks described below.

1. First-line operators

At the end of the selection procedure 18 people with reduced capacity to work were applied, 15 of them as „first-line” operators handling all the incoming calls. The remaining 3 were employed as back-office workers because of their slight difficulties with speaking. Furthermore, we had 6 retired HCSO colleagues as first-line operators. In case of no free lines, an automatic voice indicated the case and the call was transferred to the second-line operators.

In spite of their physical obstacles the operators with reduced capacity to work did everything that was possible for the success of the call center. They worked tirelessly every day and their enthusiasm was outstanding. It is quite difficult for them to find a job, most probably that was the reason why they were all very grateful for the opportunity. They were able to learn the professional knowledge really fastly, which was needed for properly answering calls in connection with any issues related the population and housing census. Regarding the **quantity of their work** it is quite meaningful that there was no chance of having more than a few minutes of rest any day, since the lines were almost always overloaded. Obviously, their performance can not be measured by call traffic data, but the 34.500 calls handled by them in 44 days is a significant amount.

On the other hand, the **pace of work** of disabled people was self-evidently slower than that of people without any physical obstacles. The assistance and support of some operators required extra energy and more human resources. Few of them needed support regarding their everyday life, like eating and clothing. They also needed longer time to just go out for a short break for example. In addition, some of these people did not work for months, or even years before being applied here, so it was more difficult for them to get used to the situation.

All in all, their employment **required additional investments**, but it was beneficent and we experienced that their effectiveness and commitment to work **was beyond all expectations**.

2. Second-line operators

23 employees with census experiences working at different departments of the HCSO joined the census call center project as „second-line” operators. They only received calls if all the front-line operators were busy.

3. Supervisors

Colleagues of the HCSO working at the Information Service had useful experiences that we could use in our call center. They contributed as supervisors. They were responsible for technical support and in case of overload they called the second-line operators to join the work. In the meanwhile, they also participated in back-office work.

4. Back-office workers and assistants

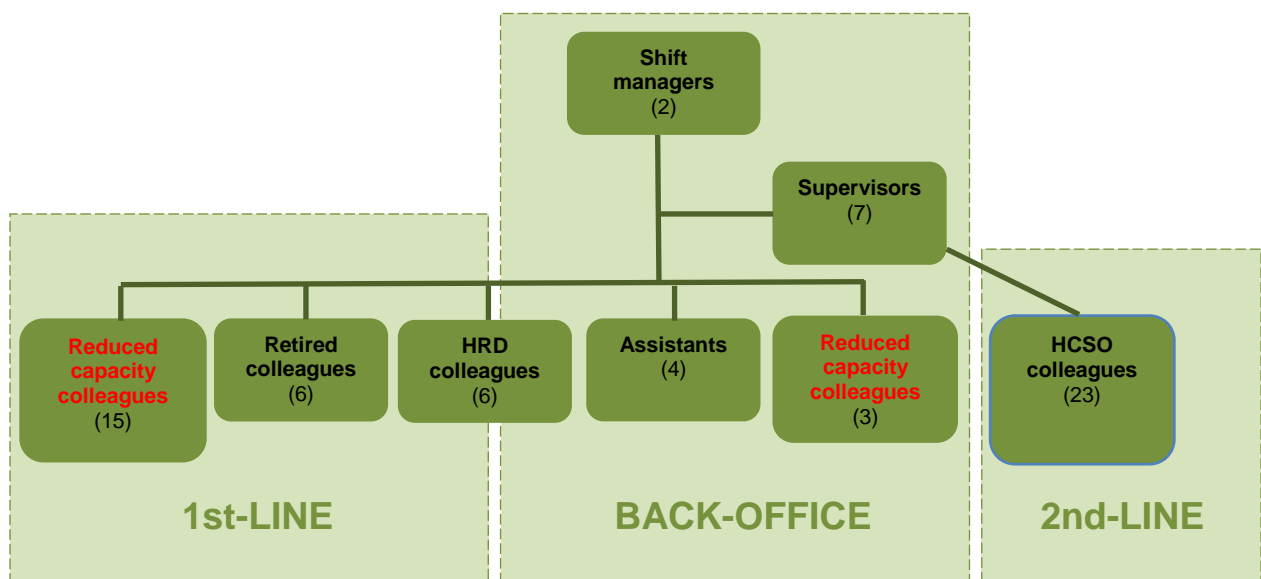
Employees of the Human Resource Department functioned as first-line, or second-line operators themselves and also acted as back-office workers, assistants, whatever was necessary.

5. Shift managers

We applied two „census experts”, who have been through several censuses during the last decades, as shift managers. They handled those problematic calls and questions that operators could not solve themselves.

6. Others

There was a separate toll-free line for helping enumerators and also a separate line for callers having special technical problems in connection with the online census form. Besides these phone communication channels, several colleagues answering incoming emails need to be mentioned here as well, since more than 15.000 emails were written by those people, who most probably tried to call us on the phone first, but the lines were overloaded.



The Census Call Center Staff

III. RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION

Firstly, the HCSO got in contact with the National Federation of Disabled Persons' Associations. We defined the application requirements for the call center operator position, which was published on their website. The **minimum requirements** were:

- Secondary school graduation
- Good communications skills (no speaking deflections)
- Basic computer skills
- Being able to master the necessary census knowledge
- Being able to synchronize the job with other job or studying
- Close habitation – especially in case of being disabled
- Good computer skills **was an advantage**
- Foreign language skill (English, German) **was an advantage**
- Customer service experience **was an advantage**

After receiving lots of applications, we continued with a classic selection procedure: analysed CV's, executed phone interviews and called the best applicants for a personal interview, where the future shift manager and a HR assistant was present.

Phone and **personal interviews were slightly different from general**. The usual exaggerations of applicants regarding their skills and experiences were definitely stronger than usual. For instance, most of them firmly stated good computer skills at the interviews and later it turned out that their skills were just minimal. Obviously, most of them had not enough information on the expectations of today's labour market. Moreover, people with such disadvantageous living conditions and with such difficulties on the employment field did everything they could when they got the opportunity of a personal interview. Some of them did not have any job interview experiences, while some others had so many negative experiences that they came with fully considered answers and speeches.

Also we had to be more permissive than we usually are regarding individual needs. For instance, while normally we unilaterally define working hours, this time we tried to be as flexible as possible when it came to putting work schedules together. We took everyone's individual needs into consideration.

Some of them had difficulties with moving and using public transport, so they needed another person to fetch them to work, or to just dress up for work in the morning. We also recognized that most of these people were struggling with poverty, they were living in very disadvantageous conditions so they had to do part-time jobs, which were necessary for them to live on. Some others studied, or had children to take care of. It was not an easy job compiling the work shifts every week in a way to achieve the best schedules for everyone.

Afterall, the successful 18 applicants were enrolled for an intensive training, before which they needed to master the basic theoretical census knowledge at home. Right at the end of the classroom trainings they began to work. Further employment needs to be mentioned related to the recruitment and selection procedure, since after de-activating our toll-free number **we have been further employing those 5 operators at different departments of the HCSO**, whom we found the most effective in the call center. Two of them are now working at the Information Service and three are employees of the Central Data Collection Department – clearly demonstrating the success of the whole project.



Recruitment and Selection procedure for operators

IV. TRAINING

It was an important application requirement of operators to be able to master the necessary census knowledge within a relatively short time. However, **none of the applicants had any experiences** related population and housing census and none of them had taken part in any other statistical data collection procedures before. Although some of the selected operators did work at customer services before, they all had to master a huge amount of theoretical knowledge related the census on a high level, to be able to answer confidently to any possible questions of the public. The call center software and the census monitoring software were also new to everyone. Consequently, the training was declared compulsory for all the applicants whom we chose by job interviews.

The training took place in two phases. Considering the short time available for the training, first of all we tried to send the participants as many written guides, notes and educational videos as it was possible to let them prepare at home. This way at the classroom meetings we could spend more time with practice and put less emphasis on theoretical issues. We compiled a comprehensive „Questions and Answers” summary with the issues that we expected to come up most frequently. The second phase was 6 days of all-day classroom trainings, as the table shows below.

Preliminary	- Preparation at home (guides, Q&A, educational videos)
Day 1	- General information regarding the tasks - General census knowledge
Day 2	- Census monitoring software (theory & practice) - General communication skills
Day 3	- Online questionnaire practice in groups - Call handling practice in groups
Day 4	- Call handling and online questionnaire practice in groups - Census monitoring software and call center software practice
Day 5	- Customer service communications skills (theory)
Day 6	- Customer service communication skills (practice)

Training schedule for operators

We were present at all of the lessons and we evaluated the performance of the applicants in the meanwhile, therefore a separate exam was not necessary. Education of operators did not end though with these trainings, since there were new problems and changes coming up throughout the operation of the call center that required continuous revision of knowledge. Learning new answers, methods was a necessity.

Training of people with reduced capacity to work was pretty similar to what it would have been of anyone else. **It was not primarily difficult because of their disabilities, but rather because of their lack of experience.** Basically we needed to train completely unexperienced people in a few weeks to be front-line census professionals answering every questions of the public. It would have been just as difficult for people without any physical obstacles.

V. WORK ENVIRONMENT

Work stations were installed in a library reading room of the HCSO. Unfortunately, we did not have too many spacious rooms in the office with accessibility, which was a necessary condition since we needed to take into consideration that many of the operators were disabled. Nevertheless, the most cost-effective solution was to install temporary work stations somewhere and not to build up a whole new call center for only 2 months of time, after which the investment would have had no function.



On the other hand, the reading room of the library was self-evidently designed for a different purpose: it did not perfectly serve as an ideal place for a call center.

We had 16 work stations in one room quite close to each other, separated only by transparent screens. It was difficult to move and walk around in order provide necessary assistance for operators. It was not easy to just get out from the work stations in the middle for a short break either. However, we tried to position operators with wheelchairs on the edges. Lack of space was also a problem at shift changes, when fast exchange of operators would have been required to ensure constant accessibility of the toll-free line.



Not only the call center suffered from the problems of inadequate work environment, but the call center itself made the life of its environment more difficult, too. For instance, we had no sound-proofing, so it was particularly strange to hear the noise generated by the call center in a library, that you would normally expect to be a quiet place.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

Based on our experiences with reduced capacity workforce and taking into consideration the specialities of recruitment, selection, training procedures and suitable work environment for these people, we drew the conclusions listed below.

1. A responsibility of Human Resource Departments

In Hungary there is a rule for institutions with more than 20 employees that requires employing people with reduced work capacity in at least 5 percent of their staff number. If they do not come up to this requirement they have to pay „rehabilitation contribution”. In some countries it is also an obligation for companies to comply a so-called „Equality Plan”. Therefore, it is necessary for every company to seriously deal with the issue and it is obviously a responsibility of Human Resource Departments to reasonably insert people with reduced work capacity into the working organization.

2. „Right person for the right job”

Human Resource Departments of statistical offices should be able to choose potential positions for people with reduced capacity to work, find and prepare applicants, provide suitable work environment, assist and support their better integration in the organization. They should not just find the proper tasks and positions for these people, but need to find the proper people as well. Call center operator position is just one possibility, with which the HCSO had useful experiences. In spite of the fact that a census call center only operates once in 10 years, at the information service of a statistical office there may be constant need for operators. There they have a chance to ask from the others and think together, so they do not hold up each other in work. Where many people work in one room others can help out those, who have difficulties with moving. But there are other administrative tasks in every organization (archives and record management, post opening) that does not need intensive physical activity so these people can better present a good performance.

3. Accessible and supportive work environment

It is important to design an accessible work environment for these people. Accessibility itself is not enough, though. The lack of need for too much movement inside the building is the most important factor of reduced work capacity employment, but they may have special needs and they may need constant assistance and control as well.

Those people who need support with everyday life, like eating, clothing, moving may need a longer rest time as well, since it may even take 10 minutes for one to just bring himself a glass of water from the drink machine outside and maybe he can not even open a bottle himself. If there are work shifts, changes may take longer so they have to be worked out well.

4. Constant control and communication

Not only physical assistance is important, but sometimes there is a need for special mental treatment as well. People who have not worked for a long time before taking a job, or have never had tasks with serious responsibilities may need a kind of psychological support from managers and other colleagues, or at least a forum to exchange experiences and discuss problems regularly. Especially if they work in a call center, where they may be exposed to direct offense from the public every day. So constant control and communication is indispensable.

5. Integration

Last, but not least, integration of reduced work capacity employees in the office is also very important. Other colleagues and managers need to understand that however there is equality between employees, reduced work capacity people would for instance need an extra day off from work in order to visit the doctor, or receive necessary medical treatment. The Human Resource Department might as well take care of their integration, organize team building events, call for more tolerance and empathy from others in case it is necessary. It is essential not to let them become a separated section, but they should try to maintain good relationships with other colleagues in the organization.

All in all, employing reduced work capacity people in the census call center was a definite success. They solved their tasks with maximum dedication and they made a fantastic team together. However, the employment of these operators required additional investments, it was beneficent and the efficiency was beyond all expectations. Further employment of the best five operators at different departments of the HCSO also demonstrates the success of their work and this whole project. Of course, a census call center only operates once in 10 years, therefore integration and support of the „best five”, development of a better receiving and more accessible work environment, together with analysing the possibilities of employing more reduced work capacity people are future challenges for both the HCSO itself and the Human Resource Department. Experiences of the 2011 Census Call Center are definitely going to be important bases for making progress on this field.

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