
THE THINK PROJECT

Introduction

THINK – Towards Handicap Integration Negotiating Knowledge – is a project that takes into account the many difficulties faced by the physically handicapped in accomplishing full professional integration. Using the methods made available by the new Information and Communication Technologies, mainly through telework, it aims to develop their capabilities, help them to market their services and achieve full professional integration.

The main short / medium term objective consists of achieving the **professional integration of twenty handicapped people in the first two years**, making them productive, profitable and self-sufficient in areas such as accounting, translations, word processing, programming and technical assistance for computer systems.

Formally started on October 6th, 1997, the project has the unique feature of being promoted by a consortium of private companies, without any public financing. The consortium includes **TELEMANutenção** (providing the project leadership and technical know-how), **Portugal Telecom** (providing telecommunication infrastructures), **Telepac** (providing Internet communications), **Edson Comunicação** (providing advertising and marketing), **Hewlett Packard Portugal** (providing hardware) and **Microsoft Portugal** (providing software).

In Portugal this project is known as **PORCIDE - Projecto Original de Capacidades Integrando Deficientes na Economia** (Original Project of Capabilities Integrating Handicapped in the Economy). As well as receiving several praiseworthy mentions in various national and international conferences, it won the 1997 award of “**Major Innovation in the scope of the Information Society**” attributed by the Portuguese Mission for the Information Society and the weekly newspaper EXPRESSO. More recently, in November

1998 it won the **European Telework Award as the best contribution to European sustainability**, attributed by the European Commission DGXIII. In the near future there are plans to expand it to other European countries under the above-mentioned abbreviation **THINK**, using the same techniques already tried and proven in Portugal.

Development

The consortium decided to limit the scope of the project during the first two years of activity to 20 individuals. This was due to the **pioneering features of the project** and the necessity of creating a monitoring and support structure for the teleworkers, which is sufficiently efficient that it provides them with the means of delivering a highly professional service to their clients.

Although still in its' grooming phase, it can be considered that **all the major difficulties of this phase have been overcome**. Both the above-mentioned awards and the praise from the media support this.

The **first and up to now, most complex project undertaken** consisted of setting up a helpdesk service for Microsoft in Portugal. The personnel engaged, spread from Setúbal to Oporto, provide technical support to Microsoft clients, by telephone, from their own homes. This group of 5 people, all handicapped, replaced a support team previously based in the company's offices, providing the latter with a reduction in costs and space, necessary for other activities, and the former with an opportunity of work and career development that would otherwise be difficult to achieve.

From the customer's point of view, it is totally irrelevant whether the technician is giving the support from the Microsoft office or his home. The customer's incoming call is redirected by

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Microsoft screeners to the available teleworker, in the same way as it would to an in-house technician. The PORCIDES (as these teleworkers were named) have two PCs at home, with one being dedicated to testing the problems presented by the customers, and the other being for general chores. They use an ISDN connection, occupying one of the channels for the incoming calls and the other for browsing the internet support databases. Microsoft has supplied them with basically the same research tools to resolve their customer's problems as those given to the in-house help-desk technicians.

The **recruitment process** was carried out following very strict parameters. From the initial 80 candidates, 20 were pre-selected. Following tests, only 10 were chosen for the tuition phase. The selection process considered the suitability of the project to the individual's conditions, and the inherent requirements of each market, as key criteria.

In a subsequent phase the selected individuals were provided with both with the necessary materials and thorough training. The training was provided almost simultaneously by **Microsoft** – in terms of product knowledge – and by **TELEMANutenção** with the techniques inherent to teleworking. The on-going accompaniment has focused mainly on technical matters as well as social integration issues, the first steps of autonomy and competitiveness, from both a market and personal development perspective.

During the training process the consortium drew conclusions from both the feedback provided by the teleworkers and from the continuous monitoring effected. Two issues became obvious. Without team spirit it would be impossible to reach the proposed targets, and that not all the workers involved showed suitability for this kind of work.

To aid in the construction and maintenance of the necessary team spirit certain procedures **were created** so that the PORCIDES wouldn't feel lonely or lacking in support: weekly Microsoft NetMeetings involving all concerned were held; Monthly live meetings in hotel resorts for face to face contact; **Distribution** of customer satisfaction reports to achieve performance evaluation, improvements, motivation and to create a healthy competitive environment; The provision of the necessary material so that the teleworkers could take the **Microsoft exams** and qualify as internationally recognised technicians; and finally all were encouraged to contact each other by phone on a regular basis to discuss both work and personal problems. Some of the other procedures currently under study are productivity awards, sporting contests, videoconferences and celebrations of important events such as birthdays, Christmas, etc.

As already mentioned, some had **difficulty fitting into this particular group / telework environment**. In spite of all the efforts – including the recruitment of a psychologist to be easily available to all – two individuals had to leave this specific group (although keeping their link to the THINK/ PORCIDE project). They were rapidly replaced by two others who were trained and are now part of a group that due to its cohesion, self-discipline, initiative and friendship are stronger than most teams that work together in the same office.

Throughout this project Microsoft has provided more than just the essential for the delivery of the service. All involved from top management to help desk colleagues have worked arduously to make it a success; training, learning and adapting when necessary to ease the initial problems of the PORCIDES. This includes making them a welcome part of the Microsoft team, to the point of including them in the office Christmas lunch, despite the

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fact that they are in reality an outsourced supplier.

Although this initiative deserves enhancement due to its pioneering work in in-group teleworking, it must not be forgotten that the consortium has also sponsored several **one or two person initiatives**, providing services as diversified as web site development, translations and graphical work. The results can be seen and customer satisfaction confirmed.

The future

After reaching the 20 teleworkers programmed for the first two years, the consortium intends to use the know-how and experience gained to create a second Portuguese group of the same size, as this seems to be a manageable number. Experience also indicates that the use of project leaders is advisable. The possibility of promotion to project leader will give the teleworkers a further incentive to excel in their tasks, and remove the fear that being far away from a head-office will mean their extra efforts will not be noticed or appreciated and that career development is not within easy reach.

In relation to the Help-desk services it is the consortium's ambition to take over the whole Microsoft help-desk operation in Portugal, over the next two years. With this in mind, it is working with Microsoft in order to organise the whole process and plan the career path to be offered to the PORCIDES. Looking further into the future, work has already begun on creating the conditions that will enable the adaptation of the on-line support system into Portuguese. The objective is to be able to offer Microsoft with all the services which can be supplied at a distance and which are not strategically interesting to Microsoft to keep internally.

The consortium's plans to **expand into other European countries** are due to the fact that all the studies indicate that Northern Europe is ripe for this sort of venture. In fact, the number of Internet users in those countries surpasses by far

those in Portugal (although the growth rate here is remarkable), and the distances involved in some countries fully justifies the creation of geographically dispersed work groups. Two further facts encouraged the consortium to consider internationalisation: most of the current customers are multinationals; and certain tasks, like translations or the maintenance of multilingual websites can be more easily done by nationals of the countries concerned.

Initial steps have already been taken in Brazil and the United States, and everything indicates that Europe will not be the limit of the project's international expansion.

Conclusion

The consortium considers that the success obtained so far by the PORCIDE project, both in terms of successful business services and of recognised international awards, warrants the expansion of the Portuguese PORCIDE project beyond its current boundaries, turning it into the international THINK project.

The Microsoft example shows that much more than being a solely altruistic or charitable project, the PORCIDE/THINK project is a viable outsourcing business, supplying benefit to client and supplier alike. It follows the conviction that the evolution of international business points towards outsourcing and that a great part of this will be done through **telework** and new forms of networking. The consortium is proud to be leading the way into the future.