The role of staff in the operation of telecottages

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SUMMARY FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS

The main purpose of establishing telecottages is to improve the provision of IT infrastructure in rural settlements via providing community access. The quantity and quality of staffing is a key factor in the long term operation of the telecottages. National and international literature focuses on the fact that use of the IT tools of telecottages requires suitable staffing. A survey conducted in 2004 showed that managers working in the questioned telecottages typically have higher education qualification, but only 54% of them receive any sort of remuneration for their work. More than half of the client service associates have secondary qualification, and every third of them does not receive any remuneration for their work. The survey findings indicate that the skills of the client service associates of the telecottages are quite appropriate, but the lack of financial incentives causes significant fluctuation among staff due to social insecurity. A survey conducted by Fabulya conducted two years later (in 2006) indicated that the situation had not improved but had gotten worse: in 2006, half of the telecottages surveyed operated without any paid employees. To successfully operate a telecottage, employees need to be motivated and financially encouraged. Due to the constant lack of financial resources, telecottages are not able to provide appropriate financial incentive to the workforce. Difficulties of the operation can be resolved by transforming the system of grants and subsidies.

BRIEF SUMMARY ON TELECOTTAGES

One of the main purposes of establishing telecottages is to have a place for community access, so that those who have no appropriate computer and Internet connection can find a place where these things are provided (*Gáspár, 2003*). Geographical location also played a significant role in creation of telecottages, since in many cases there were large distances between the settlements that made the communication difficult. Economic conditions limited the possibility of communication, so that is the reason why there was a need for an institution that was able to overcome this issue. This institution was the telecottage (*Bihari, 1999*).

Hungarian telecottages have been adapted to the local conditions. Without adaptation they would have not been viable over such a long period, since application the Scandinavian model without remodelling it would have lead to certain failure. Since the name telecottage itself refers to different things in different places, there isn't a uniform definition for telecottages. The formula is the same, the implementation varies. Hungarian telecottages have been adapted to local conditions creating a unique, Hungarian telecottage network. Based on the previous information telecottage can be a room where there is commu-

nity access to information and communication technologies (*Proenza, 2001*). But telecottage can also be defined as a community access point equipped with advanced information technology (*Fabulya, 2006, p. 3.*). According to *Mátyás Gáspár*, Hungarian expert on telecottages, "the telecottage is multifunctional, open, information and telecommunication service provider of small communities" (*Bihari, 1999, p. 86*). According to another approach, telecottage serves the informational needs of a local community (*Definitions and types of telecenters*). According to my own interpretation, telecottage is a building or room that is equipped with information communication tools of appropriate quantity and quality and employees of appropriate number and qualification, as well as it is – as the tool of the local community development – able to operate as a community venue. In my opinion the most important duty of telecottages is to provide a background to the development of local workforces with the help of its information technology tools and educated workforce. This means providing local residents with office and IT services and, in addition, providing possibilities for developing their knowledge and qualification via courses and events.

THE ROLE OF WORKFORCES IN TELECOTTAGES

Utilization of IT tools of telecottages requires appropriate workforce. If there is a telecottage equipped with the best technologies, but the staff cannot use it, the capacity of the telecottage will remain unexploited. Consequently the staff has an influence on the telecottage itself. This influence is mutual; the telecottage also has an influence on its employees.

The influence of the staff can be examined from two aspects. One aspect is knowledge; the other is the person, the character. Assessing the skills and qualifications of the staff we have made a distinction between the management and the rest of the staff. I agree with *Bihari* claiming that good management is very important, because leading at a high level is essential to operate effectively and to provide high quality services (*Bihari, 1999*). The knowledge and skills of employees refers to those that make them able to execute the tasks of the telecottage.

The person as a character has an influence on the telecottage. Employee satisfaction, remuneration, vision and career opportunities are strong influencing factors. Social insecurity and poor career opportunities could force the employees to leave this field. The telecottage movement is estimated to employ about 2-3000 people in accordance with telecottages, in some job (*Gáspár, 2003*). The telecottage can provide job opportunity for many people that – especially in underprivileged areas – can make it attractive.

In literature workforce is considered to be the most important resource of telecottages. Experience shows that criteria of a successful telecottage are high level of expertise and high level of enthusiasm and commitment from the group operating the telecottage. In many cases the story of a telecottage is closely connected to the personal life of some people – the commitment and knowledge of someone can lead the telecottage to success, and at the same time, the lack of expertise or personal conflicts can ruin it (*Gáspár, 2004; Laczkó – Soltész, 2004*). Even only one person can play a crucial role in the life of a telecottage. There are several examples telling stories about telecottages that were established by means of idea, initiation and control of one person, the mayor (*BME-ITTK–GKIeNET, 2007*). In information society the development of information and communication technology, among many other factors, can provide social benefits only if the development and qualification

of the workforce is at an appropriate level (*Mayer, 2003*). There are certain community access points that fulfill their role perfectly, but in many cases their operation is exclusively depends on the activity of one person being the engine of the local community (*Ministry of Economics and Transport, 2007*).

Foreign writers put a great emphasis on the importance of the workforce. The most important factor in the success of a telecottage is the management: a leader who is not necessarily good at information technology, but is energetic, reliable and well-respected (*Benjamin, 2001*). So recruiting the managers are as important as the financials, the economical operation, the partnerships and building trust (*Kyle, 2001*). In accordance with sustainability it is worth to mention that it has several aspects. In my opinion the most important one is the economic sustainability, but technical, political and – from our current point of view – workforce sustainability is also important. The latter one means that there always should be available enough employee and volunteer of appropriate quality. I agree with *Roman and Colle (2002)* claiming that recruiting and educating volunteers is a core element of the operation of a telecottage. Volunteerism can be described with the following key words: recruitment, education, retention (*Roman – Colle, 2002*). These 3 key words cover the whole process.

Qualification is vital to the effective operation of the telecottage. *Roman and Colle (2002)* say that, in many cases, employees and volunteers are poorly educated and are not motivated. According to the study of *Fabulya (2006)* many telecottage employees did not received even the basic training. At the same time almost 3/4 of them took part some kind of telecottage training and nearly 80% of them declared that they would like to attend further trainings.

The education of employees is in the focus of the telecottages all over the world. In Australia telecottage trainings are intensive and take several days that provide financial, organizational, administrative knowledge and information about products and services (*Gooley, 2001*). The Canadian telecottage training is multilevel, and it goes through the technology, the philosophy and the services, too (*Sheppard, 2001*). These trainings provide such compelling opportunities for developing that many people start to work there in a part-time job or as a volunteer not for money, but for trainings (*Short, 2001*). Training can also be such a motivator that makes people willing to make some contribution for minimal remuneration. That is the explanation why many Hungarian telecottages have professionals working for minimal or zero remuneration. Their benefits are experience and development that they gain during their work.

There are several initiations dealing with education of telecottage employees. MTSZ[1] has realized that the level, the judgment and the prestige of the telecottages' work can be improved with appropriate trainings (*Gáspár, 2003*). Accordingly an IS-mentor (IS is information society) training has been worked out that gives a secondary, OKJ-labeled qualification. (OKJ is national training register) The concept and the requirements of this profession have been set out in 2005 within the framework of MITS (Hungarian information society strategy) infrastructure direction. An IS-mentor's responsibility is helping those who are not able to learn using and to utilize tools and services provided by the information society. Being an IS-mentor means to be a system administra-

[1] Hungarian Telecottage Association, www.telehaz.hu

tor, educator and social worker at the same time (*Gáspár – Eckert – Szabó, 2003*). An IS-mentor's job is helping IT problems at a daily basis. But it must be pointed out that there is a greater emphasis on the social aspects of the work, since they have to overcome the people's fear and aversion, which in not a technical task. First IS-mentor trainings have already taken place in 2008, and according to the concept, even several thousand IS-mentors would be needed to be trained and employed.

EXAMINATION OF WORKFORCES

In 2004 I conducted a survey by questionnaires including 95 telecottages. 20% of telecottages existing at that time took part of the survey, 5 of each county. Data collection took place personally, via letter and e-mail. The focuses of the survey were the followings:

a) characteristics of the operation;

b) way and extent of integration into the local community;

c) ownership;

d) the relationship between the telecottage and working, teleworking (distance working);

e) the relationship between the telecottage and education, distance education;

f) services and comparison of services;

g) assessment of the workforce.

MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF THE WORKFORCE IN THE TELECOTTAGES SURVEYED

The assessment has examined the following areas:

1. personal data (age, educational level, qualifications);
2. opinions, motivations;
3. problem solving;
4. working, employment.

There were 124 employee involved in the survey. We have examined two special groups: client service associates and managers (telecottage leaders). Client service associate is an employee who directly deals with the clients of the telecottage: help them, show them how to use the tools, and solves the arising problems immediately. Consequently the qualification and attitude of a client service associate is the key to the successful operation of a telecottage. The manager is similarly important, since it is the manager who deals with the official matters of the telecottage, and represents it. In many cases (58%) the client service associate and the manager is the same person. In such circumstances the success of the telecottage is depended on the skills of this one person. So the quality of the workforce is one of the key factors in the successful operation of telecottages.

In case of client service associates the examination of qualifications and skills were more penetrating: based on these qualifications and skills a so-called knowledge index was calculated. The knowledge index is a score whose calculation is based on the existence of different skills and qualifications. An index can be:

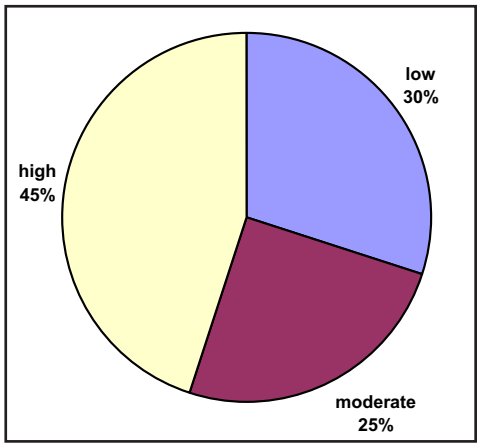
1. low;
2. moderate;
3. high.

Employees rated „high" demonstrated appropriate competence in every field in question. Results are detailed in the Fig 1.

According to the results, the knowledge and qualification of client service associates is appropriate, and almost half of them demonstrated competence in the examined fields of IT knowledge that is necessary in everyday life. Besides, the survey has also examined the age and educational level of the client service associates. According to result their average age is 31, the deviation goes from 18 to 57. So we can say that mostly representatives of the younger generations work as client service associate. The Fig. 2 shows their educational level.

Figure 1

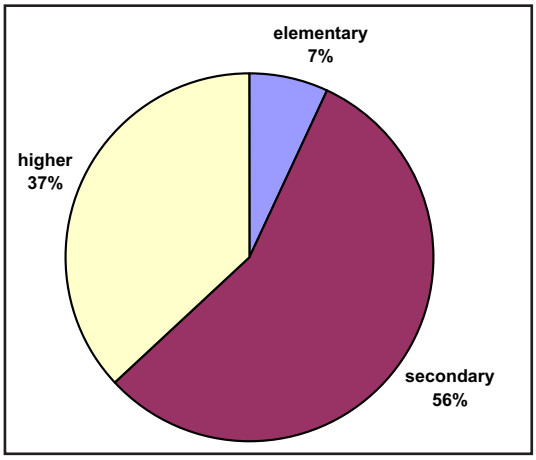
Knowledge index of client service associates (2003-2004)



Source: own editing, N=89

Figure 2

Educational level of client service associates (2003-2004)



Source: own editing, N=89

It can be seen that vast majority of client service associates (56%) has secondary qualification. The average age of managers is 40; the deviation here goes from 23 to 57. So the leaders of telecottages are mainly middle-aged people. The Fig. 3 shows the educational level of managers:

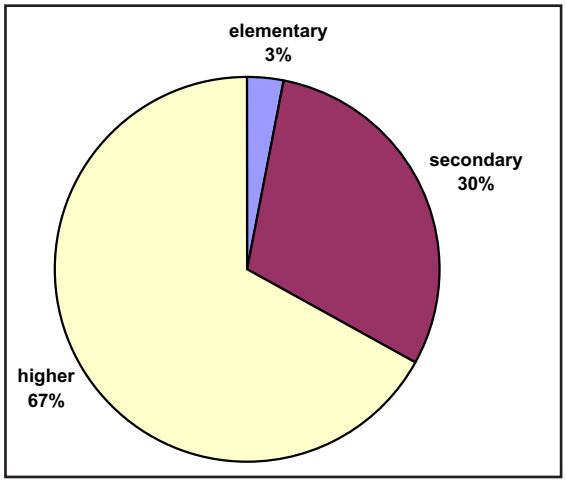
It can be seen that vast majority of managers (67%) leading the surveyed telecottages has higher education qualification.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE OPERATION AND THE WORKFORCE OF TELECOTTAGES

12% of the surveyed telecottages has no paid employees at all; associates do their work for love or as a hobby. 42% of the surveyed telecottages has only 1 paid employee, which means that nearly half of the telecottages are „one-man" institutions;

Figure 3

Educational level of managers (2003-2004)



Source: own editing, N=91

their success is due to the leader[2]. 71% of client service associates receive any remuneration (usually as employee of the local government), so 29% of them work for free. Besides, 82% of client service associates fulfill other duties as well in the telecottage[3]. So the question is whether the financial compensations provided by telecottages are attractive for the youth, and if telecottages can obtain and retain the young associates. Among such circumstances it can be readily conceived that telecottages do not attract the youth, since they can find a profitable job in the county, even with a secondary qualification, so they don't want to work in a telecottage that offers a minimum – if any – remuneration. This question is much more important in accordance with managers – 54% of them receive remuneration for their work. Since most of them have higher education qualification, they might leave this job, because they have a chance to get another one with good (better) remuneration. The fact that they still remain is due to that they do this job as a hobby, or for sense of community. 68% of telecottage leaders claimed that they have other duties beyond managerial tasks, and in many cases they are the client service associate as well[4]. So it is the approach and attitude of telecottage leaders that reflects in the main personal and community interests of the managers.

In many cases, telecottage leaders are „fanatic", who may affect their purpose even against the will of the majority. At the same time some manager did not chose to be a telecottage leader, but forced to be by expanding their scope of responsibility or by having no other job option in the

[2] In the survey of *Fabulya* conducted in 2006, there were 29% of telecottages operating without paid employee, and 48% of them operating with 1 paid employee (*Fabulya, 2006*), so there has been a set-back since 2006. The 2006 national survey of Fabulya involved 168 respondent telecottages.

[3] Cleaning, administration, financials, leadership, dealing with official matters at the local government. In many cases the associate of the telecottage is an employee of the local government, and operating a telecottage is an extra duty. This doen not mean extra money, only extra working hours. So the associate is not an enthusiastic volunteer, but someone who is forced to do this.

[4] According to the survey of *Fabulya (2006)* it is 63%, so there has been no change in this field in the past 2-3 years.

settlement. Quite often the success of the telecottage is strongly connected to personal, individual lives. A charismatic and winsome leader can lead the telecottage to the good direction, but personal conflicts, with the local government for example, can easily result in the decay of the telecottage (*Kas – Larrson, 2001; Laczkó – Soltész, 2004*).

Frequent change of employees cause problems in most of the telecottages (*Lackó – Soltész, 2004*). Constant fluctuation is mainly due to financial issues and lack of financial resources. This leads to constant insecurity both to the person and to the telecottage. According to *Fabulya*, the workforce can be considered as one of the strengths of the telecottages. But she also claims that

1. legal regulations conserve the issues of the workforce, and undertaking the new task is doubtful until these statuses do not provide social security;

2. there is not a uniform solution to employment issues;

3. many telecottage workers did not get even a basic training; they do not know about each other, and the insecurity of employment is typical everywhere.

There is governmental pressure on the telecottages, and due to misunderstandings it might happen that telecottages get in charge of such an extra function that they are not ready to fulfill, nor professionally, neither legally[5]. But the governance does not provide extra sources to carry out the extra duties.

The main problem of telecottages is the lack of money. But their lack of money is not necessarily due to overall lack of financial resources, it can be a result of the decision-makers' preferences: they may think that telecottages are unnecessary, so they do not provide them with the required financial resources. It is obvious that, in the long run, with low level of or without remuneration telecottages are doomed to fail. So in many cases community motivator function of telecottages cannot be achieved, since telecottages are fighting for their sustainment, and have no capacity for such time- and resource-consuming tasks like motivating the community. The main issue is how to retain the associates of the telecottages. It is quite reasonable that it is the most qualified people whom the poor remuneration distracts form a „telecottage career", and this problem cannot be solved by training them. To give appropriate solutions for arising problems the telecottage has to have appropriate financial resources, but now these are not provided.

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