



Social networks: **a key tool to integration**

The European Communities



The European Social Fund

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Social Networks: A Key Tool to Integration

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Printed with funding from the European Commission, The Equal Project

Printed in Denmark

ISBN 87-91692-03-2

Social Networks: A key Tool to Integration

Preface

Social networks effectively facilitate the integration of disadvantaged groups in society. This is the common experience of the three partner organisations in the trans-national project, Inclusion Power. The project promotes the exchange of experiences of three EU Equal-funded projects that are focused on the inclusion of the socially disadvantaged into the local society.

The Cornwall Inclusive Learning Partnership in the United Kingdom develops and tests models and products that provide training for various disadvantaged groups, and engage participants through the involvement of local childcare initiatives; *På Vej til Arbejde*, (PAV, On the Way to Jobs) in Denmark, pilot tests e-learning of Danish as A Second Language among migrants and develops the role of volunteers (ethnic Danes) in the integration process by assuming the role of mentors and helping migrants to join community- and work- related networks; and the *Equal Ordkraft* (WordPower) in Sweden teaches women migrants Swedish as a Second Language and helps them to secure better access to apprenticeships (with the aim of getting into work) within the context of language training in school and work-based language training.

Social Networks: A Key Tool to Integration presents the different ways of networking, and how they can be used within the context of social inclusion: In Cornwall, volunteer mentors help parents learn the use of computers so they can eventually help their children with their lessons, and beyond that, start a career in childcare. In Vejle, Denmark volunteer mentors help migrants enter a local social network; and in Helsingborg, Sweden, the women participants have established an NGO, *Bilabodod*, that functions as their network both in understanding the Swedish culture and in acquiring jobs.

The partners hope that this publication will provide professionals involved in integration some inspiration in designing their own social inclusion projects and networks.

The Inclusion-Power project partners extend their deepest gratitude to their local partners who have been key to the success of the various networks. The Cornwall Inclusive Learning Partnership is grateful to the mentors, partners, childcare groups, parents and guardians and of course their children. Equal Ordkraft thanks the organisations which have shown great interest in the women's integration by becoming a part of the network, and the PAV Project thanks the volunteers, language school teachers and the migrants who have actively participated in the project.

The “CLICK” Network

Network Members

Network members work for a variety of organisations in the private, voluntary and independent sectors who care for children and families. These include childcare providers, people working within childcare support organisations, local community project workers and, teachers and support staff in schools. The members have varied backgrounds and include Nursery Nurses, Play Workers, Nursery Managers, Development Officers, and school staff.

Network members act as mentors. A mentor supports individuals from our target group, through a series of computerbased learning sessions, covering basic computer and internet skills (“CLICK” materials); as well as a range of interactive resources. This helps individuals identify possible career options in childcare.

Why set up the network?

A mentor network was established to provide support, training and a forum for exchanging information. Further, it allows mentors to acquire mentoring skills: teaching; informal counselling; communicating; and the ability to empower others. The network provides a formal opportunity for mentors to exchange good practice; learn from one another; and, provide both group and individual support.

It is also important that the mentors do not feel alone, particularly when delivering “CLICK” in isolated rural communities.

“If I didn’t have the network I would have found the project harder to deliver because I would have been on my own. It is always useful to check if you are On the right lines”

How did the network come about?

Mentors attended regular “CLICK” project meetings, talked to each other on a regular basis, and formed their own informal network. Following this, more formal lines of communication evolved.

The mentors meet formally three times a year. On an information basis, they undertake visits to

each other's workplace; exchange emails; talk regularly on the telephone; and undertake joint training. The Project Officer makes at least three visits per year to each mentor to provide support and advice. The Project Officer cascades good practice to each mentor and can facilitate joint problem solving.

Sustaining Activities

Each mentor has a target number of people they have to support through the "CLICK" programme. Working towards these targets has brought the mentors together to work jointly towards a common goal. We expect the "Click" materials to be delivered in other childcare settings after the end of the project. Targeting mentors with the production of new beneficiaries will encourage them to exchange ideas and experiences of good practice.

"After the end of the project we have all agreed we want to keep in contact with each other".



Networks – Advantages and Disadvantages

The most obvious advantages of our network are:

- A common understanding of the project objectives.
- The opportunity to learn from each other.
- Shared examples of best practice.
- It helps renew and sustain commitment.
- It provides a fixed reference point for communicating and receiving information.
- Targets are more likely to be achieved by working together.
- Facilitates joint problem solving.

“Part of the project is about getting people to take part and I wasn’t sure how to do this. I asked my colleagues in the network and we came up with some great ideas”

Some less obvious advantages of our network, but very much appreciated by the mentors, are:

- A feeling of being supported and not being alone; new friendships; a sense of belonging; having fun.

The disadvantages of our mentor network are:

- Some mentors have chosen not to participate in the network.
- Some mentors can be put off by a competitive environment.
- Some mentors have strong characteristics that can overwhelm others.
- Working together is difficult and hard work.
- Network members could collectively re-direct the project (mutiny!).

What were the successes and what lessons were learnt?

- The network has helped ensure that the project objectives are being delivered on target and on time.
- Network members have not felt isolated and are kept regularly informed.
- Some good friendships have been established.
- Confidence and self esteem has increased in some mentors.
- Mentor skills have been improved through networking.
- Mentors can measure their own performance through talking to colleagues.
- Having a dedicated person to facilitate the network is vital in the initial stages.
- Working together can be extremely positive but you must have a common understanding of your objectives.

Continuation after the project

Work has been undertaken to extend the project and the need to maintain the network has been highlighted. The following sustainability issues are being addressed:

- Who will lead the network and how will it be funded?
- If we cannot formally sustain the network will it continue in formally?
- Would an informal network suffice?
- Should a good practice guide on mentoring be produced?
- Would an internet forum be of value? And, would it be used?



Acknowledgements

We would especially like to thank the mentors of our programme together with partners, childcare groups for their hard work and commitment. We also acknowledge the contribution made by parents and guardians and of course their children who have provided so much of the fun.



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PAV Network for Migrants

Knowledge of the Danish language and absence of social networks hinder migrants' entrance to the labour market. The project, På vej til arbejde, (PAV, On the Way to Jobs), addresses these two fundamental problems.

Participants of the Network:

The network's main participants are migrants themselves, and volunteer ethnic Danes who have been recruited by the Danish Refugee Council. These volunteers serve as mentors – helping the migrants with their lessons in Danish grammar, understanding the Danish culture and serving as key to migrants' entry to a local social network. The participating language schools, teachers and seven municipalities in Vejle County provide support to the network.

Why set-up the network

Getting migrants into the labour market is a main focus of the current government. In fact, having a job is often equated with integration. Unfortunately, migrants who live in small rural communities face conditions that hinder integration: The nearest language school is about 20-30 kms. away; they find it difficult to learn the language, because they use their native language at home, and they do not have Danish friends whom they can ask to help them with their lessons, or train with in speaking the language; they find it likewise difficult to look for employment because in Denmark, most jobs are heard of, and acquired, through one's social network. It was apparent that creative ways must be employed to make it easy for such migrants to learn Danish, and get them into contact with ethnic Danes.

The municipalities are especially interested in getting the migrants build local networks, in the hope that this will encourage them to settle permanently in the area. (Under Danish laws, a refugee is required to stay in the municipality he/she is assigned for at least three years. Should the refugee choose to move to another municipality at the end of the 3-year period, then the host municipality would have to take on new migrants, and repeat the process of integration once again).

How did the network come about?

Several municipalities in Vejle County and language centres have decided to design a system that addresses the issues mentioned above in a project called, På vej til arbejde (PAV, On the Way to Jobs). Using language training as the core activity, the project experimented on innovative teaching-e-learning -and the use of ethnic Danish volunteers as mentors, not only on the migrants' language lessons, but in understanding the Danish culture and hopefully, to help them enter a local social network.



Apart from the refugees and migrants, the network targeted teachers and ethnic Danish volunteers. These three groups work together in teaching Danish as a second language. The assumption is that combining language training and practice (with the volunteers) will make it easier for migrants to learn the language. Moreover, it was assumed that that creating a social network for them will help them find jobs.

The Process

The program involves 75% traditional classroom teaching at the language centre. The rest of the training is done via the Internet, in a learning centre designated by the participating municipality (e.g., community hall, library, etc). The intention is to get the students to go to public areas where they can meet their volunteer mentor, and interact with other Danes. A website, www.pav-vejle.dk, has been set-up, from where students can access lessons, receive assignments, and submit their projects and homework. Teachers facilitate the meetings between migrants and volunteers in connection with the discussion of assignments. As the program's main goal is to help immigrants acquire jobs, the learning materials used in the program focus on work-related issues and language at the workplace. A team of teachers develop such materials with bias towards the transportation-related, carpentry and the service professions.



In setting up the volunteer system, the project sought the assistance of the Danish Refugee Council because it has a corps of well-trained volunteers, as well as the technology on volunteerism – setting the parameters (between volunteers and the migrants), monitoring and evaluation. While part of the intention was to create social networks, the project specified mentoring as the only task of the volunteer (1 strand relationship). Networking was not identified as a main task because it was assumed that involvement in other social activities will occur naturally, and that the 1-strand relationship will lead to multistrand relations and eventually, to getting a job and better integration.

What were the successes and what were the lessons learned?

Involving the Danish Refugee Council is a key factor in program's success. They brought the professional approach to the system – from recruitment of volunteers, to monitoring and follow-ups. The initial apprehension that the targeted number of volunteers would not be reached turned out to be baseless. Following the publication of newspaper advertisements, an overwhelming number of applicants were received, enabling the project to choose the best-qualified volunteers and double the number of volunteers based on the target.

The volunteers look at the project positively because they are able to help in integrating migrants into the local community, and the same time give them the opportunity to learn about other cultures and understand the culture and values that these migrants bring with them to Denmark.

“The PAV project is something new to us, in that this is the first time that our volunteers were asked to work one-on-one with beneficiaries, in this case, with the migrants. Fortunately, we have had a lot of experience with volunteers and were easily able to adjust our systems. We are indeed very proud to have been a part of this project.”

– Rudi Bjerre
Coordinator
Danish Refugee Council

On hindsight, the project implementers should have worked more with the migrants. The project’s purpose should have been more clearly explained to them for them to have understood better the importance of networking with the volunteers, and not limit their relationship in language training but also a means of getting a job.

Continuation after the project

Encouraged by the project’s positive results, the Municipality of Kolding, has started to use the PAV set-up since Spring 2004 in teaching Danish as a Second language to migrants with disabilities (e.g., physically handicapped, victims of trauma) who are not able to go to the normal language schools. Moreover, the project has provided the necessary trigger to get migrants and ethnic Danes to interact, and on their own, build a social network. It is envisioned that the networking among the volunteers and the migrants will continue beyond the project’s lifespan.

Bilahodod

A Network for Integration

Helsingborg is strongly segregated, and the south part of the town has a majority of immigrants. The immigrant women's only contacts with Swedes were the social services and day care, and they were in great need for contact with the Swedish society.

The project *Equal Wordpower* was to strengthen integration, increase the migrants' skills in speaking Swedish and improve the chances of immigrant women (especially mothers) in this part of town, to find employment.

The women in the target group set up the association Bilahodod – a network.

A mentor with a wide social network was appointed to support the women.

Participants of the Network

Participants are the target group of Equal WordPower. The association is open for all, both men and women and members of other associations e.g. Soroptimist International, Save the Children and ABF.

Why set up the network?

The purpose was to empower the target group to take part in the project, to create meeting places for Swedish and immigrant women, to increase the target group's knowledge of the Swedish society and culture and create person to person relations.

Another purpose is to make the target group aware of the Swedish popular (national) movement (NGOs) importance for the Swedish democracy through history.



How did the network come about?

In order to involve the women in the project process initiative was taken by the steering group of the project. The mentor and the teachers motivated the women to see the advantages of creating an association. The women showed interest and curiosity and had expectations on the outcome and chose the name, *Bilahodod* which means “open borders” in Arabic.

The process

In the beginning, all the students were members of Bilahodod, as the development of Bilahodod was part of the studies in Swedish as A Second Language.

To make it possible for the members of the Board to lead their meetings they were trained by ABF.

The mentor coached the Board during their meetings and the Board took responsibility for the member meetings.

Members participated and were engaged in the steering group of DP Word Power. As a natural step in the process to develop the association, the membership became voluntary. The members of Bilahodod began to reflect on the aims of the association. As a consequence, activities were planned on the basis of the women’s interests.

Today, activities are planned and carried out together with the mentor and members of other associations.

Sustaining Activities

Bilahodod is still an active association and cooperates with members of other associations like soroptimists. The mentor supports the Board of Bilahodod which continues to provide meetings and activities for the members.

Advantages and disadvantages

We can only see advantages for the women involved. Through Bilahodod, a base has been created to build sustainable social networks, not



only a network between members within Bilahodod but also with members of other associations. The women can support each other and they will get the opportunity to meet Swedish women – a way to break the women's isolation.

What were the successes and what lessons were learnt?

A factor for success was that the women in the target group initiated activities related to their own culture. Then it was quite easy to engage both immigrant and Swedish women.

Some of the immigrant women had difficulties in taking part in evening activities because of their family situations or culture habits.

Continuation after the project

The project was completed on 31 Dec 2004, but Bilahodod will continue with support of a mentor for indefinite time.

Activities together with ABF and soroptimists are planned as well as meetings for the board and members.

Special thanks to the organisations that have shown great interest in the women's integration by becoming a part of the network.

DP Wordpower

Bilahodod
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A publication of the Equal-funded Inclusion Project Partnership Project:

