Leonardo da Vinci, Lifelong Learning Programme

Employing Disabled People through IT Tools in the EU

Reference: LdVP/12/266P

COUNTRY REPORT

UNITED KINGDOM

Prepared by:

MCSENCE GROUP

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Report has been prepared by McSence Communication Ltd as part of the IT Chance project which is a European Union Leonardo da Vinci, Lifelong Learning funded project carried out in conjunction with five other social enterprises across Europe to produce a report on best practice within the EU for employing and training disabled people to work in contact centres.

The report presents findings of research into the potential for employing disabled people using IT tools in Scotland specifically in order that these findings can be fed into a final report covering the five EU countries involved.

The contact sector in Scotland is growing at a rate of 13% per annum, bucking the trend of subdued growth in the general economy over the past five years. Research indicates that this rate of growth is expected to continue at around 10% over the foreseeable future. Consequently, there is significant demand for skilled staff and recruitment is proving difficult despite the effects of the current economic recession.

In Scotland there are estimated to be around 1 million people living with a disability where 45% of these are of working age and in employment compared to 83% of able bodied people. Disabled people are also at a disadvantage in terms of qualifications where 48% of disabled people have no qualifications compared to 24% of non-disabled. Consequently the potential for training disabled people in the skills necessary to work in contact centres is high as is the potential to find suitable employment following training although the problems associated with the "benefits trap" need to be overcome.

Research has shown that the call centre industry can offer suitable employment opportunities for individuals with moderate and severe physical disabilities and that the technology exists to create these opportunities both within the actual call centre and by remote home working. However, it is recognised there are a number of negative aspects including social issues and employers perceptions when it comes to hiring disabled staff and these need to be addressed if any programme is to be successful.

The research shows that the predominate factor in the success or otherwise of a Contact Centre is the ability of the centre operatives (agents). Therefore recruiting the right staff and providing appropriate training is of paramount importance to the chances of success. It was also found that the majority of employers consider that there is a lack of both hard and soft skills in potential new recruits to the industry and it was also considered there was a potential link between the lack of training and the high levels of staff turnover experienced in many contact centres.

Various studies conducted within the sector identify a widely held need for more training especially in soft skills such as empathy, listening, cultural fit and communication abilities while employers state a willingness to teach hard skills such as IT and product knowledge on the job. Key skills for new entrants to the industry in order of priority were identified as verbal communication skills, interpersonal skills, keyboard skills, work experience in customer care, experience in telephone working and least importantly educational qualifications.

Opportunities therefore exist not only to create jobs for disabled people within established contact centres but also to create a bespoke training programme designed specifically to meet the needs of employers and disabled employees alike. Similarly, there is the potential to create a Social Enterprise Contact Centre provider able to work across the EU selling services locally but using technology to deliver anywhere in the partner countries.

1. Introduction

McSence Communication Ltd has been successful in competitively securing funding from the European Union Leonardo da Vinci, Lifelong Learning Programme to work in partnership with five other social enterprises across Europe to produce a report on best practice within the EU for employing and training disabled people to work in contact centres. The project is known by the short title IT Chance.

The aim of the project is to develop an integrated guiding and training curricula that would advise and assist disabled people in utilising IT tools in the contact centre sector in order to:

1. Improve their IT skills and ICT competencies;
2. Understand the needs of national labour markets in the contact centre sector;
3. Help them to re-enter the labour market.

The specific objectives of the project are:

1. To identify needs and analyse state of the art in the contact centre sector and the possibility of employing disabled people in the form of home based occupation;
2. To develop a training and guiding curricula for disabled people in the contact centre sector and asses specific needs in project partner regions;
3. To implement four national workshops and transfer the IT training and exchange knowledge on the topic concerned;
4. To evaluate each national workshop and identify good practice and lessons learned as well as obstacles, barriers and gaps in VET towards disabled people;
5. Summarise the outcomes and disseminate the results in national VET systems;
6. To raise awareness about the issues addressed by this project, in particular the potential IT tools in helping vulnerable groups to enter and participate in the labour market.

The project will be completed over 18 months.

This report has been produced to present the findings of the research into the potential for employing disabled people using IT tools in Scotland specifically in order that these findings can be fed into the final report covering the five EU countries in question.

The five European Partners involved in the project are:

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   EH22 5TA

   www.mcsence.co.uk

2. Wolverhampton Network Consortium   England
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3. Fundacja ECCC

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4. Companhia de Ideias Media, Lda
   R.do Andaluz, 7, 30
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6. Future 21 Century
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The scope of this report is to outline the results of research carried out into the potential for employing disabled people through the use of IT tools in contact centres within Scotland. The project partner based in Wolverhampton will report on the same scope for the rest of the UK. It is limited primarily to desk top research using sources of information readily available and not protected by copyright.

Sources used include information available on the internet together with previous research carried out by McSence Communication Ltd on behalf of The Thalidomide Trust and the Diageo Foundation who have kindly given permission for this research to be used here. A limited number of telephone questionnaires were also carried out with local contact centres as part of the research for this project.

In addition to talking to prospective employers current job advertisements from local press and on-line recruitment sites were used to determine the skills required by employers and help participants identify the skills they needed to gain to be able to apply for the jobs they were aiming for.

2 Review of Current Situation for Disabled Employment

There are over 10 million people with varying levels of disability in the UK. Of these 6.9 million are of working age which represents 19% of the total working population.

Over half of disabled people (50%) of working age are in employment compared to 80% of able bodied people. In total 1.3 million disabled people are available and willing to work but are not currently employed.

23% of disabled people have no qualifications compared to 9% of non-disabled people.

In Scotland there are estimated to be around 1 million people living with a disability and figures for employment are similar but slightly worse than the overall UK position with 45% of disabled people of working age in employment compared to 83% of able bodied people. However, the figures for levels of qualifications in Scotland are significantly worse with 48% of disabled people having no qualifications compared to 24% of non-disabled.

This level of disparity between those with qualifications north and south of the border clearly puts the Scottish population at a considerable disadvantage within employment sectors which are not geographically constrained such as the contact centre industry.

On a more local level to McSence, Job Centre plus estimates there are around 10,000 people in Midlothian with some form of disability. Many of these people have dropped out of the labour market because of the insurmountable barriers to labour market entry.

A recent report commissioned for the National Development Team estimated that one half of a % of people with "moderate to severe learning disabilities" have proper jobs paying proper wages. The remainder are in day centres, on long stay hospital wards or sitting at home and don't feature in unemployment statistics.

45-59 year olds form the largest group in the labour force and 40% of the UK population is over 45, the age at which the chances of living with a disability or health condition sharply increases. In addition research by the DWP shows that 52% of people who meet the definition of disability under the DDA prefer not to use the term "disabled" to describe themselves.

A wage incentive of up to £2,275 is available for employers in England and Scotland for each 18 to 24 year old employed through the Job Centre. Grants are also available to allow employees and employers to undertake any adaptation work required to the work place in order to facilitate the employment of disabled staff through the Access to Work Scheme.

There is also a special disability employment programme for young people Work Choices that provides tailored support to help disabled people who have more complex support needs.

In addition, there are charities such as the Shaw Trust in Scotland who will provide further incentives to employ disabled people from their data base. The Scottish Government also provide incentives to third sector employers through the Community Jobs Fund.

In terms of specialist training and support organisations relating to disabled employment there is an imbalance between the east and west of Scotland with most facilities being based around the Glasgow area in the West. Local to McSence there are no specialist training facilities in the Lothian's designed to help people with disabilities access the employment opportunities in the contact centre sector.

3 Review of Contact Centre Industry and Economic Outlook for the Future.

The future of the UK contact centre industry is bright. Figures taken from the DTI Report, "UK Contact Centre Industry: A Study", suggest that the call centre industry has grown by almost 250% since 1995 and continues to add tens of thousands of agent positions each year in addition to a turnover of employed staff of 15% annually. There are in excess of 5,320 contact centres in the UK employing some 1.2m people in total which is continuing to rise. The sector is worth around £13bn per year and is growing in turnover terms by around 12% annually. Despite the increase in 'off shoring' of some 'low end' call centre activities this represents a continued growth in call centre agent positions of just under 10% per annum. The main reason for this increase would appear to be core business growth and demand.

The call and communication centre sector has been growing at 13% per year in terms of employment and turnover in Scotland (since 2001). Call centres support and provide service delivery for both public and private sectors at all levels including highly specialised and skilled services.

The diversity of communication and call centre types is growing as it is widely accepted in a number of industries such as Energy and Utilities, Financial services, Telecoms and Technology, Food and drink, Automotive, Pharmaceuticals and Healthcare, Transport and Logistics.

The range and nature of services offered is therefore very diverse and includes highly technical services such as database management, language translation services, specialist and professional advice. Therefore the demand for a much wider range of higher level skills (SVQ5-6) is growing also. Average salaries particularly in the more technical and senior level positions (around £25k) are rising around 5.7% p.a.

Consequently, the growth of sector is rapid and significant and demand for skilled staff is rising and proving more difficult to recruit despite the effects of the current economic recession.

As mentioned earlier there are threats from off shoring within the industry but it tends to be the lower level customer service activities that are transferred abroad with the more technically demanding retained in the UK, hence the requirement for higher levels of qualifications and ability within contact centre agents. Off shoring is also more prevalent for direct sales and cold calling activities due to the strict regulatory restrictions placed on these activities within the UK such as the requirements of the Telephone Preference Service which can impose significant fines on contact centre operations which breach the requirements not to call telephone numbers registered with the service. This would be an important issue for any cross border European working.

A likely area for growth in the UK is with E-mail Marketing which can offer several advantages such as high return on investment (ROI), immediate measurement and tracking, high-speed delivery, and sophisticated targeting and segmentation. There is still however a distinct lack of take-up in the UK for e-mail marketing especially by charities despite its availability to all because of its low cost compared to other methods.

Measuring the success rate of e-mail marketing is still proving tricky, with very little conclusive research available to show expected response and conversion rates. But as independent consultant Ivan Wainwright of IT For Charities says, "There is no reason why sophisticated technology cannot look at a donor's past giving history and tailor an e-mail to exactly what that individual wants to see."

4 Potential for Disabled Employment within the Contact Centre Industry

We cannot find any examples of where disabled people have been targeted specifically as potential recruits for the contact centre industry. However, there are examples of where other disadvantaged groups such as long term unemployed and women returnees have been successfully targeted and recruited.

We have however, spoken to organisations such as yes2work, Remploy and the Royal National Institution of the Blind who all promote the employment of disabled people and are also major employers of disabled people themselves.

Few employers have or are willing to share data on the extent of current disabled employment within the sector but most were aware of the benefits and also the potential disadvantages of employing disabled people within the industry.

Having disabled people employed in contact centres can help employers identify and fulfil contracts which involve working with disabled clients such as charities working in the disabled sector. Having staff members who are disabled means they are able to use their own experiences and learning to inform the business and other staff in its approach to such charities and other clients and their beneficiaries e.g. the use of the correct language and terminology, identification of barriers and dealing with both pre-conceptions and misconceptions. This will lead to better understanding and a more empathetic approach to customers therefore enhancing the quality of the service provision.

There are also advantages for employers in terms of Corporate Social Responsibility particularly for large publicly listed companies who are keen to promote their positive impact on society and within the communities in which they operate.

When employers were asked what factors would prompt them either to recruit from the long-term unemployed for the first time or to increase their existing intake from this group the following factors were prevalent:

- Pre-employment coaching, training and development in contact centre skills, e.g. Customer service verbal communications, telephone skills, PC skills
- Grant and training packages
- Availability of people with basic skills
- Staff with good communication skills, who can use a keyboard.

When employers were asked what forms of public sector support they would consider to be most beneficial to their efforts in recruiting people who had been long term unemployed, 67% stated training subsidy and 53% indicated referral of people to interview.

The negative aspects of recruiting those who have been away from the workplace for extended periods including disabled people were identified as:

- Lack of confidence
- Lack of ability with new technologies
- Shortage of skills and experience
- Lack of enthusiasm
- Low quality of applicants
- Addressing other personal issues (drug/alcohol problems etc.)
- Not used to interviews and recruitment processing
- Performance at interview

- Time taken to train is longer – have to start with the very basics
- More support required
- Fear of the unknown
- Out of touch with work practices

These negative aspects would have to be addressed in any future programme.

5   Employment Needs of the Contact Centre Industry.

Economic drivers discussed previously suggest growth in the industry will continue to fuel the need for on-going recruitment within the sector. Further research has been carried out here to attempt to identify more precisely what employer's needs in new staff members is and how this could be aligned with training delivery.

The research highlights that the appointment of the right staff is crucial to the success of the business. Research by Gallup on call centre effectiveness revealed that agents determine the success or failure of a call centre. Unless staff are highly skilled and experienced, they are unlikely to be able to carry out a wide range of Communications Centre functions to a high standard and as such staff are generally recruited and trained for specific functions.

An adequately skilled workforce is the foundation of any successful enterprise. The implications of not having adequate skills include reduced quality, reduced productivity and higher wages. As the majority of call centres are part of larger operations, problems of poor quality, lower productivity, higher costs and an inability to add skills to meet new challenges, will directly reduce an organisation's service delivery, and therefore competitiveness. Ensuring an adequate level of skills in the call and contact centre is therefore critical to firm-level, sector and UK competitiveness.

Historically the contact centre industry in the UK has suffered from a high level of staff turnover but interestingly the research indicated that the single most significant factor for large turnover was not the level of pay or the level of customer complaints, but the lack of support from their immediate line manager. This also informs the type of training that may be required to manage the communication centres'.

Further research showed that, while Edinburgh and the Lothian's were the home to contact centres for many national and international companies, there were very few local opportunities for people to develop the skills necessary for this type of work. Most commercial operations looked to recruit highly-experienced call-handlers and people looking to move into the contact centre industry from other backgrounds generally struggled to cope with the recruitment process and rarely progressed to employment.

In addition to this, the specific nature of the enquiries being handled in many contact centres meant that the post-recruitment training was generally focussed on the technical aspects of the company-specific systems and associated policies and procedures. More holistic skills including telephone techniques, letter-writing, customer service and basic IT skills were a pre-requisite for contact centre recruitment and programmes to develop these skills were not widely available.

With the rapid growth of the call and contact sector, a gap has developed between training needs and training provision. In addition, Government research has shown that 15% of employers are currently experiencing "skill gaps" defined as the shortfall between the skills of their current employees and the skills needed to meet their business objectives. In Scotland this figure rises to 17%.

The eSkills UK Contact Centre Survey found that the majority of employers consider that there is a lack of both hard and soft skills in potential new recruits to the industry.

58% of contact centres take on new staff without the skills required to do the job, 83% of them said they could train the staff themselves. The most frequently lacking skills include communications (35%), IT (27%), using contact centre systems (21%) and customer care ability (17%).

A report carried out specifically in the West of Scotland by the Call Centre Association, "Call Centres in Glasgow and the Long-Term Unemployed", suggested that 60% of respondents to their survey were experiencing difficulty in recruiting staff due to lack of both hard and soft skills. Commonly lacking skills were found to be:

- General lack of skills and experience
- Lack of specific skills such as keyboard and communication
- Lack of technical skills in more mature workers
- Sourcing staff with outbound sales experience
- Low volume of CV's received which included the skills required 6

This report also concluded that finding the staff with the skills and experience required has proven problematic for a number of respondents, particularly as their call centres develop and more complex skills were required. The availability of suitably trained staff would be of benefit to these call centre operators.

There are a number of skills frameworks already in place to develop and nurture best practice and skills development in the contract centre industry. Most if not all of these are specifically targeted at those already employed within the call centre industry.

There is a considerable amount of training provision available through colleges, private sector training organisations, conferences and short courses. However, this training tends to be fragmented, inconsistent and often not perceived to be specific enough to the call centre industry. The proportion of advisors who possess accredited qualifications that are specific to the needs of the call centre sector is believed to be low (there are no published statistics to fully verify this). Therefore much of the training available currently is not specific enough to the sector, relating to broader skills and management issues.

Many colleges offering call and contact centre training do so in response to requests for courses and design their courses in response to client's specifications. Only 21% run courses on an "open access" basis and few have invested in training resources or employ permanent staff dedicated to the sector. However, those who have invested in resource for call centre training are respected by local businesses with call/contact operations.

The UK and Scotland already have a range of Vocational Qualifications including courses specifically designed for the contact centre sector. However, research carried out with employers questions the effectiveness and relevance of the current provision.

Feedback from potential employers indicated that the level of IT skills required to complete the vocational qualifications on offer was far higher than the skills required for the roles available. Employers also indicated that practical experience was far more worthwhile from their perspective as a candidate with this experience was more likely to be successful in a recruitment process than a candidate with qualifications but less experience.

Employers were also keen on the attainment of work-based skills rather than academic qualifications. Some of the current IT qualifications on offer, primarily ECDL core, went beyond the level of understanding and ability required by employers and many students found that both the volume and level of information involved was too much for them to cope with in the period of time available. The amount of evidence required to fulfil the SVQ standard was also difficult to produce in the time available.

A study by the DTI into the Contact Centre Industry found that:

There is a need to co-ordinate, promote and encourage existing and new contact centre training and qualifications relevant to businesses which go from pre-job training up to senior contact centre management. Through skills, training, qualifications and advice, contact centres must be helped from focusing purely on call handling, towards the more complex and valuable action of customer contact management.

Many stakeholders believe that the way forward for the UK contact centre industry is to improve the general level of skills which agents hold, in order to focus upon the work with the greatest need for skilled staff, complex interactions and those which require a high level of empathy and knowledge thereby reducing the impact on the industry of "off shoring" low level call centre tasks. This has a direct result on the level and quality of training required by agents and an increase in their entry abilities.

There is evidence from employers groups indicating that new entrants to the workforce are less able to hold a conversation than ever before. There is a need for long-term programmes aimed at improving communication skills (including listening) not just for the benefit of the contact centre industry but to support all industry, especially the service sector.

There is also evidence to suggest that current availability of good quality call centre staff and the provision of a structured training & qualification framework is arguably behind current call centre requirements, let alone the requirements of the future as the industry moves towards more Customer Relationship Management (CRM) driven contact centres.

The availability of good quality recruits (i.e. with appropriate written, oral and numerical skills) and an infrastructure of world class training and accredited qualifications for call/contact centres would represent an infrastructure which would add significantly to the ability of UK businesses to support the development of the operations. In turn this would mitigate the risk to jobs in this sector being exported from the UK and may even encourage jobs to be imported (e.g. a multi-national may be persuaded to place its call centre in the UK).

For initial basic training, employers run internal courses to develop advisor skills. Internal courses are favoured due to there often being a lack of what they see as suitable outside solutions and a desire to train staff in the organisations particular systems. But there are indications that the training provided by employers often does not meet all the needs advisors have across the required set of skills.

There is also a concern amongst employers that accredited courses make advisors more employable elsewhere and therefore might encourage turnover. This negative view would be mitigated if employers found the accredited programme more cost effective than their own internal solutions.

When seeking the opinion of Contact Centre employees, advisors working in call centres support the concept of the call and contact centre sector having professionally recognised qualifications – 24% of advisors "very strongly" supported the proposition and a further 45% "quite strongly" supported this. Professionally recognised qualifications are regarded as an important step in raising standards and demonstrating to the wider world that employees in the sector and skilled and valued as in other areas of employment. This indicates a market that is receptive to being professionalised in terms of skills and qualifications.

In another study, 17% of contact centre staff had undertaken a contact centre related NVQ, the most common being the NVQ Level 2 in Call Handling. 71% of staff said they would like additional training, primarily induction training or a call handling relates NVQ.

Type of Training Required

Various studies conducted within the sector identify a widely held need for more training especially in soft skills such as empathy, listening, cultural fit and communication abilities. While most employers are happy to train new recruits in hard skills such as IT and product knowledge, which can be taught easily, there is a common perception that the educational system or pre-job training should be more, focused towards people skills.

There is a broad level of agreement that specific call centre training needs are greater and most urgent at the advisor level.

The key skills which employers consider essential in their staff are:

•	Verbal communication skills	95%
•	Interpersonal skills	81%
•	Keyboard skills	68%
•	Work experience in customer care	66%
•	Experience in telephone working	53%
•	Educational qualifications	43%

A further study amongst employers emphasised the importance of skills, training, experience and attitude when considering employing potential new recruits. In terms of hard and soft skills, the importance of these was ranked as follows:

Soft Skills

Rank	Skill/attribute
1	Communication Skills
2	Reliability
3	Enthusiasm
4	Honesty
5	Ability to work in a team
6	Ability to work flexible hours
7	Ability to take initiatives

Hard Skills

Rank	Skill/attribute
1	Basic IT and keyboard skills
2	Customer service skills
3	Microsoft Word based software skills
4	Internet understanding and working knowledge
5	Experience with specific IT systems and databases
6	Ability to handle customers effectively (including complaints)
7	Sales experience and a proven track record
8	Experience in specific business sectors
9	Previous experience in customer service and soft selling techniques

Other findings amongst employers were:

Verbal communications and interpersonal skills are rated by employers as by far the most important abilities for contact centre staff to have, yet are also the ones most lacking. Many employers are happy to take on staff and teach them 'hard' skills (such as IT, systems and product training), but cannot do the same with 'soft skills' which need to emerge from the educational system.

It seems that employers are asking for basic skills (communication, IT) and personal aptitudes (understanding of customer requirements and empathy) rather than contact centre-specific skills. For outbound calls, the most important attributes for an agent to demonstrate were clarity, professionalism and friendliness. Being pushy, reading from a script and insincerity were the worst attributes.

In particular call centre operators are looking for new recruits who are trained in basic PC and call centre skills, who are good communicators, and who are enthusiastic about their work.

It is not normally possible to complete an NVQ/SVQ before employment within a call centre due to the requirements for practical on the job training as part of the qualification process. Current NVQ/SVQ providers such as the tertiary colleges can therefore only accept candidates onto their courses who are in full time employment and are often reluctant to do so as they see these qualifications as making their staff more attractive to other employers. Consequently a course that could be delivered in a working environment would be a distinct advantage as students graduating would then be able to enter the job market with an SVQ qualification which would not be possible on other training programme.

Alternatively, programmes for each level of management and staff should be a mixture of on the job experience and training offered by the employer and sector specific education and training offered by accredited third parties.

With regard to future training requirements, the CCA report for the Department for Education & Skills, "The State of the Centres: An investigation of the Skills Level in the Industry and of the Training Requirements" identifies the current and future generic skill requirements for agent/operators as follows:

	Present Requirement	Future Requirements
People Skills	Oral Communication (questioning, probing & listening, absorbing & questioning, empathy, tone, pace & volume) Service (politeness, building rapport) Personal effectiveness & Team Work	Personalisation of responses (Calls e-mails etc.) Creating natural conversations when supported by scripts and prompts Making selling & cross selling a natural part of conversation Broadening vocabulary Closing low value relationships or strong active migration to automated channels
Technical Skills	Understanding Value Drivers, Targets & Measurement Employed Call Handling (controlling call structure & duration, balancing quality of calls answered vs. quality of response given) Sales Skills Ensuring Literacy and Numeracy.	Developing web based skills (e.g. handling of e-mails) Developing new skills (video interviewing) Managing calls with CTI and CRM Enablement. Becoming equipped to manage calls/enquiries for value. Exercising initiative within a framework

6   Barriers to Disabled Employment within the Contact Centre Industry.

Within the UK physical barriers for disabled people in the workspace are unlikely to be a significant problem in preventing disabled people from finding employment. Government legislation for new buildings requires that full account of disabled needs are made during the design and construction process and as a result all new buildings are designed to be barrier free and fully accessible for people with a wide range of physical disabilities.

Legislation has also been retrospectively applied to all buildings to which members of the public have access which in effect covers almost all places of potential employment. These buildings also have to comply with strict provisions for disabled access. However, as many of these buildings were retro fitted to be disabled friendly, some are compromised and while disabled access is always possible it is not always ideal or as well planned as in newer buildings. Nevertheless it would be illegal in the UK for a building accessible to the public not to have access for physically disabled people.

Good practice above and beyond the minimum standards laid down in legislation is also encouraged and awards are available for employers and building owners who provide state of the art facilities.

Employers considering hiring a disabled person who is currently registered as unemployed can also apply for Government aid to make any adaptions necessary to the work place to accommodate the disability in question. At present up to 80% of the cost involved in adaptations may be claimed by employers in grants.

Consequently there is no reason in the UK for any disabled person to face physical barriers in the workplace which would prevent them from gaining employment assuming the employer is sympathetic to their needs.

Social barriers to employment of disabled people are more difficult to assess and there is conflicting research and statistics available which further cloud the issue. Both the UK and Scottish Regional Government have extensive and robust anti-discrimination legislation which is designed to ensure disabled people are not discriminated against during recruitment or once in employment. Where employers are found to have discriminated against individuals the fines imposed are unlimited in value and can have severe consequences for employers not only in financial terms but also in reputational damage.

However, despite the legislation discrimination in some form and to some extent clearly does still exist. There can be a perception amongst employers that disabled people need more support than other employees and are less flexible in the tasks they can undertake There can also be a belief that they are slower in the workplace and that they have worse absenteeism records than able bodied staff. There is anecdotal evidence to support this view but there is also considerable evidence to refute this which has been commissioned by various disabled rights charities and organisations.

With regard to potential financial barriers faced by employers in hiring disabled staff, as stated earlier grants are available which will meet up to 80% of the cost involved in adaptations necessary to ease access for disabled employees which greatly reduces any financial barriers faced by employers considering hiring disabled staff. In addition there are various employer incentive schemes available including wage subsidies for varying periods of time to help encourage employers to hire disabled staff and to reduce the costs for them in so doing.

Disabled people themselves can face financial barriers to employment in terms of loss of benefit when taking employment or high costs of travel to work if specialist transport is needed. With regard to loss of benefit both the UK and Scottish Governments' are focused on providing a

system of welfare support that ensures no one is worse off by choosing to work where they are able to.

With regard to travel costs once again UK legislation has ensured that all methods of public transport in the UK are accessible by the disabled and while some arrangements are far from ideal it is possible in most cases for people with a range of disabilities to have full access to public transport facilities. In addition the UK has a disabled mobility benefit available to citizens which will cover the cost of providing an adapted motor car if the disability in question is severe enough to warrant it.

It is widely acknowledged that the existence of the benefits trap may prevent disabled people from moving into open employment. Research by Forth Sector in into the scale and nature of the benefits trap revealed the significance of the benefits trap as a barrier to employment and makes the case for reform of the current system. The key recommendation of the Forth Sector report is the development of a transitional employment scheme that provides the flexibility required for people with a disability and disadvantage in the labour market to be able to move towards employment.

7 Opportunities to Create Disabled Employment within the Contact Centre Industry.

It is clear from research that the Contact Centre Industry could offer suitable jobs for individuals with both moderate and severe disabilities. Initial research demonstrates that the IT solutions available today can be tailored to meet the needs of most types of disability and staff could work either from the office or from home. Around 80% of disabilities can be catered for within the sector without significant need for adaptations or specialist IT equipment.

Operators working from home does present some challenges such as staff management, travel difficulties, staff isolation, training needs and what actual modifications at what cost would need to be made to the IT infrastructure etc.

Opportunities exist not only to create jobs for disabled people within established contact centres but also to establish a Social Enterprise Contact Centre provider able to work across the EU selling services locally but using technology to deliver anywhere in the partner countries.

A key aspect of moving disabled people into work needs to be an assessment of motivation and the desire to work, with particular reference to the types of opportunities on offer in Contact Centres. Due to the specific pressures of working in a call centre and high staff turnover in the industry it is essential that time is invested at the outset to ensure that the right candidates are selected. Reports on call centre recruitment recommend that employers should select people for capability rather than focus simply on experience and look for "call centre qualities", particularly the motivational fit.

For disabled people returning to employment, a "Back to Work Plan" should be agreed with each participant including their work aims and preferences, any domestic issues, which may affect their employment, e.g. childcare, travel and health. A learning, support and development needs plan should then be negotiated which may include an introduction to computers, a module of the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL), a Microsoft Office Specialist (MOS) module, communications, social skills, confidence building, core skills, CV design, mock interviews with companies and a timetable of job search. Each stage should be agreed, monitored and reviewed. A work training and support requirements plan should also be negotiated.

During any training period it is essential participants are offered practical work experience focusing on the areas covered by the NVQ, enabling individuals to receive quality training and work experience in a real working environment. This period will help build up participants' confidence by enabling them to put into practice what they have learned. Participants will be better equipped to meet the challenges of the real working world by learning to work with customers and colleagues and by gaining valuable experience in a variety of roles. They will also build a work track record that will enable them to progress. Such opportunities will also enable participants to identify and address any issues that arise through the ongoing support of project officers. This will give a clearer indication of an individual's job readiness and highlight any additional training needs. Employers will be encouraged to employ suitable individuals when appropriate.

A key objective in any training programme is to support each participant to develop the confidence, personal attributes and technical abilities that will enable each individual to more easily access opportunities available.

Probably as important to success as acquiring the right technical competencies is the development of a positive "self-image" and the ability to value oneself and others. As such personal development programmes that identify unique strengths and talents and that promote a healthy self-image and build confidence are important components.

Mentoring is also an important support function. Availability of this one to one support will give participants the opportunity to talk through any issues in confidence and develop a way forward with an experienced individual.

8   Recommendations

Research suggests there is a significant opportunity to provide real social benefits by increasing access to training, work experience and real jobs for disabled people within the contact centre industry.

Consideration should be given to seeking funding to establish a Europe wide training programme designed to create employment opportunities for people with a varying range of disabilities within the contact centre sector. Such a programme should be based on the best practice already existing in Europe and as identified within these Country Reports and should aim to include the following which have been identified from the research conducted herein:

1. Running programmes with participants from a wide age range had benefits for all. In general younger participants have a good grasp of IT and telephone technology and are able to help older participants who may be initially apprehensive about this aspect.

2. Many of the more mature participants are likely to have had a variety of employment histories and often find themselves unemployed through illness or injury. Their experience would be invaluable in group exercises focussing on customer service, teamwork and communication skills.

3. Participants often respond very positively when parts of the programme moved away from the trainers training and focussed instead on the participants learning from each other. In addition to the learning element, support mechanisms are fostered within the group along with many lasting friendships.

4. Many participants are likely to be diagnosed as having some form of dyslexia, in some cases more severe than others, and almost all resulting in negative previous experiences of learning. Being able to work with others in similar situations and being able to learn in work-based surroundings at their own pace can turn learning into a positive and rewarding experience.

5. Experience has shown that modular structure of training programmes, which allows the content to be personalised for each participant taking account of their previous experience, current skill levels and future aspirations combined with early exposure to a live working environment creates the highest number of people completing training programmes and provides a good basis for people to move on and make significant changes to their lives and has the potential to allow individuals with the skills, experience and confidence to move into full or part-time employment within contact centres.

6. Research indicates that the level of knowledge and understanding required to successfully gain a vocational qualification, especially within IT skills, is beyond the capability of many disabled programme participants. Other vocational qualifications required a high volume of work-based evidence to form the basis of a candidate portfolio and this can prove difficult to produce in a limited time frame.

7. Where programmes can be delivered with the participants integrated into a working environment, the division between the training and work experience elements of the programme can be eliminated. Programme participants would undergo the same induction procedure as new employees and would be expected to adhere to the same standards. Breaches of discipline and poor performance can be dealt with according to company policies and procedures, further reinforcing the whole work experience and ensuring participants are fully prepared for paid employment. Treating programme participants in the same manner as new employee's right from the start of the

programme means that they integrated more quickly into the working environment and also are unconsciously learning from day one. Setting expectations in areas such as timekeeping, attendance and behaviour early on in the programme also meant that participants are better prepared for employment in the future.

8. It is essential to build relationships with outside bodies and organisations to help by providing services in areas such as childcare, dependency, housing issues, benefits and management of long-term medical conditions.

9. Any funding needs to take fully into account the need to provide child care facilities on or close to the training site. This will ensure the uptake on places is sustained and demand is strong.

10. Involving employers in the design and delivery of training programmes is essential.

11. Training programmes must aim to give beneficiaries access to an integrated package of support, which begins with vocational guidance and support, continues with pre-vocational training, which identifies and procures vocational training which secures their employment against a background of continuing support and aftercare. The support is client centred and is agreed in a personal action plan which addresses issues of employability covering areas such as personal efficacy (e.g. Motivation and confidence), core skill development (e.g. Problem solving, IT skills) and vocational qualifications as well as information on knowing how to access support in the form of assistance with child care, fares to work, gaining work experience, training etc. This will allow tackling of the issues which inhibit the target group from competing and progressing in work.

Funding for a programme such as this would be difficult to sustain in the long term and consideration should be given to establishing a Social Enterprise with the aim of creating a trading contact centre which would employ both disabled and able bodied employees, generating employment and work experience places but also generating commercial income and profits to support and expand a targeted training programme for disabled people.

Such an enterprise would target government, third sector and private clients, undertaking as an example the following tasks together with any others where a market requirement could be established:

- Call handling
- Fundraising & funding applications
- Research
- Database maintenance & management
- Customer support
- Customer satisfaction surveys
- Technical support
- Communication management
- Telemarketing
- Sales generation
- Sales order taking
- Email & internet marketing
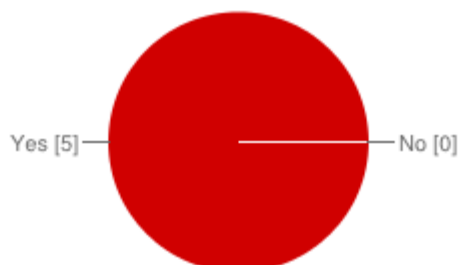
9   Partner Comparison Summary

1. IS THERE A WAGE SUBSIDY FOR EMPLOYERS RECRUITING DISABLED PEOPLE?

COMPANHIA DE IDEIAS	YES
FUTURE 21 CENTURY	YES
MCSENCE	YES
INSTITUT PRE REGIONÁLNY ROZVOJ	YES
ECCC FOUNDATION	YES

Yes [5] — No [0]
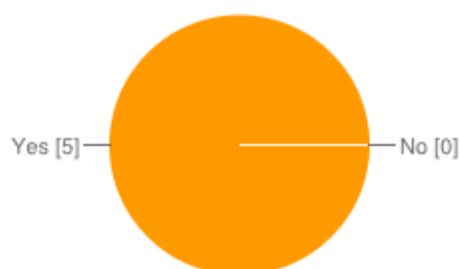
2. ARE INCENTIVES AVAILABLE TO EMPLOYERS FOR ADAPTATIONS TO ENCOURAGE EMPLOYMENT?

COMPANHIA DE IDEIAS	YES
FUTURE 21 CENTURY	YES
MCSENCE	YES
INSTITUT PRE REGIONÁLNY ROZVOJ	YES
ECCC FOUNDATION	YES

Yes [5] — No [0]

3. IS THERE A WILLINGNESS FROM DISABLED PEOPLE TO TAKE JOBS ON OFFER?

COMPANHIA DE IDEIAS	YES
FUTURE 21 CENTURY	YES
MCSENCE	NO
INSTITUT PRE REGIONÁLNY ROZVOJ	YES
ECCC FOUNDATION	YES

No [1]
Yes [4]
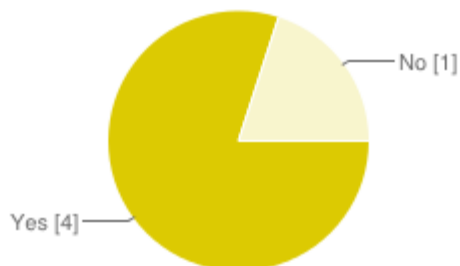
4. IS THERE A LEGISLATIVE REQUIREMENT FOR THE GOVERNMENT TO ASSIST DISABLED PEOPLE INTO WORK?

COMPANHIA DE IDEIAS	YES
FUTURE 21 CENTURY	YES
MCSENCE	YES
INSTITUT PRE REGIONÁLNY ROZVOJ	YES
ECCC FOUNDATION	YES

Yes [5] — No [0]
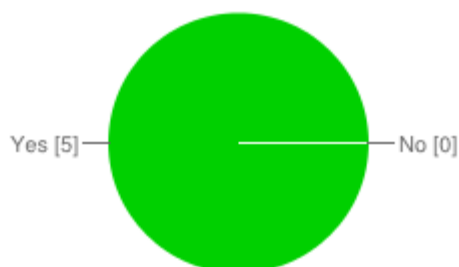
5. ARE THERE OTHER STAKE HOLDERS WITH THE CAPACITY TO DO THIS?

COMPANHIA DE IDEIAS	NO
FUTURE 21 CENTURY	YES
MCSENCE	YES
INSTITUT PRE REGIONÁLNY ROZVOJ	YES
ECCC FOUNDATION	YES

No [1]
Yes [4]
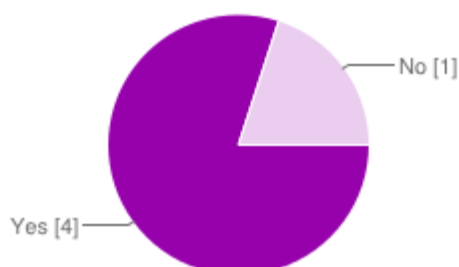
6. WHAT IS THE PROJECTED GROWTH RATE OF CONTACT INDUSTRY SECTOR?

COMPANHIA DE IDEIAS	15% GROWTH
FUTURE 21 CENTURY	THERE ARE VERY BRAVE PLANNS FOR THAT . BUT THERE IS A SHORTAGE OF QUOLIFIED SPECIALISTS. 8 % NEXT YEAR.
MCSENCE	13% IN SCOTLAND CURRENTLY, PROJECTED TO GROW AT AROUND 10%
INSTITUT PRE REGIONÁLNY ROZVOJ	THERE ARE NOT INFORMATION ABOUT PROJECTED GROWTH RATE
ECCC FOUNDATION	NO DATAS AVAILABLE

7. IS THERE A SIGNIFICANT DEMAND FOR SKILLED STAFF?

COMPANHIA DE IDEIAS	NO

FUTURE 21 CENTURY	YES
MCSENCE	YES
INSTITUT PRE REGIONÁLNY ROZVOJ	YES
ECCC FOUNDATION	YES
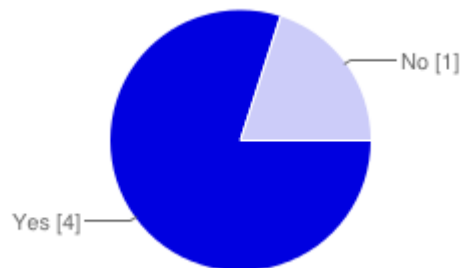
8. WHAT SKILL LEVEL IS REQUIRED?

COMPANHIA DE IDEIAS	HIGH-SCHOOL
FUTURE 21 CENTURY	QUITE DIFFERENT SKILLS ESSPECIALLY FOR THE BIGGER SERVICE PROVIDERS LIKE HP - THEY ENGAGED OVER 3000 PERSONS UP TO NOW.
MCSENCE	UK EMPLOYERS LOOKING FOR EXPERIENCED CALL HANDLERS RATHER THAN FORMAL QUALIFICATIONS. OVER 50% ON NEW RECRUITS LACK SOFT SKILLS NECESSARY, ACCADEMIC QUALIFICATIONS OR LANGUAGE SKILLS LESS REQUIRED BY EMPLOYERS
INSTITUT PRE REGIONÁLNY ROZVOJ	COMPLETED SECONDARY EDUCATION (GRADUATION)
ECCC FOUNDATION	NO DATAS AVAILABLE

9. DO CONTACT CENTRES RECRUIT AND TRAIN INTERNALLY?

COMPANHIA DE IDEIAS	YES
FUTURE 21 CENTURY	YES
MCSENCE	YES
INSTITUT PRE REGIONÁLNY ROZVOJ	YES
ECCC FOUNDATION	YES
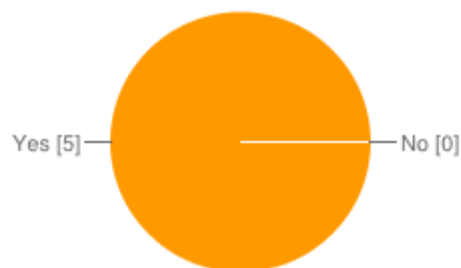
10. IS THERE A STRONG REGULATORY ENVIRONMENT IN THE PARTNER COUNTRY?

COMPANHIA DE IDEIAS	YES
FUTURE 21 CENTURY	NO
MCSENCE	YES
INSTITUT PRE REGIONÁLNY ROZVOJ	YES
ECCC FOUNDATION	YES
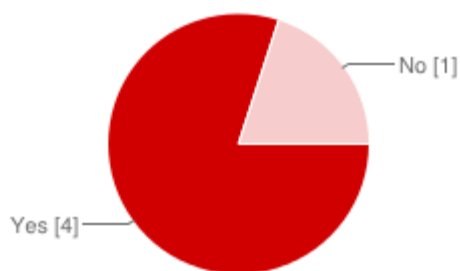
11. DO THE CALL CENTRES OFFER REMOTE JOBS?

COMPANHIA DE IDEIAS	NO
FUTURE 21 CENTURY	NO
MCSENCE	NO
INSTITUT PRE REGIONÁLNY ROZVOJ	NO
ECCC FOUNDATION	YES
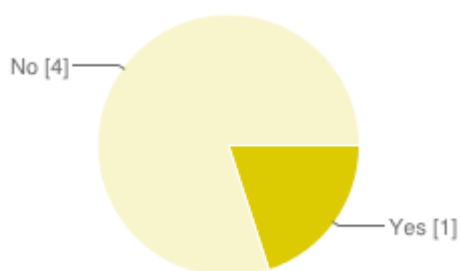
12. ARE THERE MORE THAN 50 PERCENT OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES WITH BROADBAND INTERNET ACCESS?
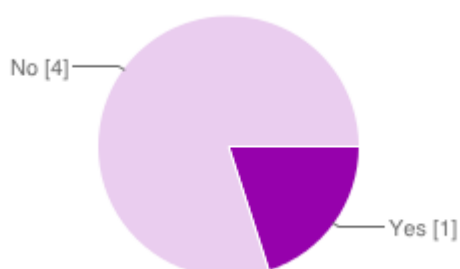
COMPANHIA DE IDEIAS	YES
FUTURE 21 CENTURY	NO
MCSENCE	YES
INSTITUT PRE REGIONÁLNY ROZVOJ	YES
ECCC FOUNDATION	NO
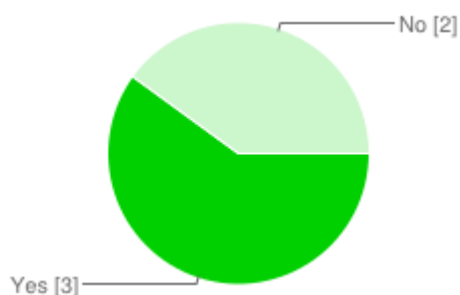
13. ARE THE PARTNER COUNTRIES EDUCATING DISABLED PEOPLE WITH THE LANGUAGE AND IT SKILLS REQUIRED FOR THE CONTACT CENTRE INDUSTRY?

COMPANHIA DE IDEIAS	NO
FUTURE 21 CENTURY	NO
MCSENCE	NO
INSTITUT PRE REGIONÁLNY ROZVOJ	NO

ECCC FOUNDATION	YES

14. DO THE ALLOWANCES AVAILABLE INCENTIVISE DISABLED PEOPLE TO ACCESS THE LABOUR MARKET?

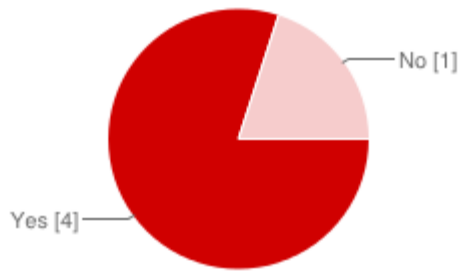| COMPANHIA DE IDEIAS	NO
FUTURE 21 CENTURY	YES
MCSENCE	NO
INSTITUT PRE REGIONÁLNY ROZVOJ	NO
ECCC FOUNDATION	YES
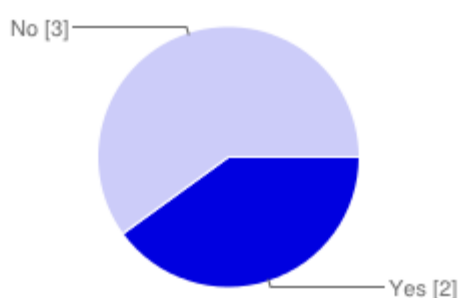
15. IS THERE TOO MUCH LEGISLATION PROVISIONS OVERPROTECTING DISABLED PEOPLE IN EMPLOYMENT?

COMPANHIA DE IDEIAS	NO
FUTURE 21 CENTURY	YES
MCSENCE	NO
INSTITUT PRE REGIONÁLNY ROZVOJ	NO
ECCC FOUNDATION	NO
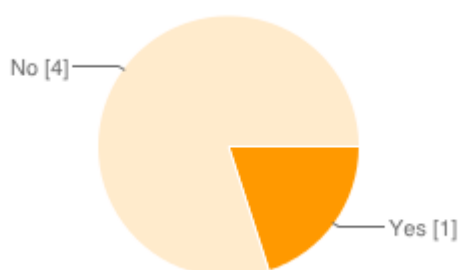
16. IS THE STATE OVER BUREAUCRATIC IN DISTRIBUTING THE ALLOWANCES?

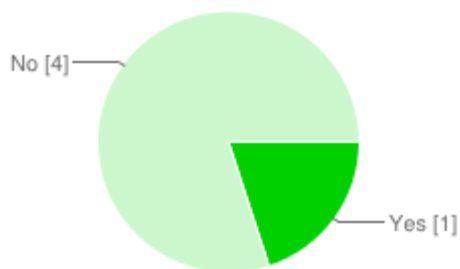| COMPANHIA DE IDEIAS	YES
FUTURE 21 CENTURY	YES
MCSENCE	NO
INSTITUT PRE REGIONÁLNY ROZVOJ	YES
ECCC FOUNDATION	YES

17. ARE THERE SUFFICIENT INCENTIVES FOR EMPLOYERS TO PRIORITISE PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES?

COMPANHIA DE IDEIAS	NO
FUTURE 21 CENTURY	NO
MCSENCE	NO
INSTITUT PRE REGIONÁLNY ROZVOJ	NO
ECCC FOUNDATION	NO
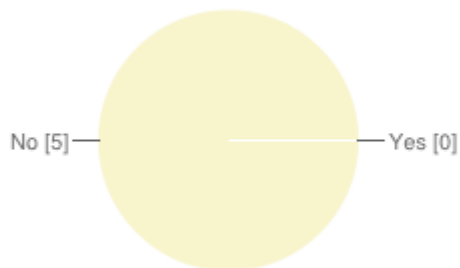
18. WILL GOVERNMENTS PAY FOR THE TRAINING OF CALL CENTRE STAFF WHEN THERE ARE SO MANY PEOPLE WITH HIGH LEVEL EDUCATION ALREADY AVAILABLE?
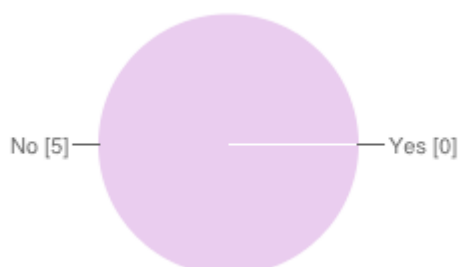
COMPANHIA DE IDEIAS	NO
FUTURE 21 CENTURY	YES
MCSENCE	NO
INSTITUT PRE REGIONÁLNY ROZVOJ	NO
ECCC FOUNDATION	NO

19. ARE EXISTING CONTACT CENTRE STAFF TRAINED TO RECEIVE STAFF WITH DISABILITIES?
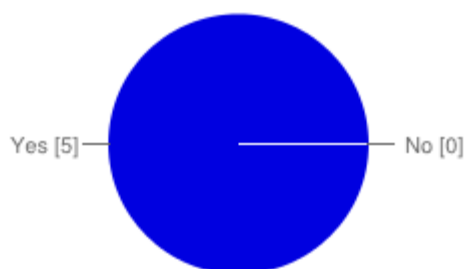
COMPANHIA DE IDEIAS	NO

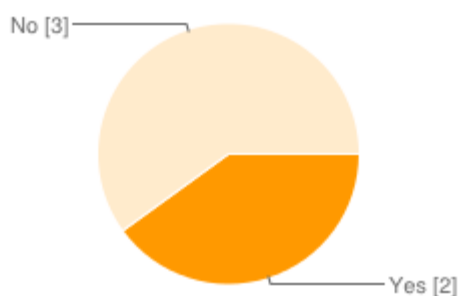| FUTURE 21 CENTURY	NO
MCSENCE	NO
INSTITUT PRE REGIONÁLNY ROZVOJ	NO
ECCC FOUNDATION	NO

No [5] — Yes [0]

20. DO DISABLED PEOPLE FEEL THERE IS DISCRIMINATION IN ENTERING THE LABOUR MARKET?

COMPANHIA DE IDEIAS	YES
FUTURE 21 CENTURY	YES
MCSENCE	YES
INSTITUT PRE REGIONÁLNY ROZVOJ	YES
ECCC FOUNDATION	YES

Yes [5] — No [0]

21. IS THE PHYSICAL INFRASTRUCTURE ACCESSIBLE FOR DISABLED PEOPLE?

COMPANHIA DE IDEIAS	NO
FUTURE 21 CENTURY	NO
MCSENCE	YES
INSTITUT PRE REGIONÁLNY ROZVOJ	NO
ECCC FOUNDATION	YES

No [3]

Yes [2]

22. IS THE TECHNOLOGY IN CALL CENTRES BARRIER FREE?

COMPANHIA DE IDEIAS	NO
FUTURE 21 CENTURY	NO
MCSENCE	YES
INSTITUT PRE REGIONÁLNY ROZVOJ	NO
ECCC FOUNDATION	NO

No [4]
Yes [1]
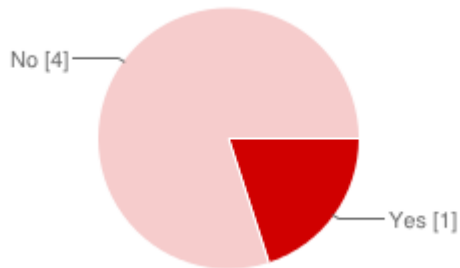
23. DO YOU EXPECT HIGH GROWTH IN THE CALL CENTRE INDUSTRY IN YOUR COUNTRY?

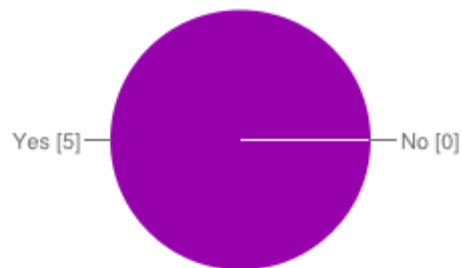| COMPANHIA DE IDEIAS	YES
FUTURE 21 CENTURY	YES
MCSENCE	YES
INSTITUT PRE REGIONÁLNY ROZVOJ	YES
ECCC FOUNDATION	NO

No [1]
Yes [4]
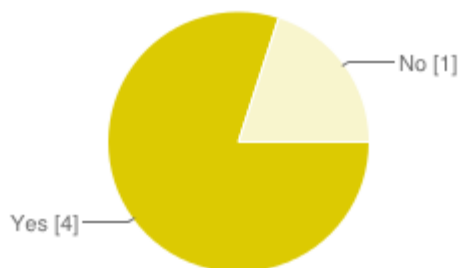
24. DO YOU HAVE ORGANISATIONS WHO CAN SUPPORT DISABLED PEOPLE IN LOOKING FOR JOBS IN CALL CENTRES?

COMPANHIA DE IDEIAS	YES
FUTURE 21 CENTURY	YES
MCSENCE	YES
INSTITUT PRE REGIONÁLNY ROZVOJ	YES
ECCC FOUNDATION	NO

No [1]
Yes [4]
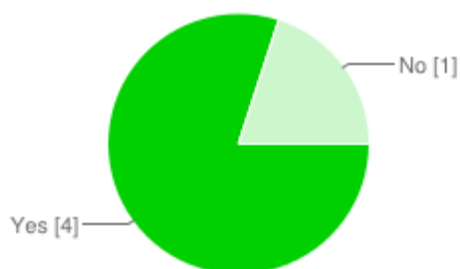
25. DO THE DISABLED PEOPLE HAVE OPPORTUNITIES TO FURTHER DEVELOP THEIR SKILLS IN CALL CENTRES?

COMPANHIA DE IDEIAS	YES
FUTURE 21 CENTURY	YES
MCSENCE	YES
INSTITUT PRE REGIONÁLNY ROZVOJ	YES
ECCC FOUNDATION	YES

26. WOULD IT BE APPROPRIATE TO LAUNCH A SOCIAL ENTERPRISE CALL CENTRE BUSINESS?

COMPANHIA DE IDEIAS	YES
FUTURE 21 CENTURY	YES
MCSENCE	YES
INSTITUT PRE REGIONÁLNY ROZVOJ	YES
ECCC FOUNDATION	YES