

## **Samarthanam**

Challenge: Changing attitudes and stigmas associated with the differently-abled as well as providing a facility to train differently-abled persons so that they may achieve personal independence

Solution: Equipping the differently-abled with the tools to become financially independent

Benefits: Creating multiple programs that are available to differently-abled persons and an opportunity for the differently-abled to contribute to their own livelihood and society through work and education.

### **About Samarthanam**

In 1997, three visually impaired individuals, Mr. Mahantesh G.K., Mr. Paul Mudda and Mr. S.P. Nagesh, came together under a united determination to aid differently-abled people in achieving personal independence. Their own access to education and opportunities inspired the men to found Samarthanam as a way to give back to differently-abled youth. They believe that through access to education, accommodation, nutritious food and vocational training, differently-abled persons can become confident, valued and contributing members of their communities.

### **The Situation**

Through their close connection to the differently-abled community, Samarthanam has a heightened awareness and knowledge of the discrimination the differently-abled community faces. These includes the beliefs that the differently-abled sinned in their previous life and are thus destined to a life of hardship or that families should cherish and protect their differently-abled children to such a degree that they are incapable of doing anything for themselves. In July 2009, Samarthanam launched a branch of their organization in Dharwad and introduced their Techvision initiative to open new doors to the differently-abled in North Karnataka.

The 2007 World Bank Report by Phillip O'Keefe, *People with Disabilities in India: From Commitments to Outcomes*, found that observable characteristic of the differently-abled do not explain the low employment rates, but other factors, such as social attitudes and stigmas, are the reasons the differently-abled struggle to secure employment. Additional evidence of the impact someone's disability plays on their ability to become financially independent in India was cited in the United Nations fact sheet from the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*. The UN found that of the approximately 70 million people in India with disabilities only 100,000 are employed in industry jobs, or just 0.14%.

A critical challenge Techvision faces is convincing the differently-abled and their families that they have the ability to use technology to achieve personal independence.

### **The Challenges**

As is the case with any NGO attempting an innovative approach to change mindsets, the path for Samarthanam has been full of challenges. As the organization looks to expand their services into the Sandbox region, they know they have significant battles to face. Samarthanam plans to open a training facility that will accommodate 200 students at a time and will include 50 fully equipped computer systems and housing facilities for 100 girls and 100 boys. The facility will cost approximately 1 crore to build. Once they have built the training facility and operations are running systematically, Samarthanam believes they can train 600 students per year at a cost of approximately 4,500 (INR) per student. As Samarthanam expands their capacity to train more students, their expenses per student will decrease. However, with such a high initial capital investment, it is a challenge for them to build a facility that will enable them to quickly build their training capacity.

Samarthanam wants to ensure the financial sustainability of their programs in the Sandbox. Thus, the team plans to transplant successful revenue generating initiatives, such as the waste management program, from Bangalore to Dharwad. Techvision will inculcate an attitude of giving back amongst the trainees with the hope of recouping a portion of the training expenses from the participants, starting in the second year. The team is confident they will be able to sustain the program, but know it will not be easy to create a fully sustainable model.

Another critical challenge Techvision faces is convincing the disabled and their families that they have the ability to use technology to achieve personal independence. Initially, 109 students registered for the training in Dharwad, but due to a lack of residential housing facilities, participants' limited mobility and insufficient transportation options only 48 students are regularly participating in the course. The team must find a way to eliminate these barriers and prove to potential participants that working diligently throughout the four month training will equip them with the necessary tools to pursue a prosperous career. The organization estimates they will require a marketing budget of five lakhs per annum and need to hire staff to work closely with Village Level Workers (VLW) in the community to ensure they have a comprehensive outreach program.

- How can Samarthanam build a strong infrastructure, including a committed community outreach team, effective marketing materials and a quality-training model, which enables them to effectively reach people in remote areas?
- What additional steps should Samarthanam consider to create a financial model that is sustainable?
- As Samarthanam launches new initiatives and transplants programs from Bangalore to the Sandbox, what factors should they consider to ensure they do not grow too quickly and are keeping the organization's overall best interests in mind?

## **The Solution**

In bringing Techvision to the Sandbox, Samarathanam aims to not only change the way society perceives the differently-abled, but also the way the differently-abled perceive their own capabilities. Samarathanam's experience suggests the best way to break down stereotypes that prevent the differently-abled from reaching their potential is by equipping the differently-abled with tools to become financially independent and treating the differently-abled as they would any other member of society.

In 1999, Samarathanam launched their IT cell with the aim of enabling the visually impaired through technology. The program focused on JAWS, a screen reading software, as a tool to aid the differently-abled with their studies and assist them in gathering information. Looking for a more holistic approach, in March 2008, Samarathanam launched their Techvision initiative in Bangalore. The program takes an innovative approach in preparing people with disabilities to compete with the mainstream job market through training on computers, English communication and soft skills as well as assisting participants in identifying career paths and securing a job placement.

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### **The Results**

To date, Techvision has trained more than 250 visually impaired and physically challenged people and assisted them in securing job placements in human resources, chartered accountancy, teaching, social entrepreneurship, data processing and self-employment.

Based on Samarathanam's work with the differently-abled, they have found that a differently-abled person typically earns 2,000-3,000 (INR) per month without access to the tools and training Techvision provides. On average, graduates of Techvision earn a monthly salary of 6,000-8,000 (INR) with approximately 20% earning more than 10,000 (INR). Access to technology has enabled women, like Rajani, who now works with Infosys, to become the first visually challenged chartered accountant. Technology also enabled Pankaj to become the first visually challenged person admitted to FMS Delhi for his MBA and pursue a career at Indian Oil Corporation as a senior human resources manager making more than eight lakhs per annum. Through Samarathanam, people, like Rajani and Pankaj, develop the confidence and skills they need to pursue careers that otherwise would have been impossible.

Over time, Samarathanam has also seen their organization grow—a chart of their activities since 1997 shows the expansion of programming:

<b>Program</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Impact to Date</b>
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	<b>Started</b>	
Higher Education Program	1997	Supported 150 students through graduation and currently supporting 120 students
Sports Program	1997	Supported 350 athletes, won the Visually Impaired National Cricket Championship for the past 3 consecutive years and receiving sponsorships from 50 Multinational Corporations to cover sports program's operating expenses
Cultural Program	1999	Conducted 500 performances and generated 179 Lakhs (INR) in revenue
Integrated Education Program	2000	Provided educational support to 750 children
Mid-day meal program	2001	Providing over 35,000 nutritious meals
Library Program	2003	Serving 4,200 youth through 6 libraries
Environmental Management Program	2004	Generating 3.5 Lakhs (INR) per month in revenue
Rehabilitative Services for Women	2007	Supported 120 women in distress
Advocacy Branch	2009	Conducted presentations at 76 colleges and closely working with media, government and corporations