



The TAP Programme in New York City – One Year On

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INTRODUCTION

Last summer we published an article about the work of INCube Inc. – a consumer-led consultancy in New York that helps former psychiatric patients create their own jobs in businesses they have founded themselves. Such a lot of interest was created by this article – and by the founder of INCube, Mimi Kravitz, at the Life in the day Annual Conference – that we have decided to follow up on the development of this work. The first article presents the first results of the TAP (Technical Assistance Program for Recipients) programme.

The unique features of the programme are described and discussed in detail – the author is the programme director, Gerold Schwarz. The second article by Liz Ruddle of Milton Keynes MIND is an account of a visit to the programme in New York and her thoughts about INCube from a UK standpoint.

Gerda A. is an ambitious businesswoman who runs her own graphic design agency in New York. Her clients come from the fields of public administration, non-profit organisations and private companies. She employs several part-time employees, their numbers depending on the current inflow of orders. At the moment she has just received a big order from a major publishing company in New Jersey and is developing a campaign for the launch of a new magazine.

Stuart E. is the boss of his own small but ambitious company called 'Peak Business Systems', based in Staten Island, New York. He supplies photocopiers, computers and other office equipment and provides the service necessary. He places particular emphasis on taking care of his customers personally and individually. Most of his orders come from companies that (like Stuart himself) are members of the local Chamber of Industry and Commerce and the

Staten Island Employers' Association. He makes good use of his contacts in these institutions and is on the way to establishing a good reputation for himself in the area, something that is particularly important in his trade, and a factor that sets him apart from his major competitors who are big and already well-established companies.

So what have these two people got to do with vocational rehabilitation? The fact is, both these entrepreneurs have been diagnosed as having serious mental health problems and both have spent a number of spells in psychiatric clinics: each has been officially informed in writing that they had very little chance of being reintegrated into working life.

Fortunately, both of them came into contact with a very unusual organisation called INCube Inc. which was able to provide both the capital needed to help them start up their businesses and provide intensive support in setting up their companies. INCube's avowed aim is to give people with serious mental health problems a career chance. (For a full description of INCube's activities see Schwarz [1995 & 1998]) INCube supports recipients who want to start their own small business. To this end, INCube has received \$1.5m (initially for three years) to found fifteen new small businesses on behalf of New York City's Health Service Administration.

The first results of the TAP programme

In June 1998, 13 clients were accepted by the TAP programme and funded to a total of around \$190,000. So far, eleven projects have started business. One project has yet been unable to get off to a start because the client had to be transferred back to a psychiatric clinic, whilst another project was unable to start due to unforeseen legal difficulties. The eleven projects that were able to commence are all in the process of making a name for themselves, finding customers and earning their first money. It is estimated that the first TAP projects have had a turnover totalling approximately \$50,000.

Let's take **Freddy A.**'s small company as an example: we at TAP adopted him as one of our first

projects. With modest funding, we enabled him to purchase the basics he needed to put his plan into action: 'Freddy the Pillowman' produces individually made customised pillows and cushions (currently only in small lots) for friends and acquaintances. You can order pillows of your very own design – one with a personal photograph or a printed slogan or dedication are particularly in demand. Sure, Freddy isn't going to get rich this way, but he does have a monthly turnover of between \$200 and \$400 – alongside his earnings from a full-time job with Woolworth's which he was able to find during the work on his project. Although it was never the aim of our programme to help our clients find (conventional) work, we still feel that we can put this down as a success. Freddy had been unemployed for many years, yet through his work on his project was able to develop such confidence in himself that he has been able to take on this job – which he has now held down for almost a year. Nowadays he makes his pillows in the evening or at the weekend and is currently considering employing another of our clients on a part-time basis with demand for his goods increasing.

Then there is **Zev F.**, who can boast many years' experience as a professional photographer, and who had lived in South Africa for some time. After returning to his hometown of New York following divorce from his wife in South Africa, he began suffering from a major depression. He needed psychiatric treatment on a number of occasions and was unemployed for a long period. A friend told him about getting in touch with INCube when he started thinking about pursuing his old profession again. We agreed to meet his request for \$20,000 – money he needed to purchase photographic equipment of a professional standard. This way he was able to find freelance work with a reputable photographic agency specialising in wedding photography, an extremely lucrative market. In New York, this is also

a demanding job (after all, who would risk giving the photos of the 'most important day of one's life' to a novice). By now, Zev has made a good name for himself at the agency and in October he is due to take photographs at the wedding of a very wealthy New York couple, a ceremony due to take

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TABLE 1
TAP clients accepted for funding during the first year of the project

Client	Project idea
Freddy A.	Production of individual hand-made pillows
Sy and Barbara B.	Audio cassettes for people with impaired vision
Chris C.	CB radio programme for people with mental health problems
Luis D.	Trading and street sales
Margaret E.	Marketing underwear for ladies with a 'fuller figure'
Zev F.	Wedding photography
Gerda G.	Albert Associates Inc. – Graphic Design
James and Rose I.	Club Promise Inc. Alcohol-free club
Stuart J.	Peak Enterprises Inc. Marketing computers and photocopiers
Paul K.	17th century 'Living History' – Reproduction of objects from the 17th century, merchandising, as well as lectures on life in America during the colonial era
Adele L.	Shtern Design – Design and marketing of luxury art post cards

place in Bermuda. At present he has a turnover of around \$1,000 to \$1,500. Currently we are working with him on a plan to help him gradually wean himself off his dependency on state support (pension, rent allowance and medical insurance).

The next steps

The TAP Business Association (ACE – Association of Consumer Entrepreneurs) was set up with our support in the summer of 1998. Initially, the first successful TAP companies were represented in it. In the near future, the association aims to recruit more members involved in running small businesses. The aim of the organisation is to promote joint work on the further development of the companies, organise common public relations work and jointly negotiate with people who could potentially provide future orders. A further goal of the new association of recipients is to organise a conference, to be held in New York in 1999. It will involve INCube and CEFEC (the Confederation of European Firms, Employment Initiatives and Cooperatives for People with Psychosocial Disabilities) and deal with the employment of people with mental health problems.

What can be learned from the INCube and the TAP programme?

During its eight year existence, INCube has never needed to end its working relationship with one of its clients because of severe or permanent relapse into mental ill health. For this reason alone it has had a much higher rate of success than other rehabilitation programmes.

Neither can INCube staff be described as 'elite clients' – diagnoses such as major endogenous depression or serious psychotic disturbances of the personality are characteristic of the majority of my colleagues. One colleague was 'treated' no less than eighteen times with electric shocks during the course of his numerous spells in hospital – the head of the workshop for the disabled where he worked for many years certified that he would never again be able to carry out a 'real job'. Admittedly, this colleague is maybe sometimes slower than others but this does not signify by any means that he is less intelligent. He can work just as well as the others when he has found his own niche and when the working environment is right.

So what does all this mean for clients on our programmes? In my view, there are three factors that make INCube unique:

Without a doubt, INCube staff serve as positive role models for our clients. The mere fact that clients, when they first come to us, are being supervised by people who had been in the same position as themselves at one time motivates to a degree that should not be underestimated. It encourages clients to trust in their own capabilities and – in spite of all the failures of the past – to give it one more try.

INCube is a place where each client is first of all taken seriously, whereas traditional agencies in the vocational rehabilitation sector all too often tend to work for their clients rather than with them. In the process, clients with ‘crazy’ ideas are sadly often left behind. Thus a potential remains untapped that can frequently be of unforeseeable and inestimable value.

Further important elements of INCube’s philosophy are the concepts of ‘informed choice’ and ‘ownership’. This means that we do not work (in the sense of ‘care’) for our clients, instead we work on their behalf in the same way as a modern service agency providing a service, which is only able to survive in the marketplace by keeping its customers satisfied – by providing the best service performance and quality possible. We have concentrated on handing our clients the instruments they need so that they can put their own ideas into practice. What is decisive in the whole process is the question of just who has the final say. Ideally, our clients are always the proprietors and managers of their own projects – projects that are aimed at their own rehabilitation at and through work. We help them gain the confidence in themselves that they need in order to take control over their own lives. Initially, this way of working may be more expensive than more traditional methods. However, in the long run, it can also release potential that would never otherwise have been used and which may well represent the big difference between long-term success or failure.

Summary and concluding remarks

Without a doubt, the TAP programme represents one of the most innovative and unusual approaches in the whole field of vocational rehabilitation for people with mental health problems. The programme offers all the elements needed so that people with mental health

problems can become independent small business people. This combination of financial support, advice, training and further education has proved itself to be very successful during the first year of the programme.

INCube originally planned setting up a total of fifteen small businesses during the TAP programme’s three-year life-time. Already eleven projects have started up, and a further eight projects are due to start operating during the second year. The eleven companies founded during year one have now largely overcome their initial financial problems and are beginning to establish themselves in the marketplace and start earning money.

In addition, it was planned to work together with another 30 clients and offer them advice and further education. Now we are having our work cut out to do justice to our applicants, who at the last count numbered 130.

The overwhelmingly positive feedback that the TAP programme has received makes clear that it is meeting a great need. It also shows that there is a not to be underestimated interest among people with mental health problems in becoming self-employed and taking their careers in their own hands.

Becoming self-employed and setting up a company of one’s own is surely not the ideal option for most people with mental health problems, although it might seem tempting for many, in view of the difficulties of finding a suitable job within the ‘conventional’ labour market. On the other hand, it does not represent the ideal step for most members of the ‘normal population’ either to take on the risk of self-employment and the work involved. What the TAP programme makes startlingly obvious is that every person, whether suffering from psychosocial problems or not, should at least have the chance to pursue this goal and in the process receive such assistance as is necessary.

References

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- Schwarz, G. (1998) INCube Inc. and the TAP Programme. *A Life in the day*, **2** (3) 6–11.