

A Training Centre Changes with the Times – Institutional Self-Sufficiency and Challenging Jobs for People with Physical Disabilities in India

The Challenge

A model of originality and self-sufficiency as early as the 1960s, WORTH Trust's impressive work rehabilitation facility initially trained and employed people with disabilities, targeting those affected by Hansen's disease (leprosy). At a time when public shunning was common, WORTH purposely integrated people with Hansen's disease into its training programmes to try to address the discrimination. In addition, WORTH's unique approach called for creating a pool of workers with high-demand skills and thus break down stigmas and hiring barriers. Demand for training at WORTH rapidly outpaced capacity.

As time went on, WORTH created two more training centres and four more production units. Demand increased for WORTH's precision metal items as well as for its training and workers. But markets and demand change over time. How does an organization relied on by hundreds of people maintain its success and self-sufficiency over decades? How can it help people with disabilities move into the active labour force in a country where 80 per cent of job seekers fail to find jobs?

Meeting the Challenge

To maintain its success, WORTH found that it had to keep pace with the marketplace and change with the times. Though it needed to remain flexible, it also needed to adhere to the solid business principles and training practices that had led to its initial success. The formula seemed to work.

Consequently, it made dramatic change. WORTH switched from manufacturing once highly marketable metal items to fabricating less costly plastic objects. In addition, it dropped some skills development courses and added others, including, somewhat recently, a computer course featuring training in English and, in response to female trainees, a course in secretarial practices. At the same time, WORTH brought open-market conditions to its production centres. It is integrating its workplace in reverse by hiring some nondisabled workers. It pays good wages, provides benefits and facilitates workers' inclusion in mainstream community life by offering loans to help build homes and independence.

The Good Practice: Self-sufficient vocational training and work programmes based on sound business and rehabilitation principles and responsive to changing market demands.



• Background •

In 1963, the Swedish Red Cross started a Rehabilitation Industry Workshop in India that offered vocational training for people with disabilities caused by Hansen's disease. It also provided educational and corrective medical services. By 1970, the rehabilitation workshop started operating independently of the Swedish Red Cross and changed its name to WORTH Trust.

WORTH still provides counselling, outreach and physiotherapy to assist children with disabilities and their parents at no cost. Since the 1960s, it has operated a residential transitional school for children age four to eight years. The facility prepares young people to move into regular schools. More than 600 children with disabilities have undergone rehabilitation in the transitional facility and have moved into mainstream schools. WORTH also provides educational assistance, such as tuition or fees, to children of its trainees. In 1976, WORTH enacted a scheme to identify children with disabilities in need of assistance who could benefit from early intervention for physical, educational and social rehabilitation. In schools in the Indian state where WORTH is located, all children, whether or not enrolled in school, receive a free midday meal. Workers involved in the meal distribution have been trained to identify and report children with disabilities. WORTH then offers counselling to parents to help them understand the child's disability and the services available to them.

In 1973, WORTH adapted to the massive demand for its vocational training services and opened a Technical Training Centre and a production centre. Production managers imported high-precision machines to fabricate metal components that were in great demand for the manufacture of typewriters, calculators, automobiles, motorcycles and bicycles. To meet the production requirements of WORTH's several contracts, production managers hired disabled workers from outside sources as well as graduates of WORTH's vocational training programmes. The work required skilled labourers, and the WORTH training filled a large void.

When it started, WORTH's vocational training was of a higher quality than that provided by several mainstream vocational training centres. Companies that purchased parts made by WORTH's production centres began to hire into their regular workforce WORTH's skilled and well-disciplined employees with disabilities.

The same period saw an enormous demand for wheelchairs and tricycles, which were not then produced in India. WORTH designed and tested devices suitable for the local terrain and then started another production centre to produce assistive devices at an affordable price. Within the decade, WORTH built two more training centres to reach more people interested in its training services. WORTH courses are taught in line with the national curriculum standards. Graduates receive certificates recognized by the Government's education ministry.

Today, WORTH Trust operates three technical training centres, five production centres and two training centres offering instruction in computer and office skills. The income of the production centres finances all training, education, medical and operational expenses.

"Technically, the production centres are factories," explains Antony Samy, WORTH director. But Mr. Samy notes that the centres operate like a mainstream business. "We don't want to be dependent on the Government or the public," he says. "It is possible for people with disabilities to stand on their own." WORTH has been operating "on its own" for nearly four decades and is still going strong. "We're a well-run facility that changes with the times," adds Mr. Samy.

• WORTH's Programmes •

The training programme. WORTH offers two types of training:

- Formal training, which is a two-year programme, follows the Government's National Council for Vocational Training syllabus. Courses prepare trainees for jobs as machinists, lathe operators, welders or electronic technicians. Graduates receive a certificate demonstrating that they are qualified for employment in Government or the private sector.
- Informal training, which is also a two-year programme, for those who have not completed high school. Graduates do not receive a certificate. Skills are taught in welding, machine operation, electronics repair and basic computer use.

The training takes place in both classrooms and training workshops, depending on the skill. Both formal and informal programmes include on-the-job instruction in the WORTH production centres. In keeping with the Government's guidelines, the curriculum is organized around 60 per cent practical work and 40 per cent theory. Course enrolment never exceeds 16 people. Of the students in each course, five to eight are female.

Trainees with all types of physical disabilities in both programmes can stay in WORTH hostels at no charge, and the training is tuition-free. As already noted, production centre profits cover costs.

Production centres. Trainees and full-time workers in WORTH Trust production centres earn salaries comparable to those offered in open employment. WORTH bids in the open market for its contracts and must deliver professional-quality service to maintain those contracts. Therefore, demonstration of a strong work ethic, equal to what would be expected in a mainstream factory, is required of all WORTH employees. Production workers who are not WORTH trainees live in the community with their families and commute to the WORTH facility.

In addition to high-precision parts, WORTH makes and sells assistive devices on a nonprofit basis or donates them. Devices include wheelchairs, tricycles, abacuses and geometry sets for blind children, canes, pocket-sized plastic Braille slates and medicine pill boxes for elderly people and people with visual disabilities. In collaboration with the US-based Perkins company, production centre workers assemble Braille typewriters for export to the United States. The “Brailers” are made available at a highly subsidized price in India and other developing countries.

Wages. WORTH pays competitive salaries but could, because of its successful business, pay higher wages. Staff have opted for a system of remuneration that is fair to employees, though at a level that encourages them to seek open employment.

Worker representation. At one production centre, workers have organized a labour union; at the other four centres, Work Committees represent employee interests and provide a forum for discussing grievances or other issues with workshop management.

Job placement and support. In India’s environment of high unemployment for all types of workers, WORTH trainees find that, despite their skills, it is difficult to secure open employment. WORTH helps employees through a placement service that makes individual contact with potential employers. In addition, WORTH delivers business development training and provides information about where to apply for credit. Some trainees, such as those with welding skills, open their own shops.

Housing loans. To encourage the integration of workers into local communities, WORTH provides loans at very low interest rates for the purchase of land and construction of a house. Depending on a worker’s situation, the loans are repayable over a long period.

Training for trainers. WORTH provides training to trainers and managers from India and abroad who are interested in upgrading or starting training centres and production workshops for people with disabilities. The training for trainers takes place in the same courses offered to people with disabilities, thereby providing trainers-to-be with additional insights into various types of disabilities.

Advocacy. To help promote disability rights, especially with regard to employment, WORTH supports the lobbying activities of activist groups. In addition, it conducts seminars for government workers on the needs for accessibility and enforcement of policies affecting people with disabilities.

• How WORTH Changes with the Times •

Training courses in the 1960s focused on machine and lathe operations, welding and mechanical drafting. In the 1980s, WORTH discontinued the mechanical draftsman course in response to reduced demand for drafting services. By keeping in touch with market demands through employers, customers and former trainees, WORTH staff keep abreast of the market relevance of its training courses and make adaptations as needed. For example, WORTH added the electronics repair course in 1986 when staff recognized that the influx of electronic goods would mean the constant need for repair. Recently, in response to gender needs, the Rotary Club of Madras funded WORTH's addition of a basic computer skills course to broaden trainees' employment possibilities. Many of WORTH's female participants are interested in developing computer and office skills as well as skills in electronics repair. Teaching computer and secretarial skills along with English competency opens up employment options in small offices.

In its production centres, WORTH initially invested in the manufacture of brass and steel components, but as the costs of brass and similar metals increased during the 1990s, market demand shifted to plastic parts. In addition, technology improvements demanded greater "tolerance," or accuracy, in the dimensions of components. The companies contracting with WORTH, for example, needed components with highly refined tolerances beyond the capability of WORTH's traditional machines. To meet the shifting demand for cheaper but more sophisticated parts, WORTH invested in expensive computer-controlled injection moulding machines to make plastic component parts with high tolerance.

Accomplishments

WORTH Trust's accomplishments are significant. It is the only vocational training facility in India that covers its own costs and earns a surplus that supports its outreach and training activities. Each of WORTH's five production centres employs up to 50 people with disabilities, though not all the workers have participated in the vocational training programme. Its production workforce of almost all disabled workers is testimony to the abilities of people with disabilities.

WORTH production centres succeed in a highly competitive, global marketplace. Two of the five production centres have achieved ISO 9002 certification, which tells prospective buyers that the centres' products meet international standards and are suitable for export.

In April 2000, WORTH conducted a survey of the 1,174 people it trained since 1973. The results were significant in terms of long-term impact on employment, as the following data indicate:

- 852 (72 per cent) had factory jobs;
- 48 (4 per cent) had government jobs;
- 42 (4 per cent) were self-employed; and
- 232 (20 per cent) were unemployed or their status was unknown.

Lessons Learned

WORTH's four decades of vocational training experience and three decades of production centre experience yield valuable insights for people or organizations thinking about developing similar programmes. Some of the important lessons include:

Counselling services for trainees add a vital support ingredient to a programme. Guidance and counselling services assist people with disabilities in making appropriate employment choices that are in line with market realities.

A centre must change its curriculum with the times. While it is critical to know the market when setting up a centre or vocational training programme, it is essential to track trends constantly. Shifts in technology, for example, make some skills obsolete. If employment options for a skill decline, a programme needs to drop the affected training course and replace it with one that leads to employment.

A profitable production centre needs managers who understand the competitive market. Many well-meaning individuals who do not understand business nonetheless operate training and work centres. A good manager must see the production centre as an independent business competing in the open market. The centre must deliver high-quality products and service if it is to survive.

A production centre must be located near its market. It is often cheaper but imprudent to locate far away from customers, business hubs or the marketplace. If a centre locates itself some distance from its market or where products are to be delivered, it may not make its deliveries on time. With a few missed deliveries, a centre is likely to lose customers. Cost cutting is important, but not at the expense of maintaining customer contact and service.

A reliable power source is crucial. In developing countries, power is not always dependable. If telephones or fax machines shut down as a result of a power outage and a company is unable to communicate with its subcontractor, customers may go elsewhere. If a centre is located in an area that experiences any level of power cuts, it should plan for a continuous power supply by investing in a generator. The generator should be of sufficient strength to handle the peak hours of operation.

Looking Forward

WORTH intends to use more of its earnings for sensitizing the public about people with disabilities. It also plans to expand its outreach service to children and adults with disabilities and their family members. The goal is to provide more assistance to people with disabilities to help them reach their maximum potential in education, social life and employment.

WORTH intends to expand its line of assistive devices to include more products that support the education and employment of persons with disabilities. In addition, WORTH is researching potential products that fulfil the needs of India's increasing number of older people, such as better-quality wheelchairs, tricycles and chair lifts. It plans to continue to share its knowledge in production and product development with other organizations around the world, especially for devices targeted to people with disabilities. It is currently working with the ILO to train workshop personnel in Africa in wheelchair production techniques. It also plans to partner with the ILO in Asia and the Pacific toward similar ends.

Replication

Over the years, WORTH has provided training and employment for hundreds of people with disabilities. In the process, it has proven that production centres that employ people with disabilities can be successful and even generate surplus income, thus making funds available for other purposes. While many organizations may try to replicate WORTH's successes, most will attest to the difficulty of mounting a programme on the scale of WORTH. "Most people who plan to start a rehabilitation venture want to start big," notes Mr. Samy. "What they admire is something big and modern. They may not realize that such centres started humbly and grew over time."

The WORTH model and its success have been almost four decades in the making. In addition, WORTH relies heavily on local market opportunities and therefore belies direct replication. However, its highly industrial and market-driven approach to training and production has a great deal to offer. Even in an era of community-based and integrated employment trends, the realities of many countries suggest, first, that well-run productions centres like WORTH Trust can provide decent work alternatives for many

people with disabilities and, second, that certificate and trade-based training opens the door to good jobs.

Many self-help groups and cooperatives of people with disabilities aspire to the financial and production success of workshops such as WORTH, as do organizations in developing countries that want to manufacture wheelchairs and assistive devices. In the training programmes it offers to such groups, WORTH suggests the following considerations in replicating its approach:

- Realize that many rehabilitation ventures that are wide-ranging and modern started small.
- Remember that a market survey is essential to understanding what items are saleable and whether they can be manufactured within a certain country or region. Automotive parts, for example, are not in demand everywhere.
- Consider renting rather than constructing buildings at the outset of a programme. It is usually more economical. When the organization and business grow, the programme can construct a building based on real rather than imagined needs.
- Invest in capital goods, such as machinery, only after undertaking the required cost analysis. When such purchases are necessary, it is advisable to purchase (or even import) top-quality machines. Good machines that are reliable, durable and capable of producing high-quality products are cost-effective in the long run – if cost analysis supports their long-term use.
- Do not shift to the production of high-end products until the low-technology business base is secure. Upgrade technology regularly.
- Devote attention to location. Access to raw materials and markets for finished products cannot be ignored.
- Upgrade the skills of workers and constantly train supervisory and management staff. Time and resources must always be made available for human resource development, especially for staff who assume ultimate responsibility for quality and customer satisfaction.



[For More Information](#)

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