

From Illiterate to Computer Smart – Trainees with Physical Disabilities Learn Sophisticated Skills to Find Work and Help Society in Thailand

The Challenge

In the early 1980s when Father Raymond Brennan, a Catholic priest living in Thailand, travelled around the country, he took notice of people with disabilities. They were not hard to miss – many were on the streets begging. Father Brennan asked himself repeatedly, “Why can’t they get jobs?” The few training programmes available to people with disabilities focused only on simple skills. Challenging jobs were difficult to find. In Thailand, few employment opportunities existed that would allow people with disabilities to support themselves and their families. Father Brennan wondered what he could do to develop training opportunities that would lead to decent jobs for people with disabilities.

Meeting the Challenge

Father Brennan decided that technology training was the answer. Even in the early 1980s, he could see that computers would become indispensable features of the workplace. He had no experience in running any type of school, but he charged forward. His programme grew from short summer courses to a small, year-round school for about 40 students and then to its present facility known as the Redemptorist Vocational School for the Disabled. It currently houses and trains about 240 people with physical disabilities in a two-year programme offering advanced computer skills as well as electronics repair. The enrolment includes individuals from the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Cambodia and Bangladesh. Two people from Myanmar will join the training thanks to a Honda Motor Workers’ Union sponsorship. In 1999, the school added a job placement service in partnership with the Government for all people with disabilities, whether or not they study at the school.

The Good Practice: Vocational training in advanced technology that prepares people with disabilities for today’s high-demand jobs.



• Background •

Father Brennan and a staff of three people started a small school and, along the way, learned how to build a vocational training centre. On the site of Father Brennan's church in the beach resort town of Pattaya (two hours drive southeast of Bangkok) was a wooden retreat centre that accommodated 50 people. In 1984, Father Brennan joined forces with the Association of the Physically Handicapped of Thailand to offer a short basic computer course to people with physical disabilities. He sought donations to pay two instructors and to buy needed equipment and software. He then solicited funds to build a modest facility with classrooms and a dormitory for year-round training sessions. Progress was swift; by 1987, the Redemptorist church launched its formal two-year school programme for 23 students with physical disabilities. Father Brennan's vision kept expanding. By 1995, the Redemptorist centre had built a five-story structure with classrooms, a dining room and a dormitory for the male students. The female students continue to use the original centre, though a larger dormitory will be constructed for them in 2004.

• The Redemptorist Training Programme •

Courses. The Redemptorist centre's skills training programme in computer programming, e-commerce, computer and business management, Web design and all types of electronics repair runs for one to two years. "Father Brennan wanted the courses to be progressive and move beyond typical basic skills," says Supornthum Mongkolsawadi, who, having lost both his legs, attended the Redemptorist school as a trainee and is now its principal. "Electronic repair skills were offered as an option so people could return to their village and open a shop if they wanted," he adds.

The school year is divided into two semesters of five months each, and students attend class six days a week. The instructors are mostly former students with disabilities who returned after working in mainstream employment for several years. Some were employed in software development companies, hotel administration and electronics shops.

Applicants. The maximum class size is 20 students. Each year brings far more applicants than available places. Applicants must have a physical disability and be 17 to 35 years old. For computer courses, they must have a ninth grade education and for electronics repair, a sixth grade education. Students pay their own transportation costs to the school. Courses, food and lodging are free. Only students studying computer programming need to purchase their own computer. To help them, the school provides low-interest loans with a three-year payback period. The school awards each electronics repair student a set of tools upon graduation.

The Redemptorist centre now has a policy to recruit women more actively – female students currently make up about 20 per cent of total enrolment.

English training. The curriculum has included teaching English since the opening of the school, but, as the school staff searched the classified advertisements for employment opportunities for its students during the 1990s, they noticed a high demand for English-language computer skills. Consequently, the curriculum adapted to the market and in 2000 added a two-year-course in computer and business management taught in English.

Ethics and social responsibility. All subjects incorporate the teaching of life skills and good citizenship. In addition, a Buddhist monk visits the school once a month to speak about ethical issues. The purpose is to instil in students a sense of service to society, explains Mr. Mongkolsawadi. To graduate with a computer certificate, students must write a software programme or create a project for the benefit of a community organization. Previous beneficiaries include the district education office and the local government tourist office. The service component of the curriculum follows the Redemptorist philosophy that the church helps people to help others. The school, says Mr. Mongkolsawadi, “enables people with disabilities to support themselves and society.”

Nonformal education. For students who want to continue their education, the school makes nonformal classes available with a curriculum that follows Ministry of Education standards.

• Other Services Available •

Job placement. During the 1998 economic downturn, the Redemptorist staff observed that many workers with disabilities were losing their jobs. Graduates also needed help in finding employers open to hiring workers with disabilities. In 1999, the school added a job placement service in partnership with the provincial government employment agency. Three Redemptorist placement officers and support staff provide job listings and maintain a database of job candidates who are either the school's graduates or other disabled people who register with the service. Companies needing workers turn to the database. A provincial employment officer plans to set up a desk in the job placement office at the Redemptorist school to assist people further in finding jobs.

Assistance programme. Any person with a disability can use the school's assistance service for self-employment, vocational counselling, advice on further education or skills training required for certain jobs and referrals for medical treatment.

Vocational counselling camps. The job placement service operates a mobile unit that travels around central Thailand about three times a year setting up “vocational counselling camps” at fairs and community activities for people with disabilities. The school works with other organizations, such as self-help groups of disabled persons, provincial employment offices and social welfare agencies. During the three-day camp, placement counsellors meet with disabled people and offer vocational training

information as well as an evaluation of potential skills. The counsellors provide interested people with advice on job-searching skills as well as with self-employment information, such as how to run a small business and obtain a start-up loan. If a person is interested in a skill not taught at the Redemptorist school, the counsellors will write letters for enrolment to a relevant training programme on that person's behalf.

Awareness raising among employers. Placement staff frequently reach out to chambers of commerce or employer organizations in different communities to encourage their members to hire workers with disabilities. As well, school staff visit individual companies to encourage them to give people with disabilities a chance to prove themselves.

The school sponsors employer seminars twice a year to work on changing attitudes within the business community. The seminars focus on Thailand's disability law, how to employ people with disabilities and the benefits of hiring disabled workers. The programmes feature case studies and include field trips to workplaces with disabled employees.

Accomplishments

Supornthum Mongkolsawadi, the school's principal, believes that teamwork on the part of staff and students is the Redemptorist school's most significant accomplishment. "There is a strong willingness among everyone to make the programme succeed," he says.

Since 1988, the school has boasted a 100 per cent placement rate. If people do not find a job easily, they find employment with the school until a job in the open market becomes available. The school did not implement any follow-up system until 1999; accordingly, the data to date on employed graduates' retention rates are insufficient. Nonetheless, considering that most students had not completed high school when they arrived, the placement rate is considered a remarkable achievement.

The total programme (vocational school and placement service) has helped more than 820 people with disabilities (200 of whom are women) find jobs in the 2000-2003 period. The placements include jobs in hotels, travel agencies, electronics shops and computer programming companies. Starting salaries of those employed range from 6,000 baht to 10,000 baht (US\$142 to \$238) monthly, which is comparable to salaries in the government sector offered to mainstream graduates with bachelor's degrees.

One Student's Story

My name is Kodhawe Khattiyot, and I am 23 years old and was born without feet. When I reached the third grade, the school provided me with a specially designed vehicle that moved by cranking a handle back and forth. I wanted so much to continue my studies, realizing that I would be of little help to my parents if I remained at home. I enrolled at a junior high school about five kilometres from home. Sometimes on the way to school, my cranking vehicle would slip into the ditch. I had to get off and on to my hands and knees to push it out.

For high school, I applied to a boarding school. The teacher in charge was afraid to accept me, but the principal was kind to give me a chance. I was the only disabled student in the school. I felt so lonely and so discouraged. There were no facilities for a disabled person. The building was three stories high. Classes were on different floors. My knees were hurting so badly and became swollen. It became almost unbearable.

Before graduation, I was confused – no where to turn, no one to consult. I wrote to the Centre for the Career Rehabilitation for the Disabled in Chiang Mai. I was accepted and went to further my studies. There, I was given a pair of special shoes. I was able to commute and to go anywhere all by myself. While at that centre, I learned about the Redemptorist Vocational School for the Disabled; I applied to study computer science with an emphasis on computer programming and was accepted.

After I graduated, I worked in freelance Web design with a pediatrician at Bangkok Pattaya Hospital to create a site called Thaibaby.com. The job allowed me to work from home. The income was not regular as it was based on task work. I applied for a job at the company where my husband works. I was hired in January 2002 in the financial section. My salary, together with general benefits, is equivalent to what other graduates with bachelor's degrees earn. I still take on freelance Web design jobs, but with a young baby there isn't always enough time.

I am quite happy with my regular job. My husband and I rent the house we live in, and I travel to my office by wheelchair.

Lessons Learned

Given its trial-and-error beginnings, the current state of the Redemptorist programme reflects several lessons learned. Some of the more important experiences include:

A programme must keep growing. The Redemptorist school started small by linking with other organizations, but it has kept growing in response to the needs of its students and the workplace. Its new course offerings, its current emphasis on developing services for women and its outreach to students from other countries are examples of continuing growth. New programmes enhance the school's visibility and attract new donors and partners.

Reliance on people with disabilities as instructors offers several advantages. First, instructors with disabilities have real-life experiences and empower students by demonstrating what they have achieved. Students' exposure to role models is especially powerful because some students with disabilities feel that they cannot perform as well as nondisabled people. Second, some instructors with disabilities can be stricter and more demanding than instructors without disabilities. They know what their students can achieve and do not make unnecessary allowances because of disability.

A holistic approach is needed. With many students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, school officials find that a holistic approach is needed. This includes remedial education, counselling, independent living and job-searching skills and placement services to help people with disabilities move into the workplace.

Looking Forward

For the future, the Redemptorist staff would like to add an Employment Advisory Team to assist with job placement. The team would consist of employers who would work to increase awareness among other employers about the abilities of people with disabilities.

In addition, the school staff plans to incorporate assistive devices to accommodate students with severe disabilities in mastering the computer and electronic repair skills. To date, such devices have not been part of the school's teaching methods or available services.

Finally, school officials are studying the possibility of a one- to three-month "preparatory" course for nongraduates of the school. The objective would be to help people prepare for their job search, adapting to jobs and independent living. As a consequence of the vigorous recruitment of women, the school will construct a larger dormitory.

Replication

While the Redemptorist Vocational School for the Disabled is impressive in its current state of development, large sums of money are not needed at the outset to establish a similar vocational training programme. What is needed in terms of funding is ample funds to start a small course. It makes sense to use existing facilities, such as a church, school or temple, to test the environment, particularly in remote areas, and then expand as results warrant. People who start small have a better chance of succeeding than people who start with a big programme, and it is often easier to acquire financial support once a success can be demonstrated, especially in the case of services for people with disabilities. In addition, one centre does not have to do everything by itself. It is entirely reasonable to develop a network of organizations and take advantage of various connections, such as for medical rehabilitation services or other training skills. Links with other organizations can also prove strategic when requesting donor support. One service that must be coupled with skills training is job placement. Without somewhere to go, the training is nearly useless.

In short, Mr. Mongkolsawadi recommends a few important steps to be kept in mind when setting up vocational training:

- Define the situation. Determine how many people with disabilities reside in the target area, the types of disabilities they have, their educational backgrounds and so forth.
- Study the labour market. Look at employment possibilities to determine what skills could be taught. Similarly, look at opportunities in self-employment.
- Think through solutions. Select those that best help people with disabilities find placement in the market and develop a curriculum accordingly.
- Start small with one or two courses. Observe the results and expand as need warrants.

For More Information

Suporntum Mongkolsawadi
Principal
Redemptorist Vocational School for the Disabled
P.O. Box 1
Pattaya City, Chonburi 20260 Thailand
Tel: 6638-716-249, 716-247/8
Fax: 6638-716-539
E-mail: suporntum@rvsd.ac.th
Web site: www.rvsd.ac.th



For additional information:
www.flyingwheelchair.org