

Bulldozers on the loose Or, how we at malt|harms deal with barriers

At first I'd like to thank the organizers of this Forum for the opportunity to introduce ourselves and our small rehabilitation service. My name is Martina Krohn and with me is my colleague and boss, Christiane Harms. Malt|harms is a Bremen based company providing support in occupational rehabilitation and employment related fields in our part of Germany. Though founded only in June 2006, our experience goes back much further as both, Manuela Malt and Christiane Harms, have been active in this field for 15 to 20 years.

In my paper I'd like to share with you some thoughts and experiences with barriers gained during our work.

I will concentrate on our "main line", which is supporting our clients in their efforts to (re)enter into the work force. In the majority our clients are sent to us by the German Berufsgenossenschaften, the industrial injuries insurance agencies, if they suffer from an occupational disease or have recovered from a work injury. In either case: They are no longer able to stay in their former job. – and if they are burdened with additional hardships in regard to successful reintegration such as little command of the German language, low educational level or a history of long periods of unemployment they are even more likely to end up at our doorstep.

Up to here and also from then on proceedings are really rather simple. Which is why I wanted to know "why?" when my colleagues asked me to present our work here. I mean, it's just not that spectacular, I could tell you in three sentences: Client comes and stays with us for 6 months. During this time we help with his/her paperwork (letters of application, cv) and develop ideas about what (s)he wants to do and can do. Then we start looking for openings, make contacts with employers and either we do find a job or we do not. So?!

So - thinking about it – I had to admit that the above is just the theory of what we do. In our "real", our practical, work we never seem to get that case. Probably because we do not work with cases but with clients, that is: we work with – and for – people. And that might be interesting, it might be moving, it might even be fun, but it also is challenging. It needs our personal involvement and sometimes it feels as if we are working with barriers rather than with people.

We find them all around us: from our clients' side, the employers and last but not least we often come to recognize or own. Barriers.

But let's take this step by step: At first we have to face our clients' "defenses" and get behind them, as all our efforts are likely to evaporate if we don't get THEM involved. It is not enough that they do as they are told, they have to co-operate fully and whole-heartedly. We need – and want – their motivation, their active interest and especially their trust.

That's easier said than done – as our prospective clients might not be that keen. They might be frustrated, disillusioned, angry and definitely not in need of our services. Thank you very much! Or – and those are worse – they might come across as wonderfully open-minded about alternative jobs, easy-going, cooperative, even eager to embark on this journey – only to discover during the ongoing process hair after hair in every soup we try to serve. They offer perfectly rational reasons why not this and why not that and why they couldn't come last time... And before we've even noticed that we stand in front of a huge wall 3 months have passed. With us – full force – charging against barriers.

Yet, I think one of our great strengths is precisely that we are willing to do so. We run on, we put up with rejection and work to overcome refusal because we understand our client's reluctance to enter an uncertain future which also means to accept the loss of his or her former professional identity.- What for us is our daily bread to them can be threatening and frightening and spells insecurity.

Because, let's face it: The job market is not waiting for them. On the contrary for instance in our area, the north-western region of Germany, the job market still shows double digit unemployment rates and offers few opportunities for job seekers in general, much less to those restricted in any sense.

An interesting point to note is, that it is often irrelevant how severe the restriction or disability "really" is. There is no simple equation between the chance of reintegration and the severity of the disability. The crucial element is rather the client's openness, in a way his/her willingness to get on, to put the past behind and try something new.

In our cooperation, which is by the way entirely optional for our clients, we try to further

this willingness and create an open atmosphere; we hope to develop a sense of "ungeahnte Möglichkeiten" (un-dreamt of possibilities). We want to make them curious, get them interested in their future. This takes time, but with questions about their special interests, hobbies and "dreamjobs" and the focus on the things they still can do, the skills and experience they have to offer, we often manage to ignite something.

Naturally, we don't always get the result we wish for, i.e. the right job for our client. But we do our best! – And probably run directly into the next barrier! Build up by an employer.

Now, if you think clients are hard to please, wait until you hear about employers! While our clients' wants often are self-evident: like wages they need, distance they can drive I tend to find the whims and wishes of employers more difficult to tolerate; possibly because they are in a better position to turn us down. They really don't need us or our applicants! I gather you noticed: Barrier! – Barrier, in my mind. If I pick up the telephone thinking like that, I probably won't get past the receptionist. And I don't think I will be surprised! Because I know them. Employers! They want all they can get and for sure more than they need. Just consider the amazing range of requirements – often totally unrelated to the job in question: open, flexible, stress resistant, sociable, fluent in 3 languages, experienced in this and skilled in that, team worker with university education and good with pets. And I start to wonder how can all that be necessary just to knead the dough and sell the cookies. Honestly, with a list like that, I don't see David Copperfield employed in the chimney business today. Just being small gets you nowhere – and sometimes it doesn't even help if you come for free.

But before that barrier stops me, which actually does NOT solely exist in my head, I have to rein myself in and admit that even these barriers have been build up for a reason, they serve a purpose. Especially small companies are vulnerable in regard to employees. They rely on every hand – sometimes literally. If one colleague is on sick leave, the complete staff might be gone...They have little means to compensate and of course they want – as we all do – as much security as they can get. They don't want to fail and in that they are the same as our clients. And ourselves.

So we try to convince "our" employer, let's call him Mr. Bakery, that we are trustworthy partners with his best interest in mind and with an understanding of his needs. After that

we can begin to remove his prejudices – brick by brick – and show him our client as “the person he wants for a new colleague”. What we offer is an open assessment of our client's abilities plus honest information about possible weak points and how to deal with them. Once Mr. Bakery at least considers employing a worker who is only just qualified enough to do the job but not sufficiently equipped to run the bakery we try to catch him with the offer of a trial work period (usually up to one month, all expenses paid by the Berufsgenossenschaft).

Luckily enough – for us, – employers have begun to feel pressure, they worry about the cost of unmotivated or unhappy employees and on the whole some of their barriers have begun to erode. We try to be there and “scrape away” in those areas.

So much for bulldozers! Helpful as they might be, in our reality “breaking down barriers” is more a matter of mind than muscle. We have to boost, give confidence, assure and keep in mind, that barriers do protect! We might wish to walz them down but we won't get anywhere if we don't acknowledge and respect them. So instead of roaring our machines we coax and coach and hope to find the right words; words that our clients and employers feel empowered by. For all of us involved, it comes down to taking the next step, to enter new land, to learn and gain. And we believe that that is good. The right thing to do. We believe it is better to fail than to freeze and I think in this we are very convincing and compelling.

And for the record: our placement rate reads 73 %.

Thank you very much for you attention.