



WE HAD DIFFERENT PEOPLE COMING FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD TO WORK WITH US. THESE PEOPLE HAD DIFFERENT SIGN LANGUAGES, DIFFERENT AGES AND DIFFERENT NEEDS

Who in their right mind would start a business serving an “unseen minority group”? This was the question Monika Haider was asked time and again when she launched Europe’s first ever further education centre for Deaf people in 2004.

Back then, sign language wasn’t even recognised as a language in Austria. As a result, few people could understand why anyone would set up a company like equalizent – one catering specifically for the needs of Deaf people.

“They thought it was stupid,” says Monika. “It’s a very small field. Only 0.1% of the inhabitants in every county are handicapped with deafness. So you can’t have a business serving this field, it’s too small, that’s what people told me.”

But Monika was undeterred. Having worked as a social worker with Deaf people for five years, she knew her target market intimately and was acutely aware of the inadequate provisions available.

“I had already set up a very successful department in a school providing further education courses for the elderly. I was then asked to set up a new department offering courses for handicapped people.”

At this point Monika realised there were no training courses available in Austrian sign language, despite the demand. There was a gap in the market and therefore a very real business opportunity.

“I knew there was an economic opportunity and I felt it was important for this to become a business and not another institution,” she says. “So I created a spin off centre. I wanted to bridge the gap between a commercial venture and creating social impact.”

And so in March 2004 equalizent opened its doors with 12 members of staff. Within 12 months it had 10% of the Deaf people of Vienna taking classes at the centre. As well as providing further education courses in Austrian sign language, which remains the core element of the business, equalizent offered consultancy services in diversity management and began developing technical solutions for the translation and presentation of verbal and written text in sign language.

But it wasn’t all plain sailing. “We had really hard times at the beginning,” admits Monika. “Many people didn’t think we could make a viable business from the trainings so we started with diversity management. I think we were the only



MONIKA HAIDER
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

small company doing diversity management at that time – apart from us it was all large established companies.”

In order to set the business apart Monika made a critical decision – one that would go on to define the centre and make the Deaf community sit up and notice what it was doing. She made it mandatory for all employees, irrespective of their role, to be fluent in Austrian sign language.

“We are bilingual. All employees require good skills in both Austrian sign language and writing and reading. If necessary, the employees will be trained by equalizent costs. Beside the job of a trainer, where deafness is a precondition, all employees have the same career opportunities. We structure all positions in a way so that deafness is no disadvantage.” →



OVERVIEW

SECTOR
Education

FOUNDED
2004

EMPLOYEES
55

IN A NUTSHELL
With its combination of unique courses delivered entirely in sign language, and pioneering diversity management services, equalizent is empowering Deaf people around the world

TURNOVER
2015
€2,536,582
2016 (forecast)
€2,800,000
2017 (forecast)
€2,700,000

www.equalizent.com

This wasn't easy. It was a huge undertaking in fact, as there was no training and no institute to learn Austrian sign language at this time says Monika.

"We also employed some Deaf people and they needed to be trained too. They could sign but they didn't have the necessary work skills we needed. So we built up their skills and taught Austrian sign language to our hearing employees. This was a really hard time – there was a long period of investment before we could start operating fully."

For the first three years equalizent kept investing back into the business, but by year four the company broke even and made a small profit in year five. In these early years Monika was able to keep the company going thanks to relevant funding programmes and institutions.

"We made big efforts to sell our new products to public institutions for people with disabilities. Every year we have to convince them about the quality and improvement of our trainings. We also participated in calls for proposals for funds from the European Union.

"That was the first step and to some extent we are continuing down this path."

The company received a major boost very early on when it was awarded the European Seal for Innovative Language Projects in December 2004.

This was fundamental to the centre's early success says Monika, as it added credibility while providing fantastic PR for the organisation. For the team it was a major milestone: proof that equalizent was on the path to success.

If applications were the first step, the next one was providing training courses for hearing people, which they knew could sell, while the team developed the courses for Deaf people. The diversity management consultancy part of the business was also up and running from the word go.

"We spent a lot of time running different workshops and examining what the needs were for Deaf people. We had different people coming from all over the world to work with us. These people had different sign languages, different ages and different needs. We needed these focus groups so we could develop the right products for our target groups – Deaf people and businesses.

One such product is the Diversity Score Card: a tool used by equalizent to recognise the talents, skills and personal needs of employees and other relevant stakeholders, such as the wider Deaf community and public funding organisations.

The Diversity Score Card tool has since been rolled out and used by other companies in the form of the diversity.management.Tool! – a specially designed toolkit for SMEs. In 2017 Monika and the team hope to introduce the tool to companies across Europe. The business has its sights set on Israel, Germany and even France – countries where the sign language used is close to that used in Austria.

In many respects, equalizent is already an international organisation. It has been developing and broadcasting its courses via webinars and video since 2009. The centre's very name – equalizent – is an amalgamation of "Electronic Qualification Centre" and was "given to the company" by the Deaf people using the centre says Monika.

And then there's the Diversity Ball, which welcomes around 2,000 people every year. The ticketed event has grown to become one of the largest events in Vienna says Monika, and welcomes people of all ages, gender, sexual orientation, abilities and religion.





“It’s a unique, colourful, barrier-free party full of verve and respect for human diversity.

The Diversity Ball connects different worlds and turns society on its head. We put a spotlight on diversity, making it visible while staging a unique night characterised by inclusion and the contagious joy of life.”

The ball has been so successful there are plans to make it even bigger. equalizent is currently in talks with Europride – the pan-European international event that’s dedicated to LGBTIQ pride and hosted by a different European city each year.

“They want to be part of the Diversity Ball,” explains Monika. “So we’re growing in different ways, there’s lots of networking happening!”

With their sights set on expanding out into wider Europe, there’s a lot more networking to come too. Monika has ambitions to franchise out the centre’s model into countries like Germany, Israel and France.

“All the benchmarks show a constant growth. We started with 12 employees and now have 55, and the annual turnover has increased constantly. So now is the time for the next step. We are ready to go into Europe and show our ideas, concepts, and quality of training”.

As a result the team is busy developing new training tools for its European cousins to use so that new centres can be set up based on equalizent’s materials, methods, know-how and experiences.

“We are convinced that our work is helping to change the personal and working lives of Deaf people significantly. We want to grow it as much as we can,” says Monika.



LEARNING POINTS

BELIEVE, BELIEVE AND BELIEVE: Had Monika listened to the naysayers she would never have started equalizent. It was her belief in her mission, and the support from those who also believed that drove her. “You have to have faith in what you’re doing,” says Monika.

DIVERSIFY: As well as provide further education courses in sign language, equalizent has diversified its offering by selling diversity management consultancy services through the diversity.management.Tool! – a specially designed tool kit for SMEs.

LISTEN TO YOUR CUSTOMERS: Before becoming fully operational, Monika and the team held a large number of workshops and consulted members of the Deaf community to be sure they were developing the right products for the community – products that would have a real and lasting impact.