

MAJKA, CO-OWNER OF „LEŻĘ I PRACUJĘ” (I AM IN BED AND I WORK) MARKETING AGENCY

Did you know people with disabilities before you met Artur?

Not really. I was more interested in global problems like famine and poverty. I wrote my master's thesis in economics on it. I had never done anything in the area of disability. I knew people with disabilities people but Artur's situation is special, as he is tetraplegic who needs to lie in bed for most of the time.



Photo: <http://www.lezeipracuje.pl/>

What is the legal form of your enterprise?

At the beginning I was self-employed and we were operating within my firm, and from October we have transformed into a foundation. The legal form of a social enterprise can vary from a sole proprietorship through a social cooperative to an association or a foundation. We chose a foundation because it was the best option for what we wanted to do. Also as far as image goes, a foundation is much more trustworthy than, for example, a social cooperative, which usually makes people think of a cooperative of the people with disabilities (“spółdzielnia inwalidów” in Polish). And we don't want that. A legal form determines a decision making process and management procedures. A foundation suited us best.

Did you have a business experience before that?

I have my own brand of ties. Bunta – floral ties made of Polish linen. It was more of a hobby than a serious business. I expected to sell a lot of ties but I was proven wrong. However I have business experience since I've worked for two marketing agencies and one PR agency.

What was a challenge for you?

The greatest challenge are my own limitations – I'm not perfect. On one hand I know something, I have some strengths and experience and you can see the results of my work but on the other hand I'm not a good teacher. Besides we work with people who have never worked, who have neither specific education nor experience. Marketing agencies usually employ a professional copywriter, graphic designer and a social media ninja who run at least 10 fan pages, but for us it's a challenge. We need to read a lot and make improvements.

What's your solution?

We're still looking for an efficient organizational model for our vision is “Better life for people with

paralysis". We have been thinking of a social franchising-that each region would have one fully-fit manager who would manage five to ten employees with disabilities. Now we moved to the idea to support other employers in employing people with disabilities. We believe that instead of employing 100 people it is better to inspire and support 100 employers so that each of them hires at least 1 person. In this way we will have greater impact on systemic change.

Are there social enterprises in other countries? Have you checked that?

We've searched the Internet, though not in all languages, of course. The world of social enterprise is still small but we haven't found a similar agency to ours, yet. So I dare to think that we're the first marketing agency that was set up to give jobs to paralysed people. We're not saying that no other agencies employ such people, of course they do, but in our case that was the reason we started the enterprise. Giving jobs to people with disabilities was our „why". A „why" in the sense Simon Sinek, marketing consultant and motivational speaker, uses it. In this sense we're one of a kind.

What did you learn?

Formalities take time- I'm learning how to trust, how to be patient and how to be positive. I'm learning not to dwell on difficulties but move forward. My co-workers teach me humility and make me reflect on what I'm doing. To give you an example, Nikola, who's 19, has a 4-month old baby and spinal muscular atrophy, works from 9 p.m till midnight writing posts to ensure a better future for herself and looks after her son during the day. It would be hard for her to find a different job in her situation. Such stories make me feel so grateful for everything I have.



Did you get any financial or expertise support from other people or institutions?

We started with nothing but once the foundation's been registered we will get our first money to create new jobs. Our adventure with „Leżę i pracuję" started when I went to a training "Active Citizens for Social Enterprise" done by British Council and FISE, The Foundation for Social and Economic Initiatives.

Social enterprise as a model of working and earning money is still little known, especially among young people. Older people remember social cooperatives, which are nowhere near being strong brands. „Leżę i pracuję" and other organizations such as Fundacja Łąka or Agencja Społeczna Gerere are a breath of fresh air. I think that the popularity of „Leżę i pracuję" proves that there are still few people who combine helping with creativity and business. People generally cheer us on

and I've never come across any signs of spite or envy.

Our aim is to give a job that is interesting. Of course, not everyone wants a super creative and intellectually stimulating job. It's supposed to be something more than assembling pens or some other routine monotonous work. The whole team is taking English lessons now. Soon we will start to set our goals. I'm fascinated with Value Fulfilment Theory of Well-Being, which allows you to identify your values and act according to them in order to experience a state of well being. My plan for „Leżę i pracuję” is to achieve the vision of better quality of life for paralised people through fulfilling their values. Each employee will identify what is the most important for them. For Nikola it is her child so she needs a job that will help her to organize her life around it. And we support her in it. For Artur it is a trip to Arizona, which on one hand is very difficult in his condition but on the other hand it his value, his way to achieve fulfilment. So we aim at supporting these values and our work is a means and a tool to realize them. It's also a means of getting funds for a day-to-day running of the business. But it's not just about money. Work organizes your life: you have to get up in the morning, get down to work and you appreciate your free time more.

What kind of help do social enterprises set up in Poland by young people need?

There are quite a few organizations that support social entrepreneurship in Poland but their aimed at older generation. To the best of my knowledge there is no business incubator for young people that want to do something in this area. Today I posted an article on Facebook from "Stanford Social Innovation Review" which brings up the importance of early stage financing at of social enterprises of young people. There's not enough support for young people, who are not „spoilt” by the old way of thinking.

I dream about getting to the top and having a significant influence on this line of business. But to be trustworthy you need to have something to your credit. First, I'd like to have two or three enterprises doing well and then I could start supporting others. One day I would like to set up a Polish branch of a social entrepreneurship school.

What kind of support do you need at this stage?

I'm convinced that supporting leadership is crucial. If a leader is well prepared, cares about his or her own development and learns new techniques, everyone benefits. It's top-down. It's not that I don't believe in bottom-up initiatives but leadership is a key to success.

„Leżę i pracuję” is our baby, mine and Artur's. If it hadn't been for either of us it would have never worked out. Everyone brings in something different. It's a joint success. Artur was an inspiration and a face and I had knowledge, experience and ideas. If we were just a foundation helping people with disabilities, we could do the same thing but no one would ever hear about us and we wouldn't be influential. That's why I believe that social entrepreneurs need support in developing their leadership skills and social competences. Mentoring as a regular and structured practice would be a good idea. I need someone who would look at my business from a different angle and tell me where I go wrong and what I could do better. Someone who would be in touch to monitor my work. I'm lucky to have a colleague in one of the offices I work in who's more experienced and lets me pick her brains.

So it's not about support to set up an enterprise but to develop it?

Yes. And it's not about meeting up once in a while. The meetings, or phone calls, need to be regular. A mentor should be like a guardian angel who would keep tabs on things. I think it could be a great help for young social entrepreneurs.