



MBA STUDENT EXPERIENCES AT A VENTURE PHILANTHROPY FUND

CASE STUDY NOABER FOUNDATION

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This is one of a series of papers which explores how business schools and their students or alumni can work with venture philanthropy funds in ways that benefit both. In each case, the intern or consultant applies skills learned seminars and lectures to a particular task for a venture philanthropy fund. Both parties discuss the experience and highlight what they learned, how they benefited and what challenges they had to confront.

The papers are published under the aegis of the EVPA Knowledge Centre and are part of its commitment to provide relevant and accessible research and information to EVPA members and the venture philanthropy community in Europe.

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- acts as the virtual hub for all exchange relating to the practice and study of VP;
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- nurtures, develops and disseminates the practical knowledge of VP through publications and training courses.

THE TASK

Noaber had adopted the SROI method for performance measurement and with fellow EVPA members, d.o.b. foundation and Scholten and Franssen, developed a social evaluator tool so that applicants for investment and donation could carry out an SROI analysis for themselves. They wanted both to evaluate to what extent organisations would be able to do this and a baseline for their existing portfolio and, as these were already investments, and therefore had limited incentive to comply, they offered them help to explain the value of social performance measurement, educate them on the SROI methodology and to go through the process involved in using the social evaluator tool. Noaber selected 15 of its 25 members portfolio investments to participate in the project, so the process would clearly take time. They needed someone who could dedicate themselves to the task and their staff resources are limited. They therefore decided, in the summer of 2008, to take on an intern.

How did the relationship come about?

Judith Jakubowicz was student at ESSEC in France looking for a final year internship in a VP fund: 'I had worked in different social organisations before,' she recalls, 'associations, social venture, etc, and wanted to discover the other side of these social projects: the funders' side'. She had met Rob John at a seminar on social entrepreneurship, part of her course, at the Skoll Centre for Social Entrepreneurship at Oxford's Saïd Business School, and after her decision to try for an internship in venture philanthropy, she got in touch with him again, and met him at the EVPA conference in Paris. He then forwarded her CV to EVPA members. From the Noaber side, Matthijs Blokhuis recalls that, following the decision to take on an intern for the project 'we had contacted a few universities who had candidates looking for an assignment, but the match wasn't really there.' Noaber needed someone who was at least familiar with the principle of social performance measurement and preferably with SROI – of whom, of course, there are relatively few. Then Rob John had introduced Judith Jakubowicz, who was looking to work for a foundation in Europe.

Recruitment

Judith remembers the selection procedure as 'not very formal'. About a month after Rob John had forwarded her CV to Noaber, they got in touch by email. There was a telephone interview, which was more of a confirmation than a conventional interview. She then went to Noaber for a day to meet the team and at the end of that day they told her the internship was hers. Noaber didn't see any other applicants. According to Matthijs, they looked at her CV and saw her when she visited and decided 'this looks like the perfect candidate so go for it.'

The terms of the relationship

If the selection procedure had been informal, the terms of relationship were not. There was a formal contract between Judith and Noaber, similar, says Matthijs Blokhuis to a normal Noaber employment contract but for a duration of six months, and an internship convention from ESSEC, signed by all three parties, which again was a form of contract, stipulating how much the intern would be paid, the duration of the internship, the rights of the company and the student, etc.

Her day-to-day tasks during the assignment comprised mainly meetings with the social entrepreneurs in Noaber's portfolio and working with them to understand the social evaluator tool. The majority of these meetings were face-to-face, but some were conducted by phone for practical reasons – not all of Noaber's investments are in the Netherlands. Some are in Finland, South Africa and Israel (as part of the internship, she spent a week in Israel with Noaber investees).

In essence, she was a consultant, she says, supporting the investees in evaluating the social impact of the social company through the SROI methodology with a brief to spend 25 hours with each project. This was difficult for two reasons. First, because most of the participants were unfamiliar with the concept of SROI, and she was conducting a baseline

analysis for projects where investments had already been made, which meant, as noted above, that there was no financial incentive for them to take part. Some, of course, saw the virtue of using the tool, but a number only participated reluctantly. An index of this unwillingness was that some cancelled three times in a row, while others took the view that 'I have 8 hours to dedicate to this project and that's it whether we finish it or not – your problem'. The difficulty of getting people to participate was of course compounded when the investee organisation was in another country. A further complication was that, as she sees it, many investees did not see her as part of the core Noaber team and had no prior relationship with her.

Secondly, she was very much thrown in at the deep end. Although she was familiar with the concept of SROI analysis (she had been the French organiser of the Global Social Venture Competition and all students in the GSVI were required to do one), she had no acquaintance with the SROI methodology itself and she was essentially breaking new ground, being given the responsibility of setting up and carrying out the project. While there was support available when asked for, this depended on the availability of other staff and she felt at times somewhat isolated. The task was both exciting and challenging and she learned a lot of things very quickly. On the other, the occasional uncooperativeness of the participants was a source of some frustration.

Problems – lack of preparedness

Unfortunately, matters did not run as smoothly as they might have and further challenges were presented by technical difficulties in getting the tool ready. 'It took more time than we assessed,' acknowledges Matthijs Blokhuis. The tool had a lot of bugs. They ran two projects to see how it worked and it either lost data or ran into technical difficulties. The upshot was that Judith started in August 2008 and it was only in November that she was able to begin the main task. This, for Judith, was the most difficult thing.

In the meantime, she prepared presentations and information for participants and helped Matthijs Blokhuis 'a lot with testing the system'. She also spent some time evaluating investment opportunities. This was far from being wasted time in that she was very eager to learn the process, but it was not her key expertise and perhaps, feels Matthijs Blokhuis, not the best use of her time.

Needless to say, the delay was frustrating all round. Chiefly, it reduced the amount of time Judith had to do the project, which was in any case, quite a lot of work, so the shortened time-span put greater pressure on the task.

What both sides gained from the arrangement

Without Judith, says Matthijs, Noaber 'wouldn't have been able to establish a baseline for the SROI of our projects so quickly'. Noaber got what he describes as a good overview of the 10 or 15 projects that she was able to go through thoroughly. She also made recommendations on how to incorporate the analysis into Noaber's standard operating procedures.

Judith, on her side, 'gained a network in the field'. She became in effect the person most familiar with, and expert in the use of, the instrument, by virtue of being largely on her own. The internship 'opened the doors of a job in the sector: I signed two contracts, one for an assignment with d.o.b foundation in the Netherlands to conduct a similar mission to the one at Noaber, and another in a social venture. She also 'learned the Dutch way of working'. Office hours, she reflects, are different from France, notably with only 30 minutes for lunch. She also learned to integrate into a team.

The main immediate positive consequence of the internship, though, has been the work with d.o.b. She is now on a six-month contract, half-time for d.o.b., half-time for Social E-valuator Ltd. She is also working on an idea to take the methodology to France, and there is currently some interest in this idea from ESSEC.

The use of internships in general

More generally, thinks Judith, internships help students or those making the transition from study to work, understand the sector and 'let you to see whether you like it or not.' They also, of course, bring you into contact with a professional working environment and help you understand what adjustments you need to make to adapt to it.

From the standpoint of the host, says Matthijs, they allow organisations 'to focus on a specific project in a relatively short timeframe'. Having an intern from a business school brings 'refreshing thoughts and input to the organisation.' Noaber is small, he says, so ideas come from a limited pool. 'Someone from outside can have refreshing and creative approaches and thoughts which are valuable.' They are young and enthusiastic.

In addition, they are (often) full-time in your office during the internship, so you get to know them and you can see which people are suitable for employment either by your own or by a partner organisation. 'If you see someone working for 6 months,' he says, 'you see what they can do.' He was enthusiastic about Judith, hence the recommendation from Noaber to d.o.b.

The merits of an intern from a business school for a VP fund

Does an MBA education help interns bring particular qualities to internships? Perhaps in this case specifically, felt Matthijs, but not generally. Postgraduate interns in general bring new thinking and commitment and, in his view, Judith Jakubowicz was well aligned with what Noaber does, better adjusted than, say, he was when he joined.

And in the specific case of SROI analysis, it helps if you have business-like and entrepreneurial attitudes, which people on what he terms the 'softer side of the social sector' might not have. It had helped Judith understand and evaluate the tool, he thought. On the whole, though, and for most tasks, he felt that it didn't matter whether interns were business school graduates or not.

Judith points out that 'I was working in a field that is very new (social impact measurement), so I never learned it at school.' However, the virtues of the business school education, she believes, lie in both the quality of the MBA course and the entrees and opportunities it furnishes – 'without this seminar in Oxford on social entrepreneurship,' she says, 'I might never have been introduced to the Anglo-Saxon mindset of philanthropy.' Generally, however, she felt that if you want to work in VP, a business school provides the best form of education, especially if you specialise in entrepreneurship.

Reflections on the experience and lessons learned

As Matthijs Blokhuis put it, 'matching the start date of the internship was a challenge.' If you have an intern starting on a short-term contract to perform a particular task, you have to be able to start the project at that time. Otherwise, the intern has little to do and the delayed start means that a six-month project has to be done in four. Secondly, Noaber hadn't assessed how much time it would take to coach the intern. 'I was a bit naïve about that,' admits Matthijs. For an intern, he points out, it's often harder than for a new employee because it is one of their first working experiences. The organisation is new to them and, Judith's case, so was the country. She was 'a little bit alone at times,' feels Matthijs, an impression Judith confirms.

'I felt I was really by myself,' she says and while 'freedom is good, sometimes it would be good to have support.' One of the problems was that 'the programme was so new that I couldn't ask anybody.' This is reflected in the advice she would offer to would-be interns: 'check you have a person to refer to' – often interns are thought to manage themselves, and are consequently left to their own devices. There is a danger they might find themselves isolated, to the detriment of the task in hand and their own experience of the internship.

There was also a 2-day pilot training module developed for users of the social evaluator tool, which she did not receive till the end of December. If she were starting again, she would ask foundation up front to have that training earlier.

Another point in this respect is that, at first, Noaber tried to help her find place to live, but in the end, she moved three or four times before settling down. This was quite a challenge on top of doing the work. On reflection, thinks Matthijs, Noaber might have facilitated that better.

A key lesson to take from this experience, therefore, is to prepare well. 'Don't underestimate the amount of time it will take an intern to adjust to a new situation and make sure you have ability to get them started and give them the support they need.'

Another thing to look for, he suggests, is someone who fits your organisation socially. Judith was very sociable and fitted in well. He pointed out that the intern is someone who will be in your office five days a week, so 'it's best if you have someone who connects well!'

How does he feel, overall, about the use of interns? Prior to Judith, Noaber had a PhD student who also did a six-month assignment. These two experiences have been sufficiently positive that they have now decided to do it more regularly, especially for specific projects.

SUMMING UP

Though the internship didn't progress as smoothly as it might have done, chiefly because of the unreadiness of the tool, both parties viewed the experience as largely positive. Judith had the experience of a 'taster' in a venture philanthropy fund and developed an expertise with a new instrument in a relatively new field, which she has been able to take on to another assignment.

Noaber benefited from her enthusiasm and ability and got the tool up and running, providing them with important data on their portfolio and the ability to derive those data from future investments.

Both saw the importance of preparedness for internship assignments, both in terms of having the task ready to begin, so that the limited time of the engagement is not wasted, and in terms of support for the intern who is often coming into a challenging set of social and professional circumstances.

For further information
on the organisations
mentioned in the text:

ESSEC
www.essec.fr

Noaber
www.noaber.com

Skoll Centre for Social
Entrepreneurship
www.sbs.ox.ac.uk/skoll

social e-valuator
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