

CASE STUDY - jB consulting



ABOUT THE COMPANY

'jB consulting' is a family company with rich traditions, dating back to 1949. Currently, 'jB' employs 8 people on fixed contracts, and collaborates closely with around 20 consultants. The mission of the company is to assist small and medium sized companies, providing them with tools and solutions enabling them to be competitive towards large organisations. Firm's services, designed to enhance business efficacy of a client, range from accountancy, fiscal and financial consulting, to designing and implementation of information systems, to insurance services. 'jB consulting' also helps companies in issues related to management. It prepares SMEs for applying EU laws and procedures, and observing regulations being in force in the European Union.

ACCOUNTANCY VIA INTERNET

In 2000, 'jB consulting' has started using information technologies, with the view to improve their services offered to clients, and especially those in the field of accountancy. Computers are rapidly changing the nature of the work in this area. With the aid of special software packages, accountants organise data in special formats for financial analysis. These accounting packages greatly reduce the amount of tedious manual work associated with data management and record-keeping. The company estimates that currently 20 % of their customers use accountancy services through Internet, and that the percentage is still rising.

Computer networks play the more and more significant role in gaining new clients, even if traditional methods remain important (e.g. trade meetings, recommendation of satisfied customers). Gradually, the paper folders and brochures are being substituted by electronic ones, in a graphically attractive form, that can be put on different Internet sites (information pages, banners) or easily distributed to a large number of clients through e-mail.

Nevertheless, it is the company's web site that is considered to be the key marketing tool in 'jB', and the employees, which are not numerous, has noted important saving of time spent on telephone or face-to-face discussions with potential customers. A person interested in company's offer may easily get acquainted with it by visiting the web page, and selectively searching for desired information. It is a good preparation to a later discussion with a company representative on the most suitable option to choose by the client. The negotiations of terms of co-operation take less time than before, and the saved time of employees can be spent on effective work.

Another form of using the Internet is a web page www.fiskus.com.pl created by 'jB'. The site is an online information source for business and finance professionals on fiscal and accountancy-related issues. The page is informative only, but it may bring to the company indirect profits by attracting new customers.

BARRIERS TO OFFERING E-SERVICES

'jB' is aware of the fact that there is still a number of barriers to a smooth take-up of new, electronic accounting system by many companies, especially in the SME sector. These are high

costs of computer equipment and difficult and/or excessively costly access to the Internet in remote and rural regions, but sometimes also in urban areas. Another barrier is attitude of clients, that are relying in their work on traditional tools and mistrust the new technologies, their main concern being the security of data in the world wide web.

New ICTs have diminished in 'jB' the distance between the company and their customers, considerably reducing at the same time the need of direct contacts, but it is clear that the nearest future will not bring the possibility of serving clients from outside Krakow region, where the company is located. The customers using financial data management services via electronic networks come from the city or its environs, which is mainly due to the necessity of providing the accountant with some documents in paper and to the need of geographical proximity of fiscal offices where the client is represented. It is, thus, not yet possible to separate the traditional and electronic accountancy, as the latter only plays a complementary role to the first one, even if its use is still growing.

'jB' contacts the companies from all over the country on the Internet discussion forum on its informative site *fiskus.com.pl*, where every entrepreneur may seek for free advice in the field of legal and financial matters.

It is interesting to note that for some of its clients, 'jB consulting' is a gate through which the client communicates electronically with the outside world. The company, on behalf of the client that does not have access to the Internet, contacts public institutions like e.g. national Social Insurance Office, and transfers to them the required data.

TELEWORK IN 'jB'

'jB consulting' employs on full fixed contract only several people, but closely collaborates with others, assigning them tasks adequately to existing needs. Such flexibility in organization allows to control the personnel costs and to respond to dynamically changing situation on the market.

All the employees of the company, permanent and temporary, work to some extent in teleworking system. This is also true for students of Academy of Economy in Krakow, having in 'jB' their traineeships, often lasting several months. Beside the usual work on accountancy programmes in the office, they contribute to creation of the portal *fiskus.com.pl*.

The contact between teleworkers is maintained through a special software designed to enhance the communication in a dispersed team, GroupWise of Novell, and through e-mail server. Employees in remote locations have access, via FTP, to the internal company information system, and they can freely view and/or modify the files, sometimes shared with others colleagues, stored on the company's server. This system allows flexibility in place of work, as the teleworker can access the company system from anywhere, providing they have a PC with Windows of Linux and with access to the Internet.

The teleworkers usually work form home, but also from University (students), or even from Internet cafes. The flexible working system has been in operation in 'jB' for over one year, and no serious problems emerged so far. Its main advantage – from the employee view-point – is the freedom it gives to work accordingly to individual rhythm, with no fixed working hours.

Currently, the company's mail focus is on creating a commercial portal *www.e-fiskus.pl*, that is due to be launched by the end of 2003. The portal will let the further extension of the telework system within the company, and gaining the clients regardless of their location.