A summary of my findings

1. Introduction

There are millions and millions of unemployed South Africans. A few of these unemployed people are members of Men on the side of the road (MSR), a non-profit organization (024-519-NPO) that seeks to bridge the gap between the growing economy and unemployed people with low skills. The essence of their activities is to increase the ability of people to earn a sustainable income. They do this by registering people who are unemployed as their members and placing them with employers in an organized manner.

MSR services are free to its members and to the public. This is because all costs are covered by the generosity of government, corporate South Africa, and local and international donors. The membership is estimated to be over one hundred thousand men and women; each day they gather, come rain or shine at the sites across South Africa. Other things MSR do include nationwide assessment of the men’s skills, implementing training where possible and providing mentored opportunities in focused teams.

2. About MSR

2.1 Organizational Structure

The general director is the head of the organization and seats at MSR headquarters in Cape Town. MSR has regional offices and they are headed by a regional manager, whose work is to support staff at the various organized worker collection points and talk to members, among other things. The placement officer reports to the regional manager and his work is mainly to place workers and run the collection points. A placement officer is always supported by a fieldworker who is mainly responsible for a particular collection point.

2.2 Worker Registration

Unemployed people register as MSR members. This can be done through their website (www.employmen.co.za) but mainly by a membership co-ordinator at organized collection points. Members complete a membership form which has the following details: Names, DOB, ID, contact numbers, skill/work experience, marital status, number of people in the house and training needs. The coordinator then takes a picture of the member. Finally a membership number is allocated, a member’s card is produced and all the details entered into MSR database.

2.3 Organized collection points
One of the problems associated with employing men who stand on the side of the road is the issue of chaotic sites. Going to a site to find a worker can be a chaotic and intimidating experience. This experience often prevented employers from making use of the men's services\(^1\). MSR facilitates order and structure at the collection point. Members no longer mob a potential employer. Employers are able to request the particular services they require and the MSR representative will recommend a reliable person with verified skills. MSR claims that the impact of an organized site is significant especially in the small business and domestic employment market.

Employers collecting members are also brought into the loop. Every time an employer utilizes a members services MSR collects that information and they use to build up a profile of that member’s work experience. This enables them to provide a better service to employers and members in the future.

2.4 Worker Selection

When registering a worker, their skills are taken. This is used to classify them as either low skilled or skilled worker. When placing into jobs requiring low skills, the placement officer is required to be fair. No member should be frequently placed at the expense of the others unless specifically required by the employer. For jobs that require particular skills, only members with verified skills can be placed. Preferences are given to members with the highest ratings received from employer.

In all the cases, members are contacted either through a phone call (mobile phone) by the placement officer or through the worker collection point through the fieldworker.

2.5 Marketing

The objective of MSR is to have their name get known locally. The main reason for this is that they need to reach as many potential employers as possible. This way, it can improve on the number of people they can place per day. Normally MSR have promotion days once per month per collection point for at least two hours. The main tool used is what is referred to as a promotional pack. A promotional pack has the following: Skills list, Stickers, Newsletters and script cards (for people who speak to the public).

2.6 Call centre

MSR has a small call centre. The main activities of the centre are:
- To support the organized worker collection point
- Deal with all the booking enquiries
- Updates members mainly by sending emails to them about their free service
- Capture employers on the system
- Rate members on the system by contacting employers and capturing the response on the system
- Email bookings enquiries to the relevant region’s placement officer.

3. How MSR Operates
3.1 Membership

MSR membership is numbering about ten thousand workers and six hundred employers per year. Worker members consist of both locals who are about 70% and foreigners who are about 30% in total. Apparently most foreigners are literate while few locals are. Only about 20% of all local workers are literate while about 90% of foreigners are.

3.2. Communication

Out of all the ten thousand worker members, only about 20% of locals own a mobile phone while over 90% of foreigners do own a mobile phone. Mobile phone usage in work searching activities is limited to skilled workers. It was reported that the probability of getting a non skilled worker using their phone details from the database is less than 5%, in fact it was reported as very rare, while that of a skilled worker is over 90%. This is the reason why a good percentage of skilled people wait for job offers from home, while unskilled men have to go to the side of the road i.e. organized collection points.

Mobile phone as a marketing tool is not an option for MSR for now. Instead they prefer traditional marketing methods (face to face, fliers) and sometimes emails to registered employers. This may be partly because the kind of potential employers are not very much into email and SMS. The other reason is because they do not have a budget for SMS. MSR reported that their most effective way of marketing has been construction site visits (having face to face conversation with employers) and fliers. Not even their well maintained website has been able to serve them well as far as marketing is concerned in isolation. Until one or more of the aforementioned marketing methods is used, employers don’t visit MSR website i.e. the hit rate is dependent on other marketing strategies.

With workers and the website, it was noted that only two workers have been seen using the website. This clearly shows that as it is, MSR website is not of any help to worker members.

3.3 Money matters

While MSR spend about R20 a day in looking for a job for one non skilled worker, they recommend a daily earning of R110. It is however estimated that the average earnings per day for both skilled and non skilled worker is R90 although some employers pay more while others pay less. The estimated amounts spend looking for a job for a skilled worker is less than R20. On a good day, skilled worker earns R110, and gets picked or transported refunded by the employer. On a bad day, he earns R60 and pays his transport to the work area which is estimated to be anything above 20KM and less than 40KM. This means that the net earnings will be about R48 per day as commuting may cost up to R12 using a taxi or train.

Currently, MSR places about 20% of all the unskilled job seekers who turn up every morning for a job. This figure could be higher because subsequent successes are not always reported by members. Sometimes MSR officers learn that a worker got placed two to three days after the job was done. Sometimes they may not know about it completely. The unknown numbers do not include the 20% that we are talking about here.
3.4 Is MSR cost effective

Here we are trying to analyze the cost effectiveness of MSR, is it worth the struggle. We have used the figures given above i.e. the cost of transport, daily earning, the number of people placed and other factors to do the analysis. Although we value this analysis, we do recommend its results as a basis for use for any decision making as we note that the information is not accurate and a lot of it is missing. For example, it is difficult to know how many people get placed for their second and subsequent placements without notifying MSR?  

3.5 Quality of Information

MSR maintains a database of all its worker and employer members. They are very much interested with the accuracy and quality of information about their worker members. During registration, potential worker members are requested to provide evidence of their skills, training, clean criminal record certificate and any other documentary evidence. Further, for every skill a worker claims, he is asked to provide references, e.g. contact details, of employers they have worked for before. MSR then contacts the referees to counter check the information provided. Most worker members however claim to have some skills and do not provide any evidence or references. MSR give them a benefit of doubt without putting the employer and the organization at risk. They do this by having the newly recruited member accompany a known skilled worker, who will put him through a “test”. The test will be used to proof or disproof the skills claims by the subject. Only tests related to claimed skills are taken. The test outcome is then used to update the worker's details.

To update the skills database, employers are encouraged to give references or general comments about workers who have worked for them. It has been noted that if an employer's satisfaction is not met, they were not likely to use MSRs’ services let alone the specific worker services. This means that if an employer asks for either a specific worker or organizations services, then his satisfaction was met sand he is approvals of the worker(s) used before.

3.6 Job Allocation

MSR applies (or is suppose to apply) a fair method of job allocation. For non-skilled workers, no one worker will be placed twice before another unless explicitly requested by an employer. It was mentioned that non-skilled workers are likely to wait in a queue before any placement for a very long time, not because there are no jobs but mainly because they are not able to travel to job destination. The inability to travel is as a result of not being able to read a map, street, communication barrier with the employer or even lack of transport. For skilled workers, different factors are considered. The skills requested for by an employer is prioritized, followed by the last out last in criteria. It was however noted that South Africa and particularly Cape Town lacks enough skilled workers. This, sometimes, lead to special skills being required at a time when all the skilled are engaged somewhere else.

3.7 Privacy
MSR is a responsible organization and tries as much as possible not to intrude into anybody's privacy. Apart from ordinary demographics, skill is the only other piece of information collected during registration. MSR does not discriminate on race, HIV aids, gender or any other form of discrimination. On the contrary, employers sometimes ask for workers with specific characteristics. For example, an employer may prefer a foreigner than a local worker mainly because most foreigners speak English or because of their perception that local’s criminal records may not be good.

Issues that came up

- Skilled workers are likely to be placed compared to non-skilled workers. In fact it was reported that an unskilled worker is likely to stay in the queue for a very long time. The reasons for this range from lack of the skills required to language barrier (most employers speak English and Afrikaans). A case like a worker not being able to read a map or street names will let him wait in the queue for longer than someone who can rush to where a job is (Although this was negated by the fact that most employers like to pick and drop their workers at the worker collection point). Likewise, if a worker cannot take instructions from the worker because of language barrier, often leads to poor workmanship.

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Pertinent questions

- How do we reduce the net cost of looking for a job i.e. transport, phone calls and any other
- What is the best way to have illiterate, unskilled worker get placed fairly, what kind of ICT is best suits such situations- consider that illiteracy limits these guys to the point that they cannot even read road streets and maps
- Can we get the proportion of workers who can be helped? I.e. those that maybe able to use the very basic that can be offered by technologically.
- Can we create many pick up points using technology or what is referred to as virtual service or presence (Mehdi, Menon and Toyoma, 2008- Challenges in computerized job search for the developing world)
- Are there ways in which we can convey a map to illiterate persons? Is it possible to use landmarks?
- Is voice mail recording and subsequent translation an option?

After a visit to MSR road side, the following came out

- There is need to decide if to assume those people without mobile phones and work with those who have? If to focus on those without mobile phone? Or both cases?
- My thinking (after visiting the road) is that communication (there is no communication barrier) and getting to a place is not a problem – lack of
ownership and use of mobile phones and unwillingness to change their mind as far as waiting for calls from home are the main problems.

- The problem of unfairness was reported by some member workers. How can this be dealt? - social problem, but can a system help, what kind of system
- We might just think of avoiding systems that will help avoid such problems from happening; this can be done by having applications that can in advance give people equal chance of posting their credentials and not go the waiting points from the start.

**MSR social problems**

- How can they encourage those who subsequent placements to report back to MSR – My suggestion was to have them understand that every time they do that, they will be giving back to MSR. This means that MSR needs to introduce awareness campaign for its members (both employers and employees) as part of their program.
- The biggest MSR problem seems to be illiteracy and communication barrier among unskilled workers. What is the technological solution to this? What is the social solution to this?

4.0 MSR Fieldwork; worker Interview data – 29/03/2010

This part highlights some findings from a field interview conducted with a total of 13 interviewees at MSR organized collection point in Wynberg, Cape Town, South Africa. All the questions asked were not direct. In total, I talked to two groups of men, the first one was a group of three men. I was in a chat with this first group for about two hours. The second group was made of 10 South African men. The first group was from Zimbabwe. Our chat with the second group lasted for about 40 minutes. There were about 20 people when I got to the Wynberg collection point. The coordinator informed me that there was a train problem in Khayelitsha and therefore, a lot of people were not able to come. “On average, there are between 30 and 40 people on a good day and 60 to 70 on a bad one” the MSR placement officer said. The collection point is along road XXX (will establish the name of the road in due course), about 0.5 KMs from Wynberg station. The following is a synthesis of what came out of the talk.

4.1 Demographic data

There were about twenty people at the Wynberg MSR collection point, all of them being men aged 21 and 55 years; i.e. 21, 23, 27, 38, 47 .... 55. Three out of thirteen people interviewed were Zimbabweans, while the rest (10) were South Africans. I was informed that there are normally other nationalities (including Malawians and Tanzanians) at the station. Some of the men left before I got a chance to talk to them. It seemed to me that waiting time is from early morning to mid or late morning, sometimes to early afternoon.
4.2 Skills

Most of the men (about 8 of them) I talked to claimed to be skilled. The skills ranged from no skills to carpentry, painting, brick laying. Out of the three Zimbabweans, one attended apprentice school on panel beating. Although they were all ready for any kind of job, most preferred to have jobs related to their skills e.g. painting, brick laying etc.

What about their experience? Most of the old members had over five years experience. For the Zimbabweans who were younger (between 24 to 27 years old), their experiences ranged from 6 months to 2 years.

4.3 Languages

Among the three Zimbabweans, two out of three spoke relatively good English. In addition they could speak in shoner. For the second group, the South Africans, four out of ten could speak in relatively good English and their local languages while two could speak English with difficulty. There was one particular person who could speak in most SA languages including Afrikaans and English. I got to learn from interviewees that most people speak in Zulu and Xhosa. Language barrier seemed not to be a problem as many people could work in groups leading to them having translators among themselves. The interesting one was the Zimbabwean who could barely speak English but could understand a bit of it. Some people have been in Cape Town for all their life. For those who were immigrants, the years of experience ranged from ½ to 7 years. We noted that those who had been here for long had learnt to speak English and other languages.

4.4 Literacy

Grade 11 (O level in Zimbabwe) was the highest reached among my first group of interviewees. Apart from one, who reached grade 10, the rest two completed O-level. On the other hand, my second group of interviewees had only 1 person who reached grade 8. (grade 8 in SA is primary level). Most of them, seven out of ten said they can read and write their names, although this was not tested.

It was difficult for me to ascertain my interviewees writing or reading literacy since I thought that it was not a good idea to ask such questions directly. I therefore used the writing and reading of an SMS to try this. Within the first group, two could write in English and Shona (as demonstrated by SMS writing). As for the second group, none of them had a mobile phone and therefore could not test the writing skills.

Two of the three members of my first interviewee group said they can actually use a map. This was not the case for my second group who preferred to wait and get picked from the collection point. In fact one guy indicated that there was no need for a mobile phone because, if an employer needs certain skills, he would just pick them at the waiting point. Because I insisted on the issue of knowing how one would find their way to a place they have never been, most of them said that by mostly taking directions from the prospective employer. ”Sometimes a map can do”, they said. However taking directions and/or using maps was not true for my second group of interviewees.
4.5 Ownership and use of technology (mobile phones, computers, internet, land lines)

As indicated before, none of my second group of interviewees had a mobile phone. In my first group, two out of three owned a mobile phone, Nokia 1202 and MTN-ZTE costing R180 and R139 respectively. The two who had mobile phones reported that their phones were on at all times and that I could reach them anytime through their phones. They however could not call back as they did not have airtime. Something to note here is the fact that one of the two owners of mobile phones acquired it just two weeks before the interview day. They both rarely used their phones to call or SMS, in fact one had no airtime while the other had R1. Once in a while, they received calls from the placement officer.

With a view of looking for a relationship between mobile phone ownership and computer and internet literacy, I sort to find out if any of the three Zimbabweans was computer literate. It was a bit strange to note that the fellow without a mobile phone had an email address and that he could check whenever he had time and money. All the three men from my first group had heard about the internet. However two of them did not know how it works. In fact they did not have any idea about MSR website, they only knew MSR as an organization. No interviewee knew anything about other mobile phone services like MXIT and WIZZIT. This was true for fixed telephones; none of them used fixed line telephones.

4.6 Income and expenditure

On average, daily income earnings was ranging from 150R to 350R depending on the job and the employer. Daily expenditure averaged about R10 per day, a bulk of it being fare. Those with mobile phones used less than R2 per day to call or SMS.

4.7 General view

This is the most disturbing revelation in this interview. Of the three Zimbabweans, all of them think that MSR is good and has really helped them. They believe that it is fair and is there for their good. On the contrary, my second group showed some frustrations with regard to MSR services. The South Africans reported that MSR placement officer was unfair. They felt like MSR was an individual and racist organization (at least at the Wynberg collection point), which was out to benefit individuals and in the worst brings hatred between job seekers from different countries. We noted that the placement officer was a Zimbabwean. I’m yet to establish if the discrimination claim is true. After a lengthy brainstorming with my supervisor, it was agreed that I visit other collection points, which we hope will help to clarify some issues raised, especially the discrimination factor.

5. Conclusion

One obvious thing that is coming out is the fact that literacy goes hand in hand with skills. This is seen by the fact that 90% of foreigners are literate and the same time over 90% of them are literate. Another point that comes out is that phone ownership and use is very much dependent on literacy. You find that over 90% of foreigners own mobile phones, a percentage which is close to those who are literate.
The next course of action was to visit other MSR collection points with a view of clarifying unclear issues. I note that information from Fishoek MSR collection point was not any different from Wynberg, my first point to visit. Apart from the fact that the placement officer (also called coordinator) was a colored South African (Wynberg coordinator is a Zimbabwean), all factors remain the same. It is was interesting to note that South Africans at the Fishoek station still believe that their fellow South African is biased against them and favors Zimbabweans. In all cases, there was a consensus that physical waiting at the side of the road is the best way of looking for a job.

6. Sources of Information

1. About MSR (accessed 05/03/2010)
http://www.employmen.co.za/index.php?/About/About-MSR.html

2. MSR Operational Manual

3. Face to face Interview with Mark Tinker (Cape Town Regional manager) and Elisha Mureru (Placement officer)

4. Face to face Interview with Elisha Mureru (Placement officer, Cape Town) and Peter (General Director MSR)

5. Two field interviews (Wynberg and Fishoek)