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Outsourcing for the Home

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In this paper, I would like to talk about Hemfrid, my company. My experience in starting and running this company has taught me a lot about the value of the home and how important the work that goes into it is. I believe that this knowledge may be able to contribute something to the topic of the panel, namely, home management. To give a brief overview, I am going to discuss Hemfrid in light of the two important pillars of the company: demand, or need, and the importance of quality and personal touch. I believe that both of these pillars, especially when considered more in depth, are important for a company that works in the home not merely because they are important in the realm of business, but because they are needs that are intrinsically linked to the home.

Hemfrid is Swedish and it means peace at home. To understand why I started this company, I think it will be useful to look at Swedish society briefly. For people who are not from Sweden, the way we lead our lives might seem a bit odd. For almost fifty years it has been very natural for both men and women to work outside the home. We hardly have any housewives anymore. Practically all children go into day-care after their first birthday. This day-care service is mostly paid for by the State so that the maximum fee you pay to have a child in a day-care is about £200 a month. Both men and women go on parental leave and receive 80% of their salary, which, again, is paid for by the State, during that time. In most cases it is usually women who take maternity leave, but there are an increasing number of men who are taking paternity leave.

In Sweden there is a political vision called 'volkemet', which is Swedish for 'a house for everyone'. This vision began in the fifties when the idea came about to build a society where everybody would be able to buy a house on their own. It is easier to buy a house of your own with loans in Sweden than it is in other countries. However, people are working more and more. I would say that in Sweden people are like Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times*. Children in our country have their own activities and, I would even go as far as to say, their own careers. Furthermore, in Sweden we talk about 'curling parents', or parents who curl the waves in their children's hair. A child might be a sports-star, for example, and his parents will look after his career.

Knowledge about how to run a household is dying out and our tax system is counterproductive because it makes it extremely expensive to buy any kind of services as a private person. Our country is built upon the idea that everything should be available to you through the State at a reduced price. The State, however, cannot provide everything and people want to lead very good lives, so a huge black market has emerged.

It was in this market situation that I started my company twelve years ago. It was not that I saw an emerging market, but rather that I was trying to solve my own problem. I am married to a man who I would say is my mental equal, but who, when it comes to practical matters, is not. I was the one that ran the family, then. We have four children who are all grown up now, but when they were young it was very hard to cope with my own career – I was in the newspaper business – as well as with the children, the school and my husband as a fifth child. I was, essentially, trying to manage

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two full-time careers: my professional job and my work at home. I really felt the need for paid help, but I did not want to buy cash-in-hand services and it was very difficult to find a professional company. Perhaps I was ahead of the vast majority in thinking that it was needed, but looking at my friends and people of my generation, I could see that we all had the same problems. Society really has changed to a time when both men and women have a career of equal value and with equal rights, but there are still children to take care of and there is just as much housework to do. What I felt I needed was more time for both work and the family. It has been so politically controversial to buy help for the home. It has always been alright to buy other forms of help, but when it comes to buying help with the daily work through household services it really has been politically charged.

The idea for the company, then, was born out of a real need I felt in my own life. My plan was to sell my idea through employers as a fringe benefit in order to make it affordable to ordinary families, but it took me eleven years to change the tax system. Thankfully, since July 1st 2007, there is a tax reduction for these services for private persons as well. It did take eleven years of lobbying, though.

The services we provide include cleaning, housekeeping, and taking care of children and elderly people. It took me six years to make this enterprise profitable, but now we are looking at a turnover of about 140,000,000 Swedish Krona, which is about 40M euros and we are making a 5% profit margin, more or less. At the moment we have about 800 employees from forty different nations and Hemfrid is a strong brand in Sweden. We have been established for a long time which means that we have vast experience. There are great demands on us to deliver on time and in line with our customers' expectations. If we cannot do that, we stand to lose a lot since Hemfrid is a market leader.

As important as I know it has been for my company to be the first to meet the rising demand for domestic services, I do not believe that this has been the key to Hemfrid's success. I think that it was very important that I had this problem, this need, myself because it has made Hemfrid a real solution in people's lives. I wanted professional help because I wanted assurances of the quality I was going to receive. This constant striving for excellence is one of the pillars Hemfrid is built on. Of course we want to increase our turnover and make more money, but we also want to be a good company. I would say, of course, that Hemfrid's strength is our staff, the people who work for the company. The experience and the knowledge we have built up, both practically and organisationally over the years put us well in front of our competitors. The challenge now is to keep the personal touch and the quality as we grow. There must be quality in every step. Today we have a large group of customers who are very happy with the work we do, and, naturally, it is important that we tell everyone in the company that they are satisfied. However, good can always be better, and to get really satisfied customers we must keep on developing the company. Are our customers satisfied or really, really satisfied? That is an important question.

The other pillar Hemfrid is built on is the personal touch, and, again, I think this stems from my personal experience. One of our staff at Hemfrid says there are three kinds of families: catastrophes, normal families and interior exhibitions. Each type of family requires different treatment and this is the challenge that our staff must undertake. It is also a large responsibility on our part. We must hire the right people, we have to work efficiently, but with our hearts, and take

great care when we hire and assign our staff to the customer. The personal chemistry has to work well. Our staff may be very good at their job, but if they cannot fit in with the family they are working with, in a sense, they cannot do their job properly.

Through my own experience of the demands of the work that goes into the home, I have seen that there are specific requirements needed to carry out this work. I knew, for example, that I wanted it to be done to high standards, but I also came to recognise that because of these high standards and the sheer amount of work that was involved, it was a full-time occupation. This is, of course, where the idea for Hemfrid originated. In Hemfrid we cater to the need to provide high standards by training our staff. Training, however, is not all that is needed to do this job well. As I have mentioned, there needs to be a personal touch in the way tasks are carried out. I think it is the balance between the need for skills and the need for a personal touch that makes the high standards possible. Furthermore, I think this balance is part of the reason why our staff, despite the challenges of the job, enjoy what they do. One of our employees has said, 'In this job I make a difference, which is not always the case. I am doing something that really makes me feel good every day.'

To conclude, I think there are two things that my experience with Hemfrid can contribute to the discussion surrounding the work of the home as a profession and as valuable work. On the one hand, my experience at both ends – as someone in need of these services and as someone providing others with them – has shown me the great need there is for this work to be done. Just because most women today work does not mean that the work of the home has disappeared or become less important. It is still important that this work is carried out and that it is carried out to high standards. Secondly, Hemfrid provides us with a model of the professionalisation of the work of the home. If the work needs to be done, and done well, but the household cannot do it themselves, Hemfrid provides a choice to outsource this work and keep members of the household properly looked after.