
WORK EXCHANGE TO LEEDS

A report by Dennis Bonnmann

From 28 April to 20 May 2018 I had the pleasure of taking part in an Erasmus+-funded work experience programme to Leeds in the UK, a twin city of Dortmund. For my internship I was assigned to Egton, an IT-company working closely with the NHS and providing a wide range of products within the health care sector. These include Automated Arrivals kiosks for practices, where patients can check in to appointments by themselves, a digital patient calling system for waiting rooms, blood pressure devices, spirometry (lung capacity test) software, practice websites, access to the NHS' secure N3 network via VPN, practice WiFi and general IT support. With such a wide spectrum of products it is essential for Egton to have good quality customer support. A part of this is the Egton Service Desk, which is the department I was assigned to.

The Egton Service Desk, run by manager Manoj Patel, is organised into five different teams, each specialising in a different product field for customer support:

- **Incident Management run by Elliot Kitchingman** – where the main brunt of the phone calls are taken. Each phone call is logged into the company's incident management system and the Incident Analyst tries to solve the problem or enquiry over the phone. If that is not possible, the analyst hands the incident off to the Engineering team, who then schedule an Engineer visit.
- **Problem Management** – A team of Technical Analysts who act as a place of advice and training for the incident analysts, as well as a stage of escalation should incident management be unable to resolve a request. Each analyst is a **tech lead** in one or more subjects, specialising in a certain product and as such being very knowledgeable at it.
- **Digital Support run by Paul Nelson** – supporting practice websites as well as other web-based products such as Seneca, a software for solicitors.
- **Platform Support run by Chris Hinchcliffe** – specialising in the server side of practice IT. Mainly dealing with backup faults, hard disk failures, Antivirus on servers and storage optimisation.
- **Engineer Resource Coordination** – scheduling engineer visits where on-site support is required.

On my first day I was greeted by Engineer resource coordinator Leanne Hinchcliffe, who then took care of all the necessary paperwork and helped me get settled in. After a tour of the premises and getting to know people in my department, I set up my workstation and was introduced to Service Desk manager Manoj Patel. Mr Patel inquired as to how much IT experience I had already gained, to see what jobs he could assign me. He concluded I could take part in over-the-phone support for the Egton Managed Service product, which is a support contract for NHS mail accounts, Windows accounts, smartcard readers and printers. I was then forwarded to Technical Analyst Andrew Duck for training and organising the coming three weeks. Since my job required me to have a proper Windows user account and I had until then only been furnished generic work experience access, training was rescheduled for the coming day and I spent the rest of my day shadowing an Incident Analyst to get a feel for their work.

Luckily my user account was set up and ready by the second day, so Mr Duck and I could commence my training. He introduced me to the incident management system, a web-based application based on SugarCRM. The problem with this software is that it is not meant to be used for incident management, but rather for Customer Relationship Management. This leads to the application being slow and unresponsive and in the worst case offline frequently. I was told the company is going to move on to a proper incident management tool that complies with ITSM guidelines, but this system was not available yet during my stay. Nevertheless Mr. Duck trained me on how to log, handle and resolve incidents, book engineer visits and escalate incidents accordingly. Further we ran through most common procedures found in resolving enquiries within the Managed Service product range. I had the opportunity to ask questions and I mainly inquired about quality guidelines when talking over the phone, procedures for authenticating certain users in a phone call as well as some technical details of Microsoft Active Directory.

For the remainder of the week I spent my time handling service requests off the phone and shadowing different Incident Analysts. On Friday Mr Duck and I had a recap and feedback meeting to discuss the upcoming two weeks. He inquired after what I specifically wished to get out of this work experience, to which I replied I wished to mainly practice my English and get out of my comfort zone. Moreover, I told him gaining technical knowledge would of course also be appreciated but wasn't the main reason for me being there. We then concluded I should be put on phones as soon as possible. Unfortunately, this never happened since Egton's IT department refused to supply me with a phone extension. So, my second week went by mostly shadowing analysts, apart from half an hour where the backend for the arrivals kiosks went offline nationwide and an unusually high amount of calls came in that I was able to answer.

My third week went differently as Mr. Duck correctly assessed that me simply shadowing people was not satisfactory to anybody. I was assigned to the analyst dealing with the service desk mailbox for each day with the aim to take over their job and getting involved as much as possible. During these days my job was to log email incident reports from pharmacies, handling email requests as well as make occasional outbound phone calls where necessary. Also, with the help of Paul Nelson, I was able to get involved in Platform and Digital support, working on backup faults and antivirus update issues.

What struck me especially during my stay at Egton was the high amount of personalised performance analysis in place. Every day a scoreboard was updated, showcasing stats for taken calls and resolved incidents for each analyst, and highlighting the highest scores for each day. This was complemented by other generalised KPIs, such as average response time and customer satisfaction. Furthermore, each employee was analysed as to what percentage of their working day they were set to available on the phone system. I have never seen anything to this extent in Germany, as generally work councils will exercise their veto right in that matter. However, the team leaders did a great job in utilising this scoreboard in a constructive manner and as a means of motivation and approval. It allowed them to identify struggles individual employees had encountered and offer assistance in a very hands-on way. I had not once seen an employee being scolded for not meeting their goal. Especially Elliot Kitchingman was exemplary in keeping everybody's attitude positive and on-target during the daily huddle meetings. As a consequence, the whole department showed a great sense of camaraderie I had not witnessed anywhere else up until now. Everybody seemed to understand they are one team working for a common goal. Mentioning this to Paul Nelson, he wholeheartedly agreed and confirmed the atmosphere in the Egton Service Desk is very special.

Another difference to my usual workplace in Germany was the high amount of security measures in place at Egton. Every room was locked and fitted with an automatic opening mechanism connected to a card reader. As such it was impossible for me to enter, or leave, any room with my visitor's badge without an employee noticing. Additionally, the data centre was protected with a finger print scanner and CCTV surveillance. To complement that, I had to sign into the visitor's ledger each morning and was unable to leave the premises without signing out first. This felt very strange as I got the feeling of being under general suspicion, and I opted for eating lunch at my desk most of the time because I didn't want to bother anybody with letting me out of the room. Many of these security measures were also present at Leeds City College the day I went for my appointment with the department of international placement, which leads me to assume that these are common practice in the UK.

Probably my biggest struggle while working abroad was public transport. It was utterly confusing to find the right bus stops, routes and exactly which ticket I needed. Buses arrive, late, early, or not at all and rush hour traffic was intense. As a result, I opted to leave my accommodation over an hour before my shift every day despite the commute taking only about 25 minutes, just to accommodate for the frequent delays, eventually arriving way too early a lot of times. One day I accidentally took the wrong bus, got off a few stops later and decided to walk the rest to the office. This turned out to be a lot quicker than my usual commute, although it was a sizeable walk. This made me appreciate public transport in Germany, because in comparison it is relatively reliable.

As a conclusion I can say working in the UK is not too different from Germany as far as I can tell. The working environment was utterly pleasant and I met many great people. Speaking English in a professional environment throughout the day was stressful but also very beneficial. The same goes for being subjected to various different English accents over the phone. I'm really glad I was given the opportunity to take part in this and would do it again in a heartbeat.