

## CULTURE

### Israel's Matrix reinvents the high tech workplace - for religious women

By Sara K. Eisen February 18, 2007



An employee at Talpiot in Beit Shemesh - the first Israeli high tech company to recognize the skills haredi women brought to the marketplace and to create an environment especially suited to their needs.

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Chavi Josovicz, a polished, well-dressed woman in a stylish wig, was looking for something different when she started work. A 'haredi' woman from Israel's ultra-orthodox community, she had special requirements for any place of work - separate kitchens and dining areas for men and women for a start, working hours that suited childcare, and strict standards of modesty. She found the answer in the unexpected form of Matrix, Israel's leading information technology company.

Matrix CEO Motti Gutman set up Talpiot, a highly successful offshore development outsourcing center in the haredi town of Modiin Illit. The subsidiary - named after the Israel Defense Force's program for gifted young engineers - was the first in Israel to recognize the skills haredi women brought to the marketplace and to create an environment especially suited to their needs.

Aside from separate communal areas, there's a pump room, where breastfeeding mothers can express their milk, or feed babies, and the few men that work at Talpiot as project managers sit in separate offices from the women. The offices are always located in the center of a haredi area so that women can get to and from work easily, hours are flexible and include a lunch break when women can pop home to eat lunch with their husbands or feed their families.

Sexually charged workplace banter, often reported by Orthodox women as a reason they eventually leave the workforce, is completely absent, as are concerns over the kosher level of the kitchen, scantily clothed co-workers (secular women come to work in slacks, but will not appear without sleeves or in mini skirts), or tacit expectations for overtime or weekend work.

Training is provided in-house by John Bryce Training, a daughter company of the \$1 billion Matrix group. John Bryce was founded in the 1990s and is now Israel's leading technology training facility. Most of the female workforce at Talpiot are hired straight from university or technology courses, though some have been out of the workforce for years raising children - like one Modiin Illit mother of seven with a computer science degree from the US, who recently found the company through an advertisement, and was placed in a high-end quality assurance job for a major company.

The women are hired for specific projects, and before they

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start work they undergo a tailor-made three to five month paid training period with John Bryce where they learn all the skills they will need for their job, including software engineering, programming and quality assurance. They also receive ongoing training throughout the project. The Israeli government, which aims to keep jobs in Israel, subsidizes Talpiot's educational activities and offshore outsourcing salaries.

Since its inception, Talpiot has been a runaway success. From Josovicz, Talpiot's first employee who is now a high level manager, the company today employs 250 haredi women at its office in Modiin Illit, and 50 more in Beit Shemesh - between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem.

There are additional plans to open up new offices in Jerusalem and possibly the Tel Aviv suburb of Bnei Brak. Talpiot's clients include Motorola, Amdocs, Comverse, Seabridge, SAP, Partner Communications, Bank Leumi, Bank Mizrachi, US telephony company i-Basis, real-estate company Madison Title Agency, and AEG (American European Group).

The reason for its success is that Talpiot offers something unique. Over the last few years, offshore outsourcing of development has become increasingly popular with high tech companies worldwide. It enables them to react quickly to events, saves them the expense of taking on new employees, helps them cope with peaks in demand, and also eases problems of office space.

While India, China and Eastern Europe are already well known as centers for R&D and outsourcing because they offer cheap services, and a well-educated, low cost workforce, problems of communication and time zones can cause operational difficulties. Talpiot offers international high-tech firms competitive pricing, and an additional advantage - it is much closer in culture to the US. Indeed many of the workers are actually immigrants from North America or Europe who trained in Israel.

Matrix also has its own representative in the US, Joe Rosenholtz of Trace Consulting. Rosenholtz assists US companies and connects them with Matrix and Talpiot. US firms working with Trace can then outsource serious IT work to Talpiot in Israel, and enjoy the benefits of top quality, US-standard work at considerably reduced prices.

Another advantage that Talpiot holds over its overseas competitors is its steady and loyal workforce. Most off-shore development centers see a large turnover of staff. At Talpiot, it is rare for an employee to leave.

Libby Affen, Talpiot's COO, herself an ultra-Orthodox woman and an experienced technology and management professional originally from the US, explains that the arrangement is ideal from every perspective.

The women at Talpiot like the environment and need the

work as they are often the sole financial provider for their young, frequently large families while their husbands study in yeshiva. Clients get good prices, as hiring women with this type of technology training for 40 hours a week is far less expensive than employing university-educated secular counterparts, who expect to work more hours at higher profile jobs. And finally, it is beneficial to Israeli society, as ultra-Orthodox families can leave the welfare system and earn an honorable living, with the support of their rabbis.

In addition, modern-Orthodox women who want to leave the high-powered, workaholic IT environment during their childbearing years, but plan on returning in their 40s and don't want to lose their professional edge, can find an ideal happy medium at Talpiot.

While Matrix, which employs over 2,500 IT employees at every stage of software development, implementation and support, was the first to recognize the untapped potential of the haredi sector, it is definitely not the last. Since Matrix moved into this field, a number of other companies have also moved into the sector.

Outsourcing pioneer IDT Global Services in Jerusalem (a subsidiary of the New Jersey-based telecommunications giant, IDT Corporation) is now hiring middle-aged ultra-Orthodox men to staff its facilities. Many haredi men leave the yeshiva system in their early 40s, but find themselves unemployable in an industry where starting at age 40+ is unheard of. Like the women, they also require a separate environment. IDT trains and employs these men, often at night when the yeshivas are closed.

Citybook, another Modiin Illit company, which has offices in Beitar Illit, and Lakewood, New Jersey in the US (the parent company), also relies on Israel's Western-educated, English speaking ultra-Orthodox immigrants, for its core of employees. Using a similar method to Talpiot's, Citybook's main area of concentration is paralegal work, in addition to human resources administration, billing, and office set-up. Also in Modiin Illit, is Imagestore, a company which deals with digital archiving and employs haredi women.

All in all, over 600 haredi women are employed by these companies (excluding IDT) in three Israeli cities with high Ultra-Orthodox concentrations, and expansion of these employment schemes is likely.

The opening of Talpiot's new Beit Shemesh offices, late last year, brought, in addition to the usual cast of industry VIPs (among them Gutman who won an award for integrating IT technology with social advancement at this past fall's IT convention in Israel), leaders of Israel's ultra-Orthodox community, like UTJ leader Rabbi Avraham Ravitz, and Shas's Eli Yishai, Minister of Industry, Trade and Labor.

Yishai spoke of the "Israeli treasure, the Jewish brain," and

was thrilled to have that resource mined in a way that keeps Israelis both employed and true to themselves, in a sector so often out of work and destitute.

Ravitz extolled the virtues of Jewish women, repeating what many bosses have come to recognize: that mothers and wives at work do not waste their boss's - or their family's - time, making them a resource worth courting. "A woman's hour at work," he told the gathered audience, "is really at least an hour and a half."


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