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Freedom is From the Tech-side Out

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Women in orange make calls on some of the most notable C-Suites in world tech.

We've all seen a prison movie or two. We probably haven't escaped the last decade without being exposed to any number of the live, popular cop shows on TV. The stereotype of who commits a crime hasn't changed much.

At worst, 'prison' and 'inmate' conjure a certain image - malcontents dressed in orange or pinstripes, living shackled behind razor wire fences. Their time is spent in idleness or repetitive labor, like making automobile license plates or picking up litter along the roadways. We often think these are their desserts. We almost always assume it's men and that they're from a broken home or sketchy background. Often, the depicted scenarios ring true.

At best however, time in prison can be a gateway to a dream - a dream that not only leads to freedom, but one in which, at least for many women incarcerated at the Arizona State Prison Complex in Perryville, ends in a win-win scenario for all involved.

Learning marketable business-to-business skills, approximately 250 of women inmates provide telemarketing services for some of the world's most recognizable hi-tech brands including Microsoft, NetApp and Hitachi. They are employed by Televerde, a Phoenix-based, leader in marketing intelligence that contracts with the Arizona prison system.

Craig Burbidge, Vice President of Microsoft Global Practices at Hitachi Consulting in Irvine, California, (a division of Hitachi, Ltd) heads Hitachi's CRM and ERP campaigns with Televerde. Nearly 30 percent of the Fortune 100 comprises the Hitachi Consulting client base.

For the past several years, Hitachi Consulting, through a referral from Microsoft, uses Televerde services to create demand for Hitachi Consulting Microsoft-related business. It didn't make economical sense, Burbidge says, to go through a lengthy hiring process for each specific call campaign since needs vary.

"It's a numbers game," says Burbidge.

"We need to have someone on the phone eight hours a day every day to find out where the opportunities are. Managing that internally would be challenging," he says.

"The advantage in outsourcing to Televerde is that we're using experts. They already know what works, what doesn't work. It improves our ROI since they can make more calls," notes Burbidge.

"The success of each campaign speaks volumes about the level of professionalism of the women," Burbidge adds. He recalls that he did not find out until the middle of the second campaign with Televerde that the women who were speaking to Hitachi's C-level clients were incarcerated.

"I can see why there'd be a lot of benefits and reasons to promote it but they (Televerde) don't," Burbidge observes. "Some folks might take issue with it, mainly because television shows highlight the worst. Honestly, I don't know if I would have gotten it either. But now I've had the experience of working with them and they have had a huge impact on the success of our business," Burbidge points out.

"In fact, we've even said to Televerde that unless we could keep one of the women (an inmate working for Televerde on a Hitachi campaign) as our dedicated project coordinator, we wouldn't use them. That's how much I could count on her to get the job done," Burbidge adds.

While he finds it difficult to put a precise number on how much Hitachi has profited using Televerde's approach, Burbidge is now a believer in the Televerde methodology, delivering more impact than other marketing methods Hitachi Consulting has used, such as direct mail or email blasts.

"What we're selling is complex and expensive business solutions software and services, not widgets," says Burbidge. "A transaction will run \$250,000 up to several million dollars. We have to have weekly status calls with our team which these women are a part of. They want to hear what we've accomplished and that what they do matters. Due to their previous situations, they haven't had this kind of feedback or opportunity before," Burbidge notes.



Craig Burbidge, Vice President of Microsoft Global Practices at Hitachi Consulting in Irvine, California has high praise for the Televerde methodology.

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"We're hugely appreciative of and value what they do and it takes a certain person and level of character to do it," Burbidge concludes.

The Metamorphosis of Rebecca Morgan

"Set the bar of excellence high and incrementally raise it from there," is Televerde CEO Jim Hooker's motto regarding the program. In place since 1995, the bar he is talking about leads to freedom. This 'workforce development initiative' has proven that by getting inmates to think about the future through learning interpersonal skills, building self confidence and being mentored by professionals, their entire lives change.

Rebecca Morgan, 34, is one stellar example of how that is so. With shoulder length brownish-black hair, parted on the side and green eyes, wearing a pink sweater and brown pin striped slacks, no one would guess that such a charming, articulate woman once "did time" at Perryville. More than three years, she tells a visitor.

Rebecca could have walked into any corporate office unnoticed except perhaps for the tattoo on her upper right arm. Still, a band of colorful ink circling a bicep is no giveaway these days to a previous life behind bars. With an air of confidence and enthusiasm, she describes the journey that led from a bad choice that landed her in prison to a dream job inside the corporate headquarters of Televerde.

"I made some poor choices," Morgan says. "But we don't identify with our crimes anymore and we don't ask or talk about others crimes who are employed here. It doesn't serve any purpose and it's not who we are," she adds.

"I'll only share that I did 3 ½ years at Perryville and was released in July 2005. I started with Televerde in 2003 while still in. When I got in, I'm thinking to myself, 'You've done it now. Now what are you going to do.' It was interesting because I didn't come from the same background that a lot of the women in here do. I had a pretty stable home and good family. My father was in the military and we had good values. So when I went in (to prison), I was going in with the idea of taking full advantage of using the time to change," she recalls.

"It was the first time in my life I can remember where my focus was entirely on me," Morgan says.



Rebecca Morgan, human resources assistant for Televerde, and a success story for the company's B2B programs.

Morgan attributes that focus to the way that prison time is structured. Typically, there aren't many opportunities to do much with one's time and all daily responsibilities like getting to work, paying bills, raising kids and other obligations are taken away - there is little left to worry about. For those who want to keep busy however, Morgan feels the door at Perryville, and in particular the Televerde program, is open if someone has the desire to walk through it.

"If we could figure out the difference between people who don't use the time well," says Morgan, "and those who do, and bottle it, there'd be a lot of change. But you have to be ready to change yourself. Some aren't ready to do that yet but the ones who are, look at the reasons that got them into prison and are done with it. If they really get that they don't belong there, they do well."

As a former inmate and now a human resources assistant for Televerde, Morgan believes that the Televerde program inspires change not just because it's a job. Jobs exist throughout the prison system that don't lead to such positive transformation in one's life. The women change she asserts because the pieces previously missing from their lives are put back into place: self esteem; feeling one can actually do something constructive with life; and experiencing some small success in business activity.

"These women never thought they could get on phone and talk to high-level execs, who don't know by the way that they're calling from in prison," Morgan points out.

"Interacting with people who respect and listen to you is a very empowering feeling," she adds. Many in the Televerde program don't have much to begin with. "But they come to these jobs and put their heart and soul into it," Morgan says.

Taking stacks of technical documentation, Televerde's teams learn the material, and make calls in marketing campaigns that get results.

"It sure makes them feel they've achieved something," says Morgan. "You want to keep that going and that is what Televerde does. So, by taking on more responsibility you feel like a person again," Morgan concludes.

Apparently, working for Televerde is the most coveted job on the yard. There are four different call centers with 50 to 80 seats each. The day starts early, usually at six o'clock in the morning, to service clients based on the East coast. Other shifts may begin at eight and end at five in the afternoon to service the West coast. Morgan notes that most other jobs available at the prison pay between ten and fifty cents per hour while Televerde pays minimum wage. It adds up when thirty percent of wages earned is retained for spending money with the remainder going into a retention fund the inmate gets back when they are released.

If they've been incarcerated for any length of time, some see upwards of \$20,000. A portion is also taken out as rent to the state which lessens taxpayer dollars to fund prisons. Restitution is also deducted. Money remaining is released directly to the women's families which, Morgan notes, is "another way to empower because it offers support to your family when you're not there."

"Everyone wins," she says.

Morgan has completed an associate's degree and is pursuing the education necessary to become an HR manager. She dreams of moving to Denver should the Televerde prison program expand to other

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states. Yet she's also been able to live the American dream of having just closed on a "tiny little house on a great big piece of dirt", the place Morgan, her 10-year-old daughter, a dog, a cat and a frog, can call their own.

"Prison is the best thing that ever happened to me," Morgan says.

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