



THE PARADIGM PROJECT



BOARDS & SENIOR
MANAGEMENT



EMPLOYEES



ENTREPRENEURS
/ CONTRACTORS



CONSUMERS



COMMUNITY
MEMBERS

The Paradigm Project launched in 2009, seeks to bring life-changing products, services and opportunities to households at the base of the economic pyramid. The company operates a last-mile distribution and credit program under its consumer facing brand, EzyLife. EzyLife currently sells improved cookstoves, solar lights and water tanks, and has plans to expand into several other product areas in the near future. While EzyLife leverages multiple distribution networks globally, its primary distribution model is through the “EzyAgent” program. EzyAgents are highly trained employees who serve as field ambassadors for the company. They spend their time building relationships with established women’s groups in the community, leading product demonstrations, offering product financing and providing after sales service.



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An EzyAgent selling products to her network.
Photo credited to the Paradigm Project.

SUMMARY

YEAR ESTABLISHED: 2009 (EzyLife launched in 2013)

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 55

COUNTRIES OF OPERATION: Kenya, Ethiopia; Uganda forthcoming

AREAS OF VALUE CHAIN & GENDER OPPORTUNITIES INTEGRATED:

Board/Senior Management/Employees

- ☐ CEO / leadership commitment to gender equity, which is clearly communicated to managers and staff.
- ☐ Collect HR data including on recruitment, hiring, pay level, promotion and retention by gender.
- ☐ Offer trial period for sales agents.
- ☐ Screen for qualities that may be important for sales / the position.
- ☐ Create pipeline opportunities and source from within, as makes sense.
- ☐ Provide high base salary with less emphasis on commissions, per female employee requests.
- ☐ Offer flexible working opportunities (in travel requirements, scheduling meetings/work activities) based on family requirements.
- ☐ For pregnant women, consider temporary job reassignment if job requires travel and consider a modified work schedule according to the individual's needs.
- ☐ Have a paid maternity leave policy and paid paternity leave policy.
- ☐ Allow staff to travel with their children and caregivers
- ☐ Provide support in transitioning back to work for new parents.
- ☐ Provide sick leave and health care benefits.
- ☐ Provide travel allowances and/or access to things to travel (e.g. motorbikes, bicycles) - ensuring that whichever option is pursued is discussed with women.
- ☐ Provide staff with ongoing training opportunities to build skills related to sales and customer interaction.
- ☐ Provide staff with ongoing field-based mentorship support.
- ☐ Provide ongoing mentorship and training opportunities for office staff, supporting internal skills development to foster promotions from within.

Entrepreneurs/Contractors

- ☐ Identify qualities needed in women who can be potential marketers / sellers of products on commission, and engage them (acknowledging they may only engage for the short-term once exhaust current network).

Consumers

- ☐ Employ female sales agents to market and sell products that have female end users (e.g., cookstoves).
- ☐ Provide access to credit schemes.
- ☐ Identify women's groups for product marketing and sales.
- ☐ Develop financing mechanisms to enable access to products, particularly through utilizing groups to offset risks.

BUSINESS IMPACTS:

- ☐ Greater retention of women.
- ☐ Increased participation of women in sales and management roles.
- ☐ Average sales per EzyAgent generally range from 100-150 products per month.

SOCIAL IMPACTS:

- ☐ Access to credit for low-income women.
- ☐ Increased income for women, as well as increases in abilities to save, confidence and skills.

BACKGROUND ON GENDER STRATEGY

Since launching the EzyAgent program in 2013, gender has been central to the business model. Recognizing women as end users and consumers of the products – especially for cookstoves – EzyLife leadership took a purposeful gender approach in its distribution and sales efforts. EzyLife had initially targeted hiring 50%

women as EzyAgents, but today women make up 95% of EzyAgents. EzyLife also recognized financial constraints as a large barrier for women consumers to purchase products. EzyLife therefore devised a consumer financing program targeting rural women's groups – through which they promote and finance their catalogue of clean energy and household products.

GENDER OPPORTUNITIES IMPLEMENTED & RESULTS

Consumers:

Under the EzyAgent program, EzyLife launched a direct consumer financing program – initially for clean cookstoves – in 2015. Before, EzyAgents primarily sold on a cash basis. However, customers – especially women – had limited purchasing power so EzyAgents had taken the initiative to build partnerships with local financing organizations. Ultimately, these partnerships did not work largely because they were slow to develop and had a lengthy due diligence process from the financial institutions, which deterred many customers from taking a loan. EzyLife thus moved financing in house and currently provides access to credit for all of its products to facilitate sales to women in underserved communities. This access to credit is primarily offered through women's groups – which are often mixed gender. They have a simple diligence process, after which interested individuals pay a downpayment, receive the product, and then the group has payments over 6 months. Whoever agrees to opt in pays together so

they are collectively responsible. Approximately 40% of new customers are receiving their first access to credit through EzyLife. Since 2015, EzyLife has provided over \$1 million in loans to low-income Kenyan households.

EzyAgents primarily market to groups, particularly women's groups, but also men's groups, mixed gender groups and youth groups. To ensure women are engaged and available, EzyAgents align demonstrations and sales activities around existing group meetings and group members' schedules. Providing a great deal of scheduling flexibility to EzyAgents allows them to determine the best time and place to meet with different women's groups. Products are then delivered by a driver, and payments collected by the EzyAgents over the 6-months.

Employees: Sales Agents

Product demonstrations, especially for cookstoves, tend to favor women as sales agents, since many Kenyan men view cooking as 'women's work' and feel less comfortable conducting a demonstration. Female EzyAgents are also able to tap into their existing participation in women's groups to grow their network organically. These

natural advantages for women foster recruitment and retention of female EzyAgents as the program grows.

In order to create a gender inclusive hiring process, EzyLife initially tested an interview and psychometric test, which would objectively look for personality traits that EzyLife hypothesized would lead to a good sales agent. The interview process – which was developed and tested with support from the Women’s Empowerment Fund of the Global Alliance for Clean Cookstoves – sought to identify high-potential candidates who were the ‘right fit’ for a sales agent and included a short questionnaire. EzyLife dropped the psychometric testing within 6 months after recognizing that there was little correlation between an EzyAgents psychological profile and her long-term performance. The team realized that individuals in sales roles need self-motivation (including passion for the work), organization, integrity and the ability to thrive on customer interactions – which are hard qualities to test for up front.

EzyLife pivoted towards a training-based model with an initial trial period and long-term mentoring program. The current recruitment process starts with veteran EzyAgents interviewing the candidate to assess whether they would be a good fit. Then the candidate goes through a short training and one-month trial period during which they have to sell a certain amount of product. This phase is quite intense, with only 15-30% of candidates passing. However, this makes it effective at identifying individuals with the required self-motivation to be EzyAgents. They are then accepted into the mentorship program, shadow several sales agents and spend time at headquarters to go through trainings on processes at the organization. If they show proficiency in this mentorship phase, they are then extended a conditional offer of employment. The new EzyAgent then spends one month focused on business development and relationship building in the community where they will be working, and then the next month must meet a rigorous sales target on a cash or credit basis. Each new agent is given two opportunities to pass this phase, and those who do become confirmed staff members. Due to the amount of training invested, the graduation rates at this final stage are high. This process creates a more even playing field by focusing on aptitude to work within the program without emphasizing education or past work history.

Ongoing training and mentorship is key to the EzyLife program. Trainings focus on skills building – including on computers, record keeping and sales strategies. Mentorship through field-based managerial support is critical in boosting confidence and helping agents resolve practical



An EzyAgent.
Photo credited to the Paradigm Project.

issues. This support helps encourage EzyAgents' independence and improve confidence, while also enhancing the sense of being part of a team. This model also encourages and integrates feedback loops – whereby EzyAgents can provide open and honest communication regarding what was happening in the field and support they may need. Importantly, this requires a strong corporate culture of inclusiveness and mutual accountability, which fosters trust between employees and managers. Employees need to feel safe voicing concerns and working with management to identify and remove barriers to equity, and managers need to show willingness to listen and act on employee feedback and are responsible for creating this culture. In the words of Paradigm CEO David Barber, "This is especially important for leaders who are managing cross-culturally as local employees will often understand issues and offer perspectives that may be difficult for an expat manager to readily identify."

There remain challenges for EzyAgents – including travel environmental challenges such as dust and floods and limited travel allowance to meet the longer distances they must travel to get to new business as they saturate their network in an area. Female EzyAgents generally report that their husbands are supportive, and take care of the kids at home, or they can hire childcare support. EzyLife did not explicitly design a program to focus on women versus men. Johanna says: "[We] wanted to create a level playing field

that would give women an equal opportunity to succeed." EzyLife's initial EzyAgent team of 6 women and 3 men has grown to a team of 18 women and 1 man. EzyLife finds that female EzyAgents are consistently outperforming their male counterparts, earning more performance-based bonuses, receiving more opportunities for promotions and meeting their sales targets over a longer period. According to Johanna, "Men tend to burn out more quickly."

EzyLife focuses on creating pipeline opportunities for EzyAgents and promoting from within. While the EzyAgent position is an entry-level job, key pipeline opportunities are provided for high performers. Working as an EzyAgent allows leadership to understand a clear picture of the candidate's work ethic and cultural fit. Promoting from within also motivates EzyAgents to perform at their best. Since beginning the program, there have been various promotions of female EzyAgents. One woman was promoted to lead EzyLife Kenya's operations, while several others have received promotions to become managers and administrative staff. According to David, the mentorship programs mentioned before are important in developing this talent pipeline. Women in management and leadership positions have served as role models to other women inside and outside the company, while the growing female presence in management has also created a supportive environment for women throughout the organization.

Internal policies


Each EzyAgent is given a base salary. In addition to health and retirement benefits and product sales commission in the form of a bonus. The base salary is ~\$350/month for entry level agents and increases over time as agents meet their monthly target sales (120 products/month). Bonuses are paid for outperformance (over 150 sales in a month). There is also a small yearly bonus based on overall performance for the year. EzyAgents' sales targets are adjusted during strategic initiatives so they are not penalized for lower sales when strategies change.

The base salary allows for focused time and high-performance expectations for EzyAgents. Initially, EzyAgents were paid lower base salaries with higher commissions. Female EzyAgents—even those that were making high amounts of commission – desired higher, stable base pay over sales commission, which was more unstable. Therefore, early on this was restructured to offer a base salary above national living wage with

smaller incentives for performance above sales targets. This also enhanced the sense of being on a team and reduced competition. Each EzyAgent still sets performance targets each month and receives customer service ratings.

EzyLife allows EzyAgents flexibility in terms of when they work. This enables them to schedule meetings around the best times and places to meet with different women's groups, and also helps the EzyAgents determine how to manage their own responsibilities outside of work.

EzyAgents face various barriers, particularly related to childcare that can make it difficult for them to perform the job. Therefore, EzyLife supports women as primary care givers for their families by offering temporary job reassignment or modified work schedules during pregnancy, maternity leave (3-months of leave, as mandated by Kenyan law) and support in transitioning back to work, as well as allowing staff to travel with their children and caregivers. In particular, new mothers are given 3 additional months of flexible work where they work half days at full pay. EzyLife is in the process of standardizing this policy across all countries of operation. Men are given two-weeks of paternity leave – also mandated through Kenyan law. EzyLife admits that this is still a challenge and work in progress. As Johanna puts it: "At any given time we have a handful of women who are pregnant or having a child. It's an ongoing challenge to modify work schedules and provide extra time off." This is provided on an individual basis depending on what the individual woman feels she needs and what works for the organization. Regardless, the organization emphasizes that the individual will have a job when she is back.



When I compare my life from the past and my life now, my life now is better...I feel good I can give money to my family. We always pray for EzyLife to grow. We want more women to be able to do this."

—EZYLIFE FOCUS GROUP
DISCUSSION PARTICIPANT



LESSONS LEARNED:

1. Sales agents should schedule meetings / work schedule and meeting locations around women's schedules; remain flexible.
2. Sales demonstrations are key and naturally favor women as cookstove sellers, since many Kenyan men view cooking as 'women's work' and feel less comfortable conducting a demonstration.
3. In targeting sales to women's groups, female sales agents are better able to grow their network organically from their existing participation in women's groups, which create natural advantages for female sales agents.
4. Providing continual training on relevant topics, as well as ongoing mentorship, is key to support sales agents in reaching sales goals and improving confidence and independence.
5. Female sales agents value stable compensation much more than commission (while male agents prefer higher commission); this highlights that entrepreneurship models aren't necessarily the right model for all and sometimes a stable, full-time job is better - particularly for women.
6. Promoting from within provides sales agents - male and female - opportunities for advancement and also motivates sales agents to perform at their best.
7. Support women as primary care providers by offering temporary job reassignment or modified work schedules during pregnancy, allowing transition periods to return to work and supporting staff to travel with their children and caregivers.
8. Commitment from the top is critical both in implementing a gender lens and in creating a culture of mutual accountability. This requires the complete buy-in of senior leadership and accountability at the board level.

IMPACTS:

Business impacts:

- Consumer financing program targeting rural women's groups generated sales to approximately 30,000 households.
- In the period of April 2014 to April 2015, 50% of women hired (or 3 of 6) were retained, while 33% of men (or 1 of 3) were retained. Today, there are 18 female EzyAgents and 1 male EzyAgent - reflecting greater retention of female EzyAgents over time as well as women applying to and receiving the position.
- From April 2015 to June 2015, average sales are 61 sales for the average male agent and 78 sales for averaged female agents. Over time, this has improved, and the current (95% female team) averages 100-150 sales a month each, with just one man, data cannot be meaningfully disaggregated by sex).
- EzyAgents have high job satisfaction and rarely resign. Most transition is due to consistent underperformance (selling less than 100 stoves/ month).

Social impacts:

- EzyLife estimates that 40% of new EzyLife customers are receiving their first access to credit through EzyLife.
- Since 2015, EzyLife has provided over \$1M in loans to low-income Kenyan households.
- Women report income earned being primarily used for school fees, clothing and food.
- Women reported an increase in their ability to save (exact figures for change in savings unknown).
- EzyLife's cookstoves reduce fuel expenditures by approximately 50%.
- Women report increased respect from community members, improved networks within the communities where they are working and increased confidence in speaking to new people and developing business relationships.
- Women reported an increase in confidence speaking in public and through improved status with their full-time job.

Organizational impacts:

- EzyLife is now expanding to Uganda with an operating model focusing on equitable recruitment and growth opportunities.

This case study was conducted through (1) a review of Paradigm Project program documentation from the Global Alliance for Clean Cookstoves' Women's Empowerment Fund, (2) interviews conducted with leadership and management at Paradigm Project, and (3) a focus group discussion with EzyAgents.