

## **Icares - find your suitable path in study or profession**

*Case description, Pieter Wanten (August, 2024)*

### **Description Icares**

Icares is an Eindhoven-based company focused on the development and delivery of digital tests in the field of study and career guidance. Icares, which stands for “International Career and Education Services,” offers a wide range of solutions that help both educational institutions and companies optimize career development. The company currently employs 7 people and uses the services of freelancers for tasks such as programming and marketing.



### **Social innovation**

According to employees, Icares is organized horizontally and there is no hierarchy within the company. The lines of communication to colleagues are short and there is an informal and confidential atmosphere. The open space, where all employees are located, and the glass door to the director's office emphasize, and contribute to, this open culture.

### **Services and clients**

The services Icares provides include online testing, career advice, and labor market intelligence platforms that provide users with personalized insights and recommendations.

Icares products are divided into two blocks; Icares Professional and Icares Study. Icares Professional is aimed at organizations that use Icares' advanced products and services. This includes career counselors, job coaches, and institutions such as hospitals and mental health facilities (GGZ's). Icares offers the ability to professionally support clients with career questions with online tests and detailed reports. For example, Icares has developed an occupational test where more than 3,800 Dutch occupations are ranked in order of interest through 77 questions. There is also a wide range of tests that focus on, for example, career values, talents and competencies, functional limitations or profile choice. In this way, Icares ensures that professionals can independently choose particular tests that suit their clients. After the tests are completed by the clients, a report can also be generated that gives the professionals a clear insight into interests, values, attitudes and preferences.

In addition to these online services, Icares also offers physical training sessions for professionals who want to become more proficient in their work in general and in the use of tests in particular. During these trainings, the professionals are supervised by an Icares employee who himself has worked as a career counselor for many years. The trainings are held at the Icares office or on location.

Furthermore, Icares works for educational institutions, such as universities, colleges and ROCs, to support young people in their career choices with an extensive international search portal. This portal, Icares Study, allows free searches for courses at many levels in 123 countries.

The ultimate goal of Icares' services is to broaden the horizons of workers, job seekers and young people (students), helping them with tools to arrive at new insights and end up in a well-suited place (study and/or profession).

Currently, Icares is contacted by a potential client, for whom there is an available demo for a limited time. After the demo period, the interested person/company is contacted to see if they would like to become a client. If so, the form of contract is established and a processing agreement (AVG to ensure

privacy) is signed. There is one permanent employee who performs this task, but in their absence colleagues can take over.

### **Vision and mission**

At Icares, they strive for every individual to find an appropriate direction in both study and profession. The company believes that tests and tools provide valuable support in making choices, both academically and professionally, and with respect to personal interests and attitudes, both nationally and internationally. Icares' logo reflects this vision. The feather symbolizes spreading your wings to expand your horizons. The feather is also the forerunner of the pen. If you know what you want, you can develop further.

This is why Icares has formulated the following mission: the tools of Icares offer added value in the market by broadening the horizons of users and leading to new (self-)insights. The company's goal is to help people find a suitable place, whether in work or study, within or outside The Netherlands. A suitable study and/or work environment not only contributes to personal happiness, but is virtually essential for it.

### **Strategy**

The company's strategy is currently focused on expanding its customer base, both within the Netherlands and internationally. According to employees, there is a great opportunity for improvement within marketing and sales, with new products that seem to offer sufficient opportunities to attract new customers.

Specific goals for the coming period have been established by the director in good consultation with the team. Although meetings take place only a few times a year, concrete steps are discussed and established during these meetings. The director values support within the team, as plans without consensus have little effect. In practice, consensus is usually reached, with all employees providing input.

### **Structure**

As already mentioned, Icares' organizational structure can be described as horizontal. On paper, the director, and also owner of the company, stands above the other employees within the organization, but in practice, according to the employees, this is hardly noticeable. Besides the director, there are 6 employees on the permanent payroll and freelancers are used for other tasks. This applies to marketing & sales, programming and translation activities. There is sporadic work for the translators, the programmer wants to work for his own, and the freelancer for marketing & sales may eventually consider becoming a permanent employee.

### **Tasks**

Within the structure at Icares, each employee has a different task to perform. For example, one employee focuses on Icares Professional and human resources, where another focuses on Icares Study. Data management and ICT-related matters are handled by one employee, and the company's financial arm and administration is also handled by a single employee. Furthermore, one employee handles design and the newsletter and the other functions as the office manager. In addition, the freelancers handle tasks such as translation, programming and marketing & sales on behalf of Icares.

In addition to performing their duties, the employees also help each other perform smaller related tasks such as answering the support phone. This phone rings when customers want to ask a question

or need more information about a product. Although this is officially the job of one employee, the other employees often jump in should that person be busy or unavailable at the time.

### **Working method**

Within Icares, they assume the employees' own thinking skills and a high degree of independence is expected from everyone. Reporting is not an issue. It is assumed that every employee performs his/her work properly and, when in doubt, consults a colleague for help. In this way, employees feel responsible for their own work which gives them satisfaction.

### ***Flexible working***

Within this structure, much attention is paid to making labor flexible. In many ways this emerges within the organization. For example, working from home is made possible. Furthermore, the amount of collaboration between employees allows for flexibility. Since most employees are in the same open space, there is the opportunity for consultation and this is frequently used. In this way, the workers have a good idea of what the others are doing and can also step in when needed. Furthermore, important decisions are often deliberated on together; this is done jointly on the work floor and often outside of formal meetings.

### ***Working smarter***

Icares works smarter by using AI, which is mainly used as a translation service. Using AI as a translation tool saves the company both time and money, as previously translators were doing this work as freelancers. Furthermore, the company also uses AI to create content that they use on their site such as images. Before AI was used, pictures had to be created or purchased, for example, to depict professions. Nowadays, images can be generated with AI.

### **Culture**

The idea for using AI came from the employees, who are also encouraged to share their ideas within the group. There is always an open response to this, according to employees, and people are happy to give their opinions on how they might do things differently/better. This is one of many examples of how people work with each other within Icares. Employees are open to ideas from their colleagues, and in this way new opportunities are sought together within the company.

Cooperation at Icares is almost exclusively informal; the use of formal meetings is kept to a minimum. Team meetings take place only once every quarter because of this. More is not necessary, according to the director. This opinion is also shared by the employees. The reason, as mentioned earlier, is the open office and the interaction between employees in their daily work.

A quote from the interviews that best describes the culture at Icares is the following: 'It doesn't have to be seen as work.' This quote from one of the employees shows that the safe and friendly atmosphere envisioned by the director when the company was founded, has truly been achieved. The personal level of the employee is important within the company and time is taken, by both the director and colleagues, to talk to an employee should they feel the need. People's private situation cannot be seen separately from their performance in the workplace, and it is therefore important to pay attention to this as well.

A good example of this is the search for a good solution for an employee who, due to illness, is often unable to attend the office for full days. This affects the employee's productivity and the interaction between employees. After consultation between employee and director, it was decided that this person himself would come to the office on days when he felt well and could work from home on

'lesser' days. The flexibility of the director in this situation also shows in practice that the best, for both employer and employee, solution is sought together with the employees.

The culture that prevails within the company is also transferred toward the customers. It is important for the employees to help customers in the way they would like to be helped themselves. They do this by taking the time for each customer and supporting them in such a way that they can optimally use Icares' products.

### **Lessons learned**

When the company was founded, the director's plan was to create a workplace where every employee felt at home and could be themselves. In the years since, it has become clear that this is possible within Icares and that it is very important for employees to feel at ease and dare to make mistakes. A manager or team leader who turns a blind eye to other employees is not going to help this company, which is an important 'take-away message' from Icares.

The marketing-sales aspect within Icares clearly needed more attention in the company's early years. It is ultimately important for any company to bring in money to ensure the continuity of the business. An important lesson for Icares is that they should not have underemphasized this part. This was eventually solved by bringing in a freelancer to support in the area of marketing and sales.

One of the main reasons that things go well within Icares are the valuable relationships between employees. The number of permanent employees is small and therefore it is very important that everyone knows what is going on within the company and with the different tasks of the employees. In this way, they can help each other and together manage someone else's work should they be unexpectedly absent.

### **Justification**

This case description was prepared based on interviews with several employees of Icares; the director, four permanent employees and one freelancer. In preparation, the company's website was viewed and after my visit to the company, I had the opportunity to use some of Icares' products myself to get a good idea of their services.