

*Photo text:*

EXECUTIVE SCHOOL. Handheld of Lidköping is securing its future managerial competence by recruiting trainees who assume key positions in the company directly afterwards. From left to right: Christoffer Lander, head of the trainee programme, Christian Löfvendahl, trainee, Thomas Löfblad, co-owner, and Johan Liljenberg, trainee.

PHOTO: MIKAEL LJUNGSTRÖM

# A fast-track career in a small company

## Handheld starts a trainee programme to attract potential managers

**The Handheld Group in Lidköping has followed the example of large companies and started a trainee programme to secure its future managerial competence.**

**Its initiative has attracted enormous interest.**

**Co-owner Thomas Löfblad believes that the prospect of a fast-track career appeals to the applicants.**

The Handheld Group, which sells rugged computers, was founded in 1997 and has expanded strongly since 2003. The company now has offices not only in Sweden but also in Finland, Italy, the Netherlands and the USA.

In 2008 and 2009, Handheld Group was nominated as a “gazelle” company by DI. The company has over 30 employees and turned over SEK 120 million last year.

“We are growing tremendously quickly and can see that the availability of suitable managers would be a future bottleneck for us”, says Thomas Löfblad, one of Handheld’s two co-owners.

“That’s why we took care during the economic downturn to set up a trainee programme to groom the managers we need.”

The Handheld Group works together with training company ITM Worldwide, a spin-off from the Swedish Trade Council, which has in its turn run export sales training programmes in Lidköping for small and mid-sized businesses since 1994.

The two companies came into contact almost two years ago, when ITM Worldwide was looking for a practical placement for Christoffer Lander, a participant in its export marketing training course. Instead, he was recruited by the Handheld Group and attended the training course while working for the company in parallel. Today he is responsible for the new trainee programme.

“It was an interesting training course and it worked out well to have him join the company. So we thought we would put the whole thing on a more formal basis”, observes Thomas Löfblad.

### “A major investment”

It was the starting point of the trainee programme, which took time and energy to prepare.

“This is a major investment for us. I don’t know exactly what it cost us, but it certainly takes considerable effort for an organisation to do this if it is done well.”

“We’ve invested time in preparing the programme, we have produced study material and our staff will be running seminars as well as acting as mentors.”

### Many applicants

Two trainees were taken on during the first year of the programme, but Thomas Löfblad says there will be more in future.

“When something new is started, it’s natural to be a bit nervous about how much interest there will be. Not so many small and mid-sized businesses run trainee programmes. But we received 131 applications for the two vacancies. We had not dared to hope for such a response.”

In a better economic situation, the Handheld Group would have been overshadowed by large companies, especially in Gothenburg, but also in Stockholm.

“But many of the large companies who take on many people in boom times are less likely to be recruiting today”, says Thomas Löfblad.

Handheld’s two trainees undergo a year-long programme with theory and practice in Sweden as well as a hands-on period in one of the company’s international offices. Directly afterwards, they take up key positions in the company.

“What I believe has attracted applicants is that everything is much faster in a smaller company, you are given greater responsibilities more quickly and can influence your situation more than in a large one”, says Thomas Löffblad.

One of the two trainees to start Handheld's programme this year is Johan Liljenberg, who graduated in economics from the International Business School in Jönköping last spring. In the autumn he ran his own consultancy but wound it up as soon as he got his trainee placement at Handheld.

**“The right industry”**

“I hadn't heard of the company before, but I became interested when I found it in the trainee guide. This is the right industry for me. I've always been interested in computers, although I had previously thought of working with software”, he says.

He sees the advantages of starting in a smaller company rather than a large one.

“There's a great feeling in a small company, everything is more familiar”, says Johan Liljenberg.

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