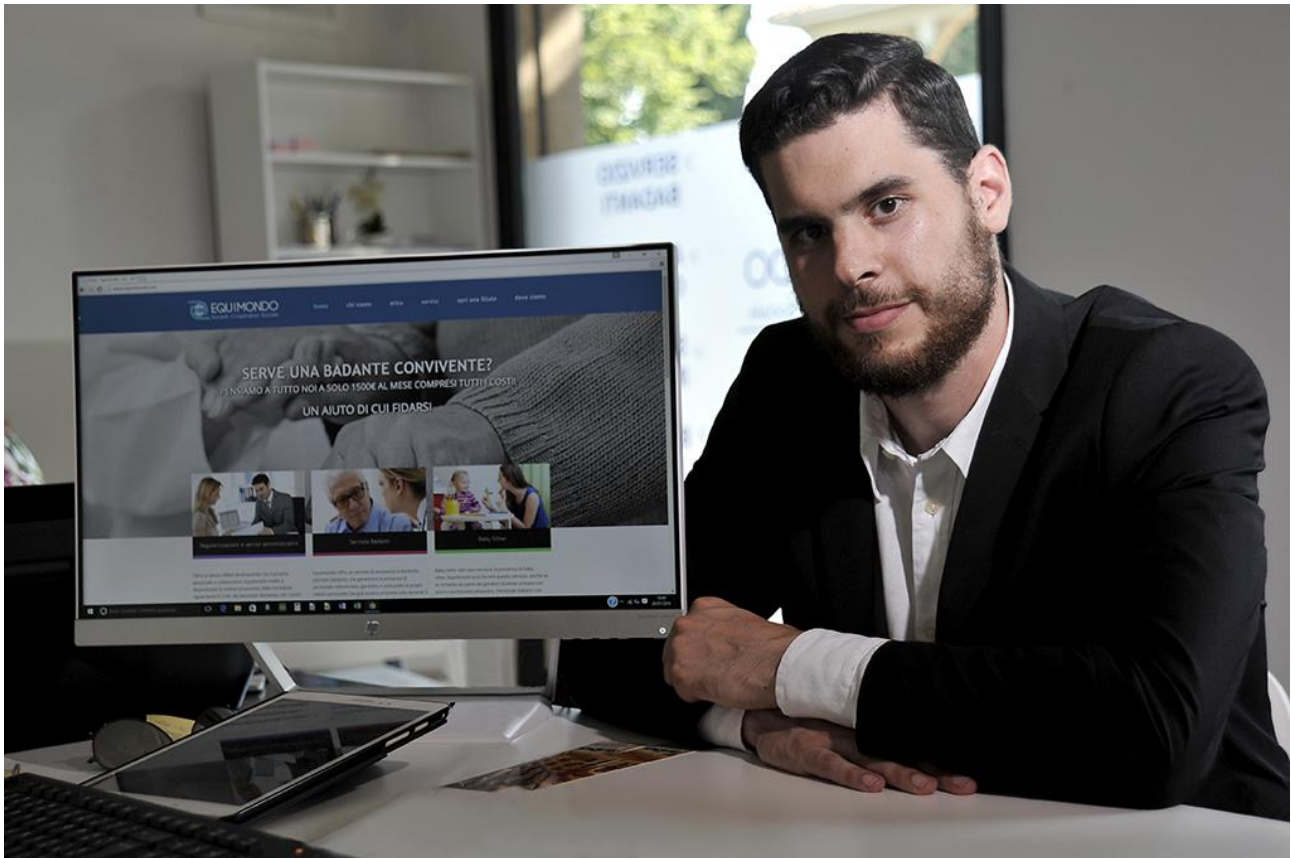


Equimondo, passion and professionalism in home-based care services

A private company offering social services: a winning idea from Martin Varotto relieving families in need of assistance from bureaucracy. Soon a model to be exported to the USA thanks to the power of the internet.



Home care and hospital-based care for self-sufficient or non-self-sufficient elderly people, and young people requiring special medical assistance with health problems. These are the services offered by Equimondo, a co-operative business based in Padova, Vigodarzere (PD) and Rovigo in Italy, that mediates between the labour supply and demand, between families and the nurses, medical social workers and carers they need. This sector is growing fast as a result of the aging of Italian society, the changing needs of the elderly today - elderly people are now more autonomous and functioning outside the old structures like nursing homes although they are increasingly suffering from chronic illnesses - and the red tape families face when trying to employ a carer on a temporary basis. The sector is expanding rapidly, so much so that Martin Varotto, sole director of Equimondo, is already working to export this type of mediation business model to the United States, via an online portal. This modern start-up aimed at domestic workers will also launch a portal in Italy in due course.

The Equimondo co-operative was born in response to a real need experienced the hard way by Martino Varotto himself, the young managing director who created the company two years ago. His family had found itself suddenly having to cope with a family member who fell ill and remained so for a long period. They had to negotiate the complex bureaucratic maze and the problems there are in matching demand and labour supply in the home care environment. This includes nurses and medical social workers, carers and finding domestic cleaning helpers. Having to find professionals quickly to play such a key role for an elderly man approaching the end of his life, with no research assistance, but rather only legal complications, made it clear to Varotto the potential value of such a service, albeit run privately, but with great social value. So, together with four partners, Varotto embarked on this adventure.

Equimondo handles the selection and supply of the right personnel for home care for families, according to their needs and the specialisation required. The company works in a "traditional" way: interviews are held in the Equimondo offices of people interested in working with families and we then shortlist potential candidates. Indeed, the quality of the personnel is one of Equimondo's trump cards and it makes all the difference for customers. They turn to the co-operative because they suddenly find themselves having to share their living space and their waking hours with people who were previously complete strangers. In selecting staff, Equimondo applies very strict criteria: we find out all about their experience; take up their references; find out about their educational qualifications and personal history as well as their reasons for wanting this kind of work. We also establish their availability and reliability and decide if they are suitable for the needs of our clients. For this reason, before the family concerned proceeds with the recruitment of a worker, Equimondo provides for a 30-day trial period. "Going to work within a home environment is not easy, especially for caregivers," explains Varotto. "Every family and every elderly person has their own habits, as do the carers themselves. Families do not always take to having a stranger living with them 24 hours a day. The law allows for a 30 day trial before employment so it's only right that families exercise this right."

The final employment process itself does not go through the Co-operative, but is entrusted to the customer, with Equimondo's assistance and help with the paperwork, and drawing up the usual domestic worker contract. "Hiring people and handling labour administration is legal only for temporary work agencies, for which there are specific requirements," explains Varotto. "So one should be wary of co-operatives who employ carers directly rather than households, and who tell clients that the family will not be held liable should there be future legal cases: there have been convictions in many legal cases brought, where the family the carers worked for have been shown to have joint responsibility where carers have sued regarding their hiring or working conditions. And above all, in such cases, the quality and continuity of service is never guaranteed because in these types of contracts carers are paid much less (foreigners' contracts or agreements are quite precarious) because the agency also needs to earn out of the arrangement."

Varotto's idea, however, does not end with Equimondo: for months he has been developing the online Time.Care portal: an innovative start-up bringing together demand and labour supply for jobs in the home environment.. By registering on the Time.Care site you can select nannies, housekeepers, babysitters, nurses and anyone else who provides home-based services. You can see a profile showing the person's skills, photographs, references, and feedback from their previous employers. The information is all presented in a simple and intuitive way and there is access to legal and bureaucratic assistance from industry experts. This is a site that goes far beyond simple classified ads. It is being launched in Italy in September.