

Limitations of setting up a small business for people with learning disabilities

Although setting up a small business is an attractive idea there is now enough experience to indicate that there are severe limitations as a way of getting people with learning disabilities into employment.

Small businesses for one or two people with learning disabilities, perhaps together with one or a few non disabled people, might be viable and well worth pursuing. However, many operations intended as small businesses for employing people with learning disabilities have five, ten or more service users. These operations often have more in common with contract work in day centres than with proper businesses.

The Business

- Why bother setting up a business when there are many businesses set up already and which generally provide better pay and conditions?
- It generally takes a very big investment of time, effort and expertise to make a success of a business. Capital outlay can be heavy. Available resources put into supported employment would be far more cost effective in terms of getting people into work. Small businesses therefore can be expensive and wasteful.
- Small businesses tend to be very fragile even in the long term.
- Operations are often not business oriented with the imperative of profit and making a living.
- A welfare culture may substitute for a business culture and connections. Most workers in caring services have no business acumen or experience.
- There is often a conflict between production and training. People with learning disabilities are likely to need training which takes time away from production. If emphasis is on production then training is likely to be neglected.
- It is difficult to avoid relying on external inputs or charity to keep afloat. The image is intensified of people with learning disabilities as a costly burden.
- The work is often not real work.
- A small new business is not likely to be able to afford support staff.

The Workers

- Numbers of people with disabilities in small businesses are often too great for integration. Their visibility is therefore high with increasing danger of a charity image.
- Work can be badly paid and for long hours. Workers are often not paid proper wages.
- The operation may come to rely on the most capable workers who are not encouraged to move on to more integrated employment.
- If there is throughput there may be an assumption that all people with learning disabilities in the locality 'need' or want the kind of work offered by the small business e.g. horticulture or furniture renovation.
- It would be difficult to involve people with learning difficulties in the set up stage. Entrepreneurs work primarily for themselves. Generally they don't set businesses up in order to give them away. This takes away ownership from people with learning disabilities and so they don't get the glory.
- There is a danger of the enterprise serving the needs of the manager rather than the people with disabilities.
- Often small businesses are used as a base for training, work experience and preparation for open employment. Problems of skill transfer and greatly reduced choice due to experiences being limited to narrow field of work are likely.

For all these reasons small businesses employing more than three or four people with learning disabilities cannot compete with supported employment as a cost effective approach to job placement for people with learning disabilities. They are usually more accurately described as pseudo businesses.

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