

Guest Editorial

Is self employment a cop-out?

Editor's Comment

Perhaps one of the fastest growing types of integrated employment choices is self employment. Clearly, the development of starting one's own business is an incredible accomplishment. This would seem inconceivable because of the challenges and complexities, for many people with disabilities. Yet, in a few short years, Cary Griffin and Dave Hammis have been all over the world helping persons with many types of disabilities do just that – start their own business. Recently, Cary and Dave shared with the *Journal* some of their most recent musings about self employment as an option. Here is what they had to say.

Paul Wehman
Editor

Guest Editorial

In 1979, we assisted in the start-up of a successful small business owned and operated by two individuals with developmental disabilities. We did the same in the early and the mid-eighties, again with folks with developmental disabilities, and also with psychiatric labels. But it was not until the mid-nineties that our colleagues began promoting business ownership as a legitimate option.

What took us so long? Mike Callahan, of Employment for All suggests, correctly we think, that those of us early adopters of supported employment feared a home-based business model arising from our dabblings in entrepreneurship and consciously decided to yield to our "inclusionist" values. Our fears of further isolating people with significant disabilities by having them produce products in their basements suppressed the growth of self employment. By the mid-nineties we realized that self employment, whether conducted from

home or from a store-front, offers tremendous opportunities for inclusion because of the supplier and customer chains that all enterprises develop and rely on for success. Certainly our environment in the frontier West and on Indian Reservations contributed to the evolution of the self employment option as well, and the willingness of Vocational Rehabilitation Counselors and the State Work Force Investment office to fund small business was critical and integral to the effort. Our experience with job development is in large part grounded in rural communities, but in Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, and other rural states we discovered a paucity of trained staff and limited options for individual vocational choice, especially for individuals with the most complex support needs.

Self employment holds the promise of financial equity, contains unique opportunities under the Social Security Act, and presents options for personalized accommodations not easily found in wage employment. These factors, coupled with the desire to expand the possible range of employment choices allowed self employment to grow. Of course, the rehabilitation literature notes that self employment as an option for people with disabilities has existed for some time. However, self employment for individuals with disabilities is traditionally grounded in the competitive employment approach including the "train and place" readiness model, vocational evaluation of a person's suitability for business ownership, and a bias against serious intellectual deficits as measured through IQ testing and psychometrics. Self employment of yesterday, and still today, is reserved primarily for individuals with physical disabilities.

Our experience in supported employment for people with complex needs, along with the economic and geographical environment of the West, made self employment an attractive consideration. Business ownership is only one of many vocational nuances and should remain so. Our approach remains person-centered and

we gently nudge more people away from self employment than into it. Why? Simply because in many cases the necessary supports, both natural and rehabilitative, are not available to support a business, because no market can yet be developed for the product or service idea, or because self employment is being considered only because competitive or supported employment has not worked or appears to be too difficult to achieve. And therein lies the rub.

Is self employment and micro-enterprise being promoted because job development efforts have failed, or perhaps because the complex support needs of individuals are perceived to be too difficult to accommodate through wage employment? It appears that self employment in some cases is being utilized for exactly these reasons. Recently we have witnessed several poverty-level businesses, often based on arts and crafts ideas, or on the six deadly sins of supported employment (food, flowers, filth, filing, folding, and fetching). These businesses may well be based on person-centered approaches, but they struggle to account also for a good match with business supports and market development. In these cases, the businesses flounder, generate wages low enough to rival those earned in a sheltered workshop, and squander perhaps the one true opportunity the individual has to break free of the system; or they are only slightly removed from selling pot holders and trinkets made in the day-activity center in creativity and symbolism. Some of these attempts, as well meaning as they are, do not employ business methods that assure profitability; underutilize the rehabilitation and generic business development systems that can adequately capitalize and stabilize enterprises; and often ignore the impact and opportunities of Social Security Work Incentives. In short, some of these businesses allow people (both owner and staff people) to look incompetent in the community and do not use the forethought necessary for long-term success.

Self employment is not a good substitute for proper job development, systematic instruction, and natural support. Using these techniques, people experiencing the most significant developmental, psychiatric, brain injury, behavioral, and physical disability labels can work and prosper. One has only to look at the successful employment generated by such folks as Paul Wehman et al. in Virginia, Jo-Ann Sowers in Oregon, Gary Bond and Pat Rogan in Indiana, Robert Drake in New Hampshire, Mike Callahan in Mississippi, Ellen Condon in Montana, and others across the country, to

know that anyone can work when proper supports and techniques are used. Fear of the community, poor job development technique, limited vision when facilitating supports, and misunderstanding of funding streams appears to be driving self employment in just a few cases. Our inability to master and employ proven rehabilitation techniques, and our discomfort with the business community should NEVER influence the vocational choices of people we serve. And, traditionally, most business owners in the United States labored in wage jobs long before starting their own companies. Wage employment teaches people valuable lessons and creates a vital social and business network. This established network is often a critical ingredient for success when the employee launches their new enterprise. Wage employment is certainly not a pre-requisite to business ownership, nor should it be seen as readiness. Many people will, and should, start successful small companies without experience.

All ideas contain the seeds of their own destruction. Supported employment in many instances was poorly implemented and half-heartedly maintained, and still it remains the single most powerful, efficient and cost-effective method of employment for individuals with significant disabilities. Done correctly, supported employment allows the natural capacity of the community to address unemployment by drawing upon the less brutal aspects of capitalism and competition. We have the opportunity to make business ownership a truly individualized option, let's not use it as a cop-out because we are fearful of employers and the communities they help to build. Job development is challenging, and assisting an employer in hiring and supporting someone with multiple needs can be difficult, but building communities of economic cooperation demands that we get smart and work hard to emancipate people from lives of poverty and isolation within the social services system.

"If everything seems under control, you're just not going fast enough."

M. Andretti

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