

ENTREPRENEURSHIP: A FLEXIBLE ROUTE TO ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES



In recent years, changes in the global marketplace have significantly altered the character of the nation's workforce. Trends such as downsizing, increased use of contingent, contract and temporary employees, and new ways of delivering goods and services have dramatically transformed the way we work.

Also, the number of small businesses and their impact on the nation's economy is on the rise. According to the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA), there were nearly 23 million small businesses in the U.S. in 2002, representing 99.7 percent of the nation's total number of employers. Collectively these businesses employ half of the private sector workforce, pay 44.3 percent of the total U.S. private payroll and generate 60 to 80 percent of new jobs annually.

These shifts and the rapid advances in technology that accompanied them have made entrepreneurship an increasingly popular and practical option for many people, including people with disabilities. Today more than ever, small business ownership and other self-employment options have the power to lower the traditionally high unemployment rate among people with disabilities and help them achieve economic independence.

■ BENEFITS OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Many people with disabilities, particularly those in rural areas where jobs are often scarce, have already created opportunities for themselves through entrepreneurship. In fact, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, people with disabilities are nearly twice as likely to be self-employed as the general population, 14.7 percent compared to 8 percent. Some of the benefits these individuals enjoy include:

- Independence and the opportunity to make their own business decisions
- The ability to set their own pace and schedule
- Reduction of transportation problems when a business is home based
- Continued support from Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) or Supplemental Security Income (SSI), including health care, when income and assets are within these programs' requirements

■ ADDRESSING BARRIERS TO SELF-EMPLOYMENT

People with disabilities often confront barriers when attempting to start entrepreneurial ventures. For example, they may not be able to access the capital needed to start a business because they lack satisfactory credit or assets to use as collateral for a loan. Also, they may not have the information and resources they need to develop an effective business plan.

Increasingly, traditional public service providers such as vocational rehabilitation (VR) professionals and workforce development professionals are implementing strategies and establishing partnerships with other public and private sector organizations to advance entrepreneurship as an effective route to economic independence for their clients. Through creative thinking and leveraging of existing resources, they are helping break down these barriers. For example:

ENTREPRENEURSHIP: A FLEXIBLE ROUTE TO ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

- The Social Security Administration's (SSA) **Plan for Achieving Self-Support (PASS)** program allows people with disabilities receiving SSI benefits to set aside money and resources to help achieve a particular work goal, including self-employment. For more information, visit www.socialsecurity.gov/disabilityresearch/wi/pass.htm.
- The **Ticket-to-Work** program connects SSI and SSDI beneficiaries with Employment Networks (EN) for training and other support services needed to achieve their employment goals, including self-employment. For more information, visit www.socialsecurity.gov/work/Ticket/ticket_info.html.
- More than 1,100 **Small Business Development Centers (SBDC)** offer free or low-cost counseling, training and technical assistance to individuals seeking to start their own business in communities across the nation. For more information, visit www.sba.gov/sbdc.
- The **Service Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE)**, comprising more than 10,000 counselors at 389 offices nationwide, provides free small business start-up advice through one-on-one counseling, group workshops and online resources. For more information, visit www.score.org.
- Local **One-Stop Career Centers** funded through the U.S. Department of Labor's (DOL) Employment and Training Administration (ETA) assist people in training for and obtaining employment, including self-employment. For more information, visit www.servicelocator.org.

In addition, many non-traditional resources may provide assistance to entrepreneurs with disabilities in turning their business ideas into operating businesses:

- Microboards consist of family members, advocates and others who come together to support a particular individual's self-employment goal.
- Microenterprise organizations include capital development corporations, community and faith-based organizations, microloan funds and venture capital firms that offer access to capital and business planning expertise.
- Business incubators are physical facilities that assist small businesses in getting started by providing office space, shared meeting rooms and necessary computer and other equipment such as phones, fax machines and copiers.
- Individual Development Accounts (IDA) are matched-savings accounts that can help certain people save to buy a home, further education or start a business. There are more than 500 IDA programs, including credit unions and community banks.

■ SUCCESS STORIES

The SBA's *Alpha Entrepreneur Program* has identified several successful entrepreneurs with disabilities, including the following:

Bob Douglas, President and Founder, National Center for Therapeutic Riding

After being diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in the early 1970s, Mr. Douglas, who uses a wheelchair and is partially blind, decided to take his future into his own hands and started a pilot program with Washington, DC public schools to provide specialized horseback riding instruction to students in special education classes. The program succeeded and in 1980 became known as the National Center for Therapeutic Riding (NCTR), a non-profit dedicated to serving individuals with disabilities through therapeutic riding. Since its inception, NCTR has served more than 6,000 individuals.

Fred Cherry, President and CEO, Cherry Engineering Support Services, Inc. (CESSI)

Mr. Cherry, a retired U.S. Air Force Colonel, founded CESSI, a small, disadvantaged minority-owned business, in 1992. The company provides expertise in information technology, disability policy and services, research, program and conference management, and accessible technology to a range of clients. A highly decorated veteran of both the Korean and Vietnam wars, Mr. Cherry spent more than seven years as a prisoner of war in Vietnam after ejecting from his aircraft and sustaining multiple injuries to the left side of his body. Upon retiring from the military, he worked for three different firms before deciding to start his own business.

Ann Morris Bliss, President, Ann Morris Enterprises, Inc.

In 1985, Ms. Morris Bliss developed a mail order catalogue company that sells a wide range of innovative products for people with vision loss. The company generates more than half a million dollars in revenue and over the years has employed a number of people, including individuals with disabilities. Ms. Morris Bliss is completely blind from a process that began from complications at birth.

■ **RESOURCES**

A number of resources are available to assist individuals with disabilities in exploring options for entrepreneurship:

Small Business and Self-Employment Service (SBSES)

1-800-526-7234 or 1-800-232-9675 (V/TTY); www.jan.wvu.edu/sbSES

SBSES is service from the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy that provides advice and referrals to entrepreneurs with disabilities who are interested in starting their own business or exploring other self-employment options. The SBSES Web site includes links to other entrepreneurship sites, including the SBA and state VR programs.

Small Business Administration (SBA)

1-800-U-ASK-SBA (1-800-827-5722) (V); 1-704-344-6640 (TTY); www.sba.gov

SBA sponsors a variety of programs and resources to assist entrepreneurs with disabilities start and grow their businesses, including the nationwide network of SBDCs that offer free or low-cost one-on-one counseling to help potential entrepreneurs with planning, financing, management, technology, government procurement and other business-related areas.

Social Security Administration (SSA)

1-800-772-1213 (V); 1-800-325-0778 (TTY); www.socialsecurity.gov/work

SSA provides information about disability cash benefit programs, employment support programs, and where beneficiaries can get the services they need to successfully enter the workforce or self-employment.



Office of Disability Employment Policy • U.S. Department of Labor • 200 Constitution Ave., NW • Washington, DC 20210
Voice: 1-866-ODEP-DOL (633-7365) • TTY: 1-877-889-5627 • Fax: 1-202-693-7888 • www.dol.gov/odep