

Introduction to Special Edition on Self Employment for People with Disabilities

In the past ten years, small business created more jobs in the United States than all the Fortune 500 companies combined. Fully 20 million Americans work in micro-enterprises of 1 to 5 people, and the self employment rate is growing at over 20 per cent annually. In addition, during times of economic recession, more people enter self employment than during boom times. Add to this the fact that the U.S. Department of Commerce estimates that 79% of all small business succeeds, and self employment reveals itself as a logical strategy in combating the overwhelming unemployment rate for individuals with significant disabilities.

This Special Edition of the Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation introduces readers to the concept of self employment, and challenges the commonly held belief that small business ownership may be achievable for individuals with physical disabilities, but not typically for individuals with serious psychiatric and developmental disabilities. The writers herein take a "supported" self employment approach. They recognize that employment of all types requires supports from family members, accountants, sales representatives, and other specialists. The myth of the "independent business owner" is just that. Most small businesses in the United States succeed because they have family support, investors, marketing specialists, and most of all, suppliers and customers. The same is true for small businesses owned by individuals with significant disabilities. Sometimes the supports are businessrelated, and at others, more disability focused. Regardless, the best businesses are interdependent.

Small business presents many advantages for indi-

viduals with disabilities. For one thing, our work with approximately 200 small businesses nationwide through the Rural Institute's Adult Community Services and Supports Dept. at the University of Montana indicates that start-up costs are similar to the expense of finding wage employment; that there are numerous community resources available for small businesses; that self employment for individuals receiving SSI payments represents an opportunity to acquire unlimited wealth without affecting the \$2000 resource limit; and that in rural areas, self employment can be the antidote to a restricted job market.

Self employment is not easy, but then, neither is wage employment. Business development requires a planful approach to safeguard disability benefits and to leverage work incentives; it requires connection with community business resources; and it demands a new set of skills and policies for rehabilitation staff.

The articles included here are an introduction to the topic. Every day witnesses new ventures, new procedures, and new opportunities for all people with a business idea and adequate support.

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