

Taking the solo plunge

Many entrepreneurs with disabilities are choosing the self-employed route, but there's a lack of support and training, and a reluctance to go headlong into business for fear of losing benefits, writes **Fiona Reddan**

GIVEN THAT about 10 per cent of the population has a disability of some degree, it should follow that a significant proportion – much like the general population – have opted to be self-employed. After all, for people with disabilities, self-employment can offer benefits that paid employment can't. It creates a freedom in terms of flexibility of work hours, and with modern technology, it is now very easy to work from home.

It's a trend that's growing internationally. In the UK, for example, a group of disabled entrepreneurs have come together to help promote entrepreneurship as "the way forward for a disabled person determined to succeed in business and financial security". In the US, online seller eBay has been recruiting visually-impaired entrepreneurs to bring their products to the eBay marketplace.

However, late last year, the Dublin Institute of Technology undertook a survey of entrepreneurs with disabilities, and, as Thomas Cooney, a lecturer in entrepreneurship at DIT, points out, it was a struggle to find enough people to complete the survey. Indeed, according to statistics from the National Disability Authority (NDA), just 37.1 per cent of people with disabilities are employed, while out of this total, just 18 per cent are self-employed. So why are participation rates in self-employment amongst people with disabilities so low?

The DIT survey offers a startling insight. With few supports in place to help such entrepreneurs, half of respondents indicated that the biggest challenge to going out on their own was giving up their welfare benefits. This "welfare trap" is the biggest challenge facing people with disabilities who want to go out on their own, says Cooney.

"People spend time developing their business but there then comes a point when they either have to grow the business to make it self-sustaining and leave the comforts of the benefits they receive; or not move ahead with the business and retain the benefits. It's one of the biggest challenges we have come across," he says.

Another issue is a lack of support aimed at facilitating people with disabilities go out on their own. Although there are some supports in place – for example, FÁS provides assistance to self-em-

ployed disabled people across the country and it offers a Workplace Equipment Adaptation Grant (WEAG) of up to €6,348 – these may not be effective in providing people with disabilities with the skills needed to go out on their own.

"There are no tailored entrepreneurship 'start your own business' programmes for people with disabilities, who obviously have unique challenges that mainstream entrepreneurs wouldn't face," Cooney says, adding, "no one is taking leadership in this area." Indeed, according to the DIT survey, 80 per cent of respondents would like to take a business-training programme designed specifically for people with disabilities.

Rachel Stevens, a director of Empowerall, who researched the issue for the NDA, agrees.

"There were a lot of supports out there but these were mainstream supports that weren't being made available to people with disabilities. They didn't know about them," she says.

This turned out to be the case for Caroline Carswell (see panel), who set up her own social enterprise in 2007. While she secured a grant from Social Entrepreneurs Ireland to start her business, she did not find or source information on start-up financing or supports for people with disability who have a viable business idea.

And, as Stevens points out, access can also be an issue for people trying to get involved in training.

"A lot of the agencies providing mainstream supports to people interested in starting their own businesses did not have good physical access which was an additional barrier for some," she says.

In this regard, Cooney thinks that offering training online could be the way forward.

"There is a need for a dedicated, customised training programme to support people who want to move ahead with such a career option," he says, but adds that it would need to have a built-in local mentoring system, which could come through some business organisation such as the chambers of commerce.

"We need support from people who are in the area of business – rather than from disability organisations," he adds.

But while self-employment can offer a unique opportunity for people with disabilities to engage in working life, it also brings its challenges.

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