

# Self-Employment

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Recovery & Rehabilitation Newsletter

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## Introduction

Many people with disabilities are missing the opportunity of starting their own business, and they are seeking just regular employment, often with poor results. Self-employment is underutilized by people with disabilities, and there are a lot of resources and opportunities that people with disabilities can pursue.

A different way of thinking is building “social businesses” by looking around in the community and seeing opportunities for problems and needs that could be solved with a business idea. The premise is that the world is full of needs. Think about your own needs, think about the people who live with you, think about the people who you know, and think about what they need, and are those needs being met? And if not, how could a small business that you could create help to address some of those needs? This initiative through social businesses might take just a small investment to start to get you going down the path of self-employment.

## Questions & Answers about Self-Employment

- **What are the steps to take when starting a business?**

First, you need to come up with an idea for a business; it is important to find a niche. Think about what needs are out there, what things that you have experienced that you wish somebody would have helped you. And perhaps you can think about turning those needs into a small business. You have to understand what you are good at, what you love to do, what the world needs from you, and what could you be paid for to do. Self-employment businesses are not necessarily created for you to become rich; they are created for you to fulfill your purpose, to be occupied, to make enough of a leeway to find satisfaction in what you do, and to have a reason to wake up every morning, and something to look forward to doing every day. Sometimes it's not necessarily about the money, but it's about what you do, what you love, your passion, your commitment, and/or your purpose. Your small business could be making a difference in somebody's life, such as your friends, your neighbors, or the people in your

community. Regardless, if you find that niche and you can make even a small living out of it, you will fulfill your purpose. It's a great opportunity for a lot of people to pursue.

Next, you need to refine your idea, which may mean conducting a little pilot project where you just try it out, even before you invest or make any real money. This will give you some experience where you can review your vision and your mission for the business.

It is very important to develop an actual business plan on paper before you take the business to full implementation. The critical elements of a business plan are: the description of the company, the name, the location, the history, the product, the services, the kind of industry or focus, the funding source, the market analysis, the competition, the sales plan, and the operation (Abrams, 2013).

The Small Business Administration has business experts, funding programs, explanations about the laws that they provide, and so forth. The [SBA website](#) has a lot of information about planning your business, launching your business, managing your business, growing your business, etc. They provide support, technical assistance, and consultation; and they are available and accessible in every state. You just have to find out the nearest location to you, and go and talk to them about your idea.

- **Are people able to make a living in a small business?**

The answer depends on how skilled you are and how successful you become. The important thing is to start. The real thing is not necessarily making money, it's getting busy, having part-time work, and giving it a shot. And if you succeed and get more money, good for you! But if you don't, at least you're doing something that you enjoy, and you're making some money, and that helps in many other aspects of your life.

For people with disabilities on subsidies there are issues about how much money you can make, before you start losing your financial benefits. The Social Security Administration has made adjustments in their policies to allow people to make an income, and it's gradual. So it's not that if you make \$1, you lose your benefits! That was never true. In reality, there is a great need for more education about how people can make money and the thresholds that they need to meet when some of the benefits are being diminished. This is an important aspect to consider, and people need to understand that they are not going to automatically lose their benefits, if they become entrepreneurs.

- **Are there any special small business assistance programs or employers who are friendly to people with mental health conditions?**

Your local provider of Vocational Rehabilitation Services and their employment specialists can help to refer you to employers that are understanding of people with mental health conditions. Every state has VR services and their job is to help you, regardless of your disability, find a job. In some cases, they also will pay for your training through a university or vocational school.

VR also has money to help you to start your own business. One of the things that the VR counselor would ask you is to develop a business plan, which is a mandatory requirement. Whether you are applying through the Small Business Administration or through a regular bank for a loan, or are going to Vocational Rehabilitation Services; the business plan is a critical element of the process. In some cases, you may be asking for a couple of thousand dollars, just to get the basic equipment to get the operation going. VR can go deep into their pockets or they can go light; it all depends on how good your business plan is, your experience, and your potential for success. VR also may require some matching funds, so you need to discuss those details with your rehabilitation counselor.

- **What about inmates with mental health conditions preparing for release and acquiring a journeyman's card, where someone could work as a self-employed contractor?**

The whole area of inmates is extremely complicated because, unfortunately, most states have very strict policies about a person's legal record when applying for regular employment positions. So the idea of starting your own business is great because you don't have to deal with those problems. Some of these journeymen or occupations require very little investment. One part is getting the tools you might need to do the work, and the other process is the marketing. This also will require a business plan to identify the niches, the resources, the particular market where you are going to establish the business, the needs in the community, etc. There is a job board called, [70 Million Jobs](#), and they specifically list jobs for employers who are understanding of people with a criminal background. But as an alternative to the stigma and the challenges that inmate's face once they get released and try to get into regular employment, self-employment is a great option.

- **What is the difference between those who succeed and those who fail at self-employment?**

There are a number of elements, but persistence may be the most important one. Having a good idea makes a big difference, of course. Having good support and having a mentor is very helpful. So it's better if you (the entrepreneur) are connected with someone—a professional in the particular area of the business, a small business network, a friend, a family member—anyone who can be supportive.

- **When is it time to give up on a business idea and move onto something else?**

The signs usually are if you are feeling tired of doing what you're doing, and/or if you're not making any money at it. Perhaps you feel that you need to tinker with your business to improve it. Nothing is created in such a way that cannot be changed or improved. Every idea, even if it's a great idea, could be changed or modified. You have to be open to change, and you have to be willing to change. If you feel that if you tinker with something or you move onto some other aspect of the business, go for it because sometimes you have to follow your intuition. If you don't feel good about your business, maybe it's time for you to move on and come up with a better idea. And don't take it as a failure. It's not about failing, it's about getting better. If you have a better idea, go for it!

### **Examples of Self-Employment Businesses**

- Jogging lessons for individuals or small groups
- Mowing lawns in your neighborhood
- Growing vegetables
- Cooking for people in their homes
- Preparing food for senior citizens
- Transporting people in wheelchairs
- Driving for Uber or Lyft
- Arranging social events for kids with disabilities
- Recycling phones and computers
- Creating posters as a graphic artist
- Jewelry making
- Writing books of poetry
- Embroidering on a computerized machine for hats and shirts
- Knitting, sewing
- Creating clothes for dolls or for dogs

The ideas for a small business are endless!

### **Resources for More Information about Self-Employment**

- Small Business Administration  
<https://www.sba.gov/>
- Listing of jobs for employers who are understanding of those with a criminal background  
<https://www.70millionjobs.com>

- The state of Wisconsin Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) has a Self-Employment Toolkit: Assisting DVR Consumers to Pursue Their Goal of Starting a Business.  
[https://dwd.wisconsin.gov/dvr/pdf\\_files/self\\_employment\\_toolkit.pdf](https://dwd.wisconsin.gov/dvr/pdf_files/self_employment_toolkit.pdf)

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## About the Author

Fabricio E. Balcazar, PhD, is a Professor in the Department of Disability and Human Development at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC). Dr. Balcazar has directed several federally-funded projects including one to promote entrepreneurship and economic self-sufficiency among individuals with disabilities, and a collaboration with the IL Division of Rehabilitation Services to help consumers start their own businesses, among many others.

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