

Belonging in the Business World



This is one of a set of information produced from The Bridge, a two year action research project asking "How can people with learning disabilities start businesses to earn real money for real work?". It was funded by the National Lottery Community Fund as part of the DRILL programme.

For more information about this research, visit www.barod.org.

For more information about DRILL, visit www.drilluk.org.uk.

About The Bridge

Many potential entrepreneurs with learning disabilities are part of self-advocacy organisations. These are organisations set up and run by and for people with learning disabilities. Most are charities and/or companies limited by guarantee with paid facilitators, staff and offices.

The research partnership was made up of three self-advocacy organisations:

- Carmarthenshire People First,
- My Life My Choice in Oxford and
- People First Dorset

together with **Social Firms Wales**, a business support organisation, and the lead partner, **Barod Community Interest Company**, a cooperative business of people with and without learning disabilities.

Two of the self-advocacy organisations investigated how to turn projects into businesses that were led by and employed people with learning disabilities. One self-advocacy organisations supported members to investigate setting up individual self-employed businesses.

As part of the action research we developed two resources:

- An online glossary of business words that people found hard to understand
- A business blocks pack that helped people to work on their business idea and monitor how far they had got.

The research has highlighted political, economic and social barriers which we will continue to address after the lifetime of The Bridge.



Belonging in the Business World

The business world operates at two levels. There is the visible side of businesses of all size from the sole trader selling cards at craft markets through to the multinational banks and supermarkets. And there is the less visible side of the business world. These are the structures, networking, culture, legislation and finance of the business world. To truly belong in the business world means belonging in this less visible side.

The business world has its own language, culture, legislation, funding and support systems. When you are part of that world, you forget that not everyone knows your business language, knows the unwritten social and practical rules and understands the business ways of seeing the world. It can be easy to assume a person's lack of confidence and knowledge of the business world means that person is incapable of starting a business.

It is challenging for anyone to break into that world. For people with learning disabilities, it is particularly challenging if society has no concept of 'people like you' being part of the business world. While the diversity of those involved in the business world has increased, we found few role models of people with learning disabilities running businesses and even fewer who were thriving and accepted in the business world of networking, events and awards.

Changing this will need action from Government, business support services and services designed to support people with learning disabilities. Self-advocates and their organisations cannot be expected to take sole responsibility for making the changes needed for them to be accepted into the business world.



We Found

People with learning disabilities have as much right as anyone to be part of the business world. It will take some shifts before that becomes reality.

Belonging requires a personal identity shift. You need to see yourself as a business person.

It requires a social identity shift. Those around you need to stop thinking you need 'needing care' and start thinking of your individual potential.

It requires a shift within the business world. Business support needs to work for people with learning disabilities and stop unintentionally excluding them.

People are being told they don't belong

People are still being told 'you can't' by banks, learning disability services and even business start-up support services. One person was told he couldn't be a signatory of a business bank account, so he had to go to a different bank. A business start-up trainer told someone that if they couldn't read, they couldn't run a business; when the person said they were going to anyway, the trainer said, "well good luck with that" and ignored them for the rest of the training day. When one person told his job coach at Job Centre Plus that he was going to be part of a workers cooperative and his own boss he was told 'That's not for you', so he didn't join the coop.

Self-advocacy organisations and individual entrepreneurs found it hard to be taken seriously as business people. When they deliver training or provide an inspection service, it's expected to be done for free or below cost. The history of day opportunity based fake employment subsidised by funding from social services means that real social businesses are not taken seriously.



Business support needs to change

Government-funded business support services are excluding people with learning disabilities in three ways:

- they use language that people can't understand
- they use concepts and ways of seeing the world that are outside of people's past experiences
- they are not funded to offer enough time or flexibility to provide the support that is needed

And it's not just about people with learning disabilities. Barriers to our belonging are similar to those faced by young people, women, and people from Black and minority ethnic communities.

Belonging takes an identity shift

It takes a long time to feel we belong, because the identity shifts are huge.

We need a shift in our **personal identity**. We need to see ourselves as belonging in this 'new-to-us world'. Starting a business is not just about making products, designing and delivering services, marketing our business offering, selling and keeping the books. So business start up support needs to be about more too. We need guidance and support to make that identity shift. It needs to be provided at a pace and in an appropriate way to help us achieve three things:

- develop business ways of thinking
- see ourselves as workers and managers
- having power to make decisions for ourselves and others.

We need a shift in our **social identity**. In a society that assumes we need caring for and cannot contribute to, we need people immediately around us, people in our communities and people in local business settings to start seeing our potential and engaging with us as people of value.

With changes in identity comes changes in what we wear, how we talk about ourselves and others and where we socialise. We saw people changing what they wear, making new friends in and out of work, making decisions to reduce their social activities to be ready for work. One person had learnt coding skills at college and built the website pages for the business. Others developed a specification for marketing literature, put it out to tender and chose the final leaflet design. These people grew in confidence, skills and experience.

Wearing the right shoes

Quite literally, wearing the right shoes, the right clothes and acting as if you belong in the business world can make the difference between someone looking at you and thinking 'business person' or not. It has very little to do with how good you are at doing business.

Buying the right clothes needs to be treated as an essential start up cost.



Try this

Government

When you make economic and business policy, remember that people with learning disabilities belong in the business world by right. If your policies and actions will work for people with learning disabilities, they are more likely to work for all other groups who are currently under-represented in the business world.

Commission business support services in a way that enables them to provide flexible packages that work at the speed of the potential business.

Business support services

Get to know people with learning disabilities. Find out what works and what doesn't.

Take advice from organisations like ours on how to adapt your training, mentoring and support so you don't unthinkingly exclude people who have great business potential but few literacy skills.

Be aware that people are being asked to make a huge identity shift, not just start a business. Consider how you can prepare someone for that identity shift and support them through it.

Check out our glossary of business language (www.barod.org) and find ways of explaining things that work for you and the people you work with.

Services for people with learning disabilities

If your role relates to careers, employment or day opportunities, remember to include entrepreneurship as an option. Could someone make things that could be sold online or at craft fairs? Can people get involved in marketing or making product decision.

If you don't belong in the business world yourself, find someone who does and ask them to provide informal guidance and mentoring to any budding entrepreneur

Employers of people with learning disabilities

Think carefully about dress codes and behaviour that you expect and make it a training goal for everyone.

Think about job titles. If someone is delivering training, they are a trainer, if someone is providing guidance and advice on how to do things, they are a consultant. Use the job title when you introduce a person.

Be clear about what is volunteering, a work placement and having a job.

People with learning disabilities

If you have an idea that could make some money, try it out! In the world of business this is called 'test trading'. Believe in yourself and be bold.

To belong in the business world you can make it easier if you take on the way others dress and behave. Think about how you want others to see you and ask friends to help you choose some new clothes that work for you and the world you want to join.



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This research was funded by the National Lottery Community Fund as part of the DRILL programme. More information can be found at www.drilluk.org.uk