

Leap of Faith



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.



Leap of Faith

Let us tell you a story.

Sian* is working in a kitchen, doing the washing up. She is not allowed to cut vegetables or do any cooking. She feels wasted at work.

In her spare time, Sian takes photos with an expensive camera she was given as a present.

Sian has a dream, she wants to be a professional photographer. She takes good photos. She finds herself a mentor who helps her develop her photography skills. Her work is of commercial standard.

Most professional photographers are self employed. That means they work for themselves.

Thanks to The Bridge, she has access to the resource we created called Business Blocks. This can help her work out how to start her business safely and legally.

Now she is ready to get some customers, take some photos and get paid.

Not quite.

Now she has to navigate the benefits system.

At so many stages in this story, Sian has to take leaps of faith. She has to tell people her dream. She has to invest her own money in equipment. She has to contact photography agencies and say out loud that she is a professional photographer. She needs to decide when and how to notify DWP of a change in circumstances.

There is no guarantee they will be successful leaps. That is why they are leaps of faith. But if she doesn't take them, she has no chance of achieving her dream.

Each person has their own story. Each person needs to weigh up whether and when to take each leap.

* Not her real name



We Found

Taking a leap of faith involves having faith and taking a risk.

Having Faith in Yourself

People with learning disabilities often don't have much self confidence and low self esteem. Self advocacy organisations are a place where this can change, as people have opportunities to use the skills we have, learn new skills and achieve more independence. People we worked with have been involved in self advocacy and were becoming more confident after some difficult circumstances.

Building confidence and resilience is something that takes time and the right kind of support. We have called this support 'invisible support' because it works best when you don't realise you are receiving it.

Doing things in a group can mean you build up confidence as you see others developing and changing. You think you can change too.

Getting support to take small risks helps you build up your confidence to take bigger risks, or to learn how to recover when things go wrong.

Taking Risks

People with learning disabilities often have low expectations from those around them or are seen as vulnerable, so are taught to avoid risk. They are rarely taught how to manage risk.

If you (and your parents/carers) are dependent on benefits, it is a big risk to change what you do so someone who decides what benefits you get reviews your benefits or moves you to a different benefit. There are enough horror stories in the press or social media to make it scary.

Fear is a major issue. Dealing with fear often needs support.

Managing risk is a life skill. Getting better at it will benefit all area of your life.

Saying "No, that's too far today" is okay too. You may not be ready for that leap yet

Landing well

To consider a leap of faith, you have to be able to see yourself landing well.

It is easier to imagine yourself dealing with the financial side of running a business if you have previous experience of being paid to work.

If you are involved in making business decisions in an organisation, you can see how to run a business and work for yourself.

Learning how to recover when things go wrong is an essential business skill



Another story...

However well you plan, **you** still have to take a leap of faith.

The story of one person's leap is part of the story of Barod

Alan was involved in self advocacy at a regional level, chairing meetings, co-training police recruits and social work students. All of it was unpaid, volunteering for several self advocacy organisations.

He wanted to get paid for his work.

His first leap of faith was talking to people about how to make that happen.

A group of 5 people with and without learning disabilities decided to start up a business making information accessible and training others in coproduction. When the company was formed, Alan was a founder member.

One of the other people was told by their job coach at Job Centre Plus, 'that's not for you' and he decided not to take the leap and join the company.

Alan decided he wanted to work for 16 hrs a week. This meant changing his benefits.

He took the next leap of faith.

With support through several organisations, Alan sorted out his benefits as he changed from ESA to Working Tax Credit. The business applied for Access to Work support for Alan. It didn't work well, so they stopped using it. The organisation pays the real living wage to everyone.

To begin with Alan was a director in the small company. When it changed to being a company with members who elected directors, he decided not to be a director. Alan has worked for Barod for seven years. He now travels independently all over the UK with work and does social research, including presenting finding to University Professors.

Try this

UK Government

Changes are needed to Universal Credit as currently it does not provide a reliable financial safety net for disabled entrepreneurs with variable incomes.

Current schemes to encourage self employment for people receiving JSA or ESA are not a good fit for people with learning disabilities, as business development takes much longer than a year.

Business Departments in UK Government and Devolved Administrations

Celebrate the business successes of people with learning disabilities. Make sure role models with learning disabilities feature in your business and economic resources and events.

Always ask: would this work for someone with learning disabilities? If you don't know enough to answer that question, ask any of the organisations run by and for people with learning disabilities to answer it for you. If the answer is 'yes', your answer will probably work for most of our diverse population.

Careers advice, job coaches and business support services

When talking about people's futures and work, remember to talk about starting a business. It is much easier to open up about your dreams if you know what you are dreaming won't be laughed at.

Help people recognise the leaps of faith involved in starting a business. Help them plan ways to reduce the risks and increase the chance of making a successful leap. Be prepared for people to circle cautiously closer to their goal rather than plough ahead.

Families, friends and learning disability services

Encourage dreams and ambitions. Challenge your perception of the person you care for or support.

Partner people on their journey. Help them recognise when a leap of faith will be required. Help them get the information and advice they need to decide if they want to make that leap now, in the future, or never. Celebrate successes and achievements. Encourage them to keep going when things go wrong. Remind them (and yourselves) that all business people have set-backs and make mistakes.

Look for ways you can help people get the business support they need if it's not your area of expertise.

Look at the 'invisible support' findings



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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