

# Invisible Support



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](http://www.barod.org).

For more information about DRILL, visit [www.drilluk.org.uk](http://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.



# Invisible Support

We all need help and support from people around us. Some support is visible, it is explicitly funded or a service you buy. Some support is invisible, but essential. The support you might get from friends or having someone to check out your ideas with.

One definition of invisible support is support that people don't realise they are giving or receiving, but which makes the difference between personal and business success and failure.

"In business, no-one makes it on their own. Don't believe stories of being self-made. Everyone needs help." Vina



# What we Found

When we start businesses, some support is funded and clearly visible:

- Free government-funded business start-up advice services
- Business support services run by banks
- Government online advice and support
- Start up hubs and technology transfer programmes.

In addition, there are paid for services, such as traditional marketing agencies, marketing gurus on social media, accountants and human resource agencies.

We first noticed the importance of what we came to call invisible support when individuals who were setting up their own businesses called in to the Barod office and asked what seemed like random questions. As time passed a pattern developed and we asked the partners to think about their experiences.



## Invisible support in work situations

Co-working is an easy way to provide invisible support. When two or more people work together, supporting each other becomes a natural part of the working relationship. In a way, this support is just 'good practice', it enables the person to be a real and valued member of the team and is not provided in a way that makes it obvious to others that support is being provided. For instance:

- If a worker cannot write, then co-workers will automatically do any writing required or there will be some technology used (eg a Dictaphone or voice recorder) that is part of 'the way we do things'.
- A worker may have a communication difficulty meaning that phone calls are difficult to understand. The team may then use texts or Whatsapp as the common communication tool.
- If a worker has a limited concentration span, then regular breaks become part of the way the team works.
- If a worker has issues with crowds or background noise, then these factors are taken into account when working out the role the worker can fulfil. Or the team has a way of indicating to each other that a situation is getting too much so they can change setting.
- If a worker has difficulty reading, then making sure all written material is provided in plenty of time, or that time is allocated to go over written material beforehand.
- If a worker or team member has difficulty staying focused on a task, having a common way of working that involves shared 'To do' lists or a daily timetable are ways of improving productivity.
- If team members have difficulties using public transport, having agreed ways of arranging travel that can be gradually altered to develop independence.
- If a colleague is learning a new skill, do not be patronising or directive in how you support them. Ask them to say how well they think they are doing, or have an example of the completed task that they can measure their performance against.





Barod has an example where one team member was a wheelchair user and another had a learning disability. Together they were able to negotiate train travel across England and Wales, whereas separately they were both vulnerable to train delays and journey alterations.

Invisible support includes emotional support and encouragement, and informal access to other people's knowledge, skills and experience. In a team or office setting this may look like:

- Asking a colleague how to spell a word, or to check an email before sending it.
- Having a 'it's okay to ask questions' culture that isn't one way. That is those without learning disabilities are sensitive to the expertise and skills of those with learning disabilities and ask for their help as well.
- Having a 'you can do it' or continuous improvement or quality circle approach in the team that encourages everyone to stretch themselves, learn new things and get better at what they do.
- Having a shared responsibility or ownership for completing tasks.

Invisible support also includes access to equipment and using personal social networks to open doors for others. It might include:

- Letting someone borrow something so they can try it out before buying it themselves.
- Showing someone how to use an app on your phone.
- Suggesting places where someone might find help for a personal problem or issue.
- Sharing the contact details of a friend who works in another organisation.



It is important that the support is invisible. Making invisible support visible or explicit brings risks. People may feel less skilled. It can affect relationships within the team. It can reinforce negative stereotypes of people with learning disabilities if it is only their invisible support that is made visible.

### **Invisible support when helping people develop their own business ideas**

We also looked at the support that was provided to self advocates who were developing their own business ideas. We found that similar 'good practise' was being used. The self-advocacy organisation was aware of the support needed to develop the confidence of the people working on their ideas and that individuals had their own pace.

The invisible support included:

- Being available to answer small questions when they came up, rather than needing to arrange an appointment and wait to ask your question.
- Having an attitude that took the concerns of the person seriously, making sure that the question or issue is understood before trying to help.
- Being prepared to give emotional support or encouragement where the issue is fear of the unknown or fear of situations where the person has had bad experiences.
- Similarly being able to give encouragement when things go wrong. To help people to build resilience and a sensible risk taking attitude.
- There is no such thing as a silly or stupid question.
- Being positive in all situations. For example, not telling someone they are doing something wrong, but saying that if they do that, then there will be negative consequences or there may be a better way of doing things.
- If there is a decision to be made, using a pros and cons framework to help the person to make their own decision.
- If the question is a factual one, always show the person where to find the answer; building their ability to find the answer themselves next time.



In these interactions a relationship is built, so it's important to remember what was suggested last week, so when you meet the person you can ask how things worked out.

We saw self advocates support each other and friends or family provide invisible support. However, we also saw situations where family carers or professional support workers could have low expectations of the person, and so it became even more important to be providing the positive support to try new things and pick yourself up after a disappointment.

We also saw self advocates getting support from on line communities such as Facebook groups and Twitter. Because social media can have an equalising effect this can be useful for people with communication issues or who are isolated.



Where a person is learning the skills and attitudes that are appropriate for people in a work environment it is reasonable to have boundaries, such as times of the day when you are not available, or having a work based social media account or mobile phone.

There is a gap between the environment where invisible support is provided and the organisation that provides explicit support, eg training courses, mentoring or back room services for start ups. One self advocacy group is seeking funding to set up a support hub that will be culturally closer to self advocates and therefore more accessible.

## **What happens when invisible support is not recognised?**

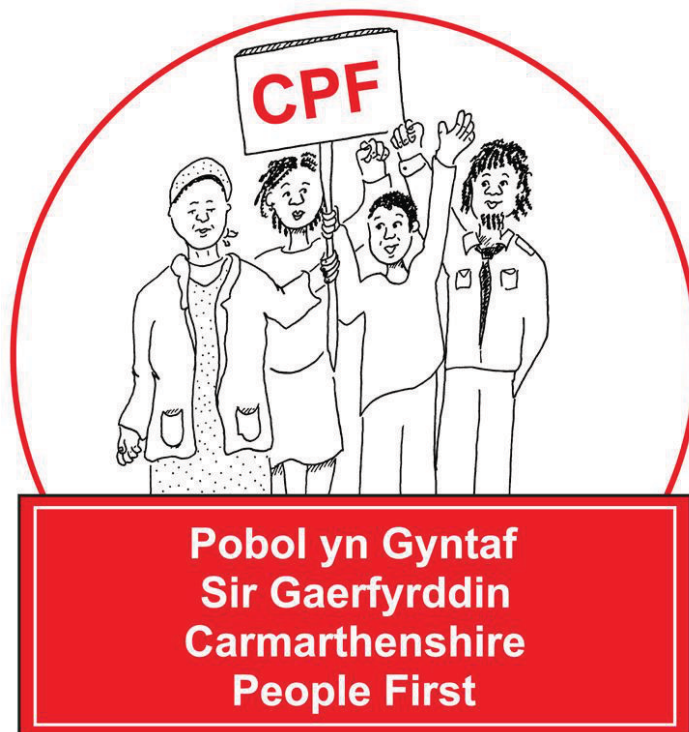
Self-advocacy organisations not only deliver the visible support for which they are funded. For many members, they are a crucial place for giving and receiving invisible support. This takes time, and time costs money.

When invisible support is not recognised by the organisation, the organisation does not recognise the need to include capacity to provide invisible support when they plan their work and funding.

One self advocacy partner group said they noticed that when people tried to start new things, they were more likely to succeed if they had what we have called invisible support. This could come from a self advocacy group, from their support worker or family and friends. Barod's search for examples of entrepreneurs with learning disabilities corroborates this; there is often a family culture of business and a family member who has supported and sometimes mentored the entrepreneur. Recognising the importance of invisible support makes it possible to ask questions about the availability of informal emotional support and informal business or entrepreneurship support when an individual first talks about wanting to start a business.

In other activities, like informal learning, it is acknowledged that the learning environment and the personal interactions with those passing on skills and attitudes are essential for success. In the general population, employment support agencies set up Job clubs to provide some of this type of support. This type of combined individual and group support is not generally available in traditional business start-up support. This is usually delivered as a number of timed sessions over a set number of weeks (eg New Enterprise Allowance). We were unable to find positive current examples. Barod themselves had received flexible start-up support as a team and as individuals, but the schemes that made this possible have ended.

As an outcome of this research, Carmarthenshire People First are seeking funding to pilot a 'My Future Business' hub, the initial business costs for which include time for both visible and invisible support.



# Try this

## Allies and support organisations

Organisations around people with learning disabilities need to recognise invisible support and understand its importance. They may need to find ways to create invisible support opportunities, without formalising the support into something explicit or visible.

## Business support organisations

Business as usual is not working for entrepreneurs with learning disabilities. The significance of invisible support needs recognising.

If you have clients who may need the type of support described here, do you know where to suggest they find it?

Are there ways of setting up or supporting peer support groups that are inclusive of people with learning disabilities?

## Funders

Self advocacy groups are a place where invisible support may be offered, and it is important that such safe places exist. Core funding of self advocacy groups is needed to ensure this is possible.

## Policy makers

Standard models for providing business start-up support are unlikely to work with people with learning disabilities because they are not flexible enough and do not provide the invisible support described here. If it is not possible to change the standard models, then are there ways of funding different models of support?

### **Self Advocacy groups**

Recognise the invisible support that you provide. Make sure it is factored into your expectations for how time will be used, how quickly goals will be reached and any funding bids you make.

### **People in Self Advocacy groups**

Anyone can offer invisible support to people around them, but don't make a big fuss about it, or it won't work.







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