

Entrepreneurship by any other name: Self-sufficiency versus innovation

The terms self-employment and entrepreneurship are often used interchangeably but they actually mean very different things. Self-employment is when people work for themselves for personal profit. Entrepreneurship is when someone creates a business to support themselves financially and bring a new product or service to the world.

Both self-employment and entrepreneurship can be great opportunities for people with disabilities, especially because their skills and talents are not always recognized in traditional types of jobs. However, while self-employment is an employment strategy it is not actually an anti-poverty strategy (something that helps reduce poverty) because it is meant to support one individual. Entrepreneurship is both an employment and anti-poverty strategy because the business is meant to grow and employ others. This brief talks about research and policy related to self-employment and entrepreneurship for people with disabilities.

The current service system related to employment and people with disabilities:

- Only a very small amount of federal disability funding is for improving employment
- Employment programs for people with disabilities are divided among different agencies making them less efficient
- Disability employment programs and entrepreneurship programs are divided and do not often work together. This can lead to entrepreneurship programs forgetting to include people with disabilities and providing them fewer opportunities.

Gaps that make self-employment and entrepreneurship more difficult for people with disabilities:

- People with disabilities often have income restrictions and fear losing services
- It can be hard for people with disabilities to qualify for money lending because of strict policies
- Special programs for minorities often forget to include people with disabilities

In the late 1980s research started to write about creating access to entrepreneurship for people with disabilities. A lot of important work has been done in theory and systems change on this topic but there is a lack of actual evidence-based research, especially from the perspectives of people with disabilities. There also has not been a lot of evaluation of existing programs. While much research mentions the benefits of entrepreneurship for people with disabilities, these benefits are often assumed rather than evidenced by research. To support entrepreneurs with disabilities there need to be more research and better statistics to track the start of businesses run by people with disabilities and the stability and growth of these businesses.

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