

Study of entrepreneurs with disability smashes stereotypes

1. Summary of impact

Although many people dream of starting their own business, few attempt it, let alone succeed. But for some with disability, self-employment and entrepreneurship isn't an option, it's a necessity, a recent UTS Business School report has found.

The stats speak for themselves.

In 2015, almost one in five Australians had a disability according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, but only about half of those of working age were employed. And the barriers aren't just physical—last year 40 per cent of discrimination complaints to the Australian Human Rights Commission came from this group, reflecting negative attitudes to people with disability in the wider community.

“While there's been little research on self-employment and entrepreneurship done in Australia, there is rising awareness that people with disability's aspirations and needs simply aren't being met, particularly in terms of traditional employment models,” explains report co-author, and Professor of Management at UTS's Business School, Simon Darcy.

The Entrepreneurs with Disability report—the first study of its kind in Australia—is aimed at tackling these issues head-on.

“We're working hard to plug people in, to get our findings out there in front of decision-makers and to make sure government, employers, Chambers of Commerce and the mainstream Australian start-up community understand people with disability need support from their programs,” he says. “They really need to make their programs inclusive.”

The Entrepreneurs with Disability report will be available online, along with other awareness-raising resources, in June 2020.

2. The problem

Many businesses don't cater well for employees with disability either in getting employment or providing a career path¹— self-employment could be a viable alternative, but the current system is short on programs tailored to support people. Mentors, tailored networks and educational opportunities are lacking.

As one visually impaired interviewee remarked to the research team, “It’s a lot harder to just get out and market, and to network. If I’m not networking with someone, I just stand in a corner because I can’t see people, engage them, read name tags.”

While the study found people with disability may be attracted to running their own business because of a lack of flexibility or reasonable adjustment, for some it’s impractical to work standard hours in a standard office setup. Survey and interview responses also made it clear that these problems don’t disappear when it comes to career development opportunities, industry or other networking events.

If these issues aren’t addressed, many entrepreneurs with disability risk being excluded from the funding, mentorship and networking opportunities available to their non-disabled counterparts.

3. Beneficiaries

Individuals with disability who are, or want to become, self-employed are the obvious beneficiaries of this research, but not-for-profits that work with people with disability also stand to benefit.

¹ Darcy, S., Taylor, T., & Green, J. (2016). 'But I can do the job': examining disability employment practice through human rights complaint cases. *Disability & Society*, 31(9), 1242-127, available at <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09687599.2016.1256807>>, viewed 15 May 2020.

“We’ve got relationships with a number of disability organisations to expand their awareness of programs that are available for their members to improve their self-employment and entrepreneurship. We’re also promoting capacity building so that they can educate their own staff on social entrepreneurship development or entrepreneurship within the organisation. It has potential to be a way of broadening their income streams and servicing their members,” says Simon.

The project team are also keen to ensure benefits are rolled out in sometimes neglected rural and remote areas—running workshops on their findings with diverse attendees from Tasmania, Victoria, country NSW, Sydney, the north coast of NSW and Queensland.

4. Approach to impact

The study analysed data from two surveys, as well as in-depth interviews with entrepreneurs with disability (face-to-face or web-based), state and local government representatives, and stakeholders from disability employment services.

One of the surveys used the Qualtrics online survey design and analysis package. It was conducted with 100 participants online, by telephone or on a face-to-face basis if required. The other analysed responses from an additional 60 entrepreneurs with disability through tailored questions incorporated into Startup Muster®—an annual online survey of the Australian entrepreneurial ecosystem run with the support of UTS, Atlassian and Google.

The project team also followed participants enrolled in IgniteAbility®, a program run by industry research partner, Settlement Services International (SSI). This program was designed specifically to support people with disability to set up their own businesses.

“Inclusivity needs to recognise the diversity of disability and the level of support that individuals require, whether they have mobility, vision, hearing, cognitive or mental health related impairments. Disability and the support needs required for inclusive programs are complex and too often mainstream education or employment programs do not provide the flexibility or support required for individuals with disability to benefit from the programs,” says Simon.

From the survey and interview responses, and observations of what worked on the ground for IgniteAbility® participants, a clearer picture of the entrepreneurial landscape in Australia for people with disability emerged.

Responses, methodology and identified themes and issues were collated in the report together with video vignettes of 10 of the entrepreneurs with disability. This, along with other resources will be made available online through a website in June 2020 to assist government and new business accelerators and incubators to improve educational, networking and funding opportunities for this cohort.

5. What has changed as a result of this work?

5.1 The outcomes

The study's analysis of ABS data found people with disability are, on average, more than 40 per cent more likely to be self-employed than their non-disabled counterparts. While this was true for most types of disability and support needs, those with cognitive or intellectual disability or very high support needs were underrepresented in self-employment.

This has serious implications for how employment services are provided to this group by the private sector, not-for-profit and government agencies. In particular, the study found there were complications in incorporating educational opportunities for self-employment or supports required under the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). It also has repercussions for how Australia's system of new business accelerators and incubators deliver their services in a way that is inclusive to the group—whether that be providing education, funding, mentorship or networking opportunities.

Raising awareness within government that entrepreneurship is a viable option is also a big driver for the project team. And their work is starting to pay dividends—as a result of the research and the advocacy work of their industry partners of National Disability Services, Settlement Services International and BreakThru People Solutions, the

National Disability Insurance Agency recognised self-employment, micro-enterprise and entrepreneurship as a valued new area of engagement within the NDIS.

5.2 Impact

The long-term impacts of the study are still unclear, but Simon hopes to leverage its results to push for policy change and increased awareness in Australia's entrepreneurial community

“The lived experiences of those involved in the research shows that once you're in business, either just with yourself or running a larger group, it's all immersive,” he explains. “It is far more taxing than just having a job where you get to leave in the afternoon. You're *the* person. *You've* got all the responsibility so you often need support, either formally, through an accelerator or incubator program, or informally through family or other personal connections. We hope this research increases awareness of that and brings about corresponding changes to training, funding and networking opportunities.”

In 2020, the NDIS set a target to increase employment of participants on the NDIS from the current 25 per cent to 33 per cent by 2023.

“Together with our industry partners² and a growing group of disability organisations we hope to leverage this new opportunity to advocate for self-employment and entrepreneurial opportunities,” says Simon.

The involvement of the UTS startup community could complement this push.

“UTS and its whole-of-university approach to startups provides an environment to test informal educational opportunities and micro-credentialing both on campus and in a virtual campus environment. It is already a leader in inclusive education for people with disability.”

² National Disability Services. (2020). Submission 25 National Disability Services Submission to Joint Standing Committee Inquiry into the NDIS Workforce. Canberra: Commonwealth Government of Australia Retrieved from https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/National_Disability_Insurance_Scheme/workforce

6. What has helped you accomplish this work?

The project was assisted by a number of industry partners. Settlement Services International adapted a training program originally designed for migrants and refugees to better meet the needs of those with disability keen to set up their own business. Connections with National Disability Services, the peak body for disability service providers; Breakthru people solutions disability employment service; and Startup Muster® an annual survey of the Australian entrepreneurial ecosystem supported by UTS, Atlassian and Google, were also leveraged.

7. Challenges

While the challenges faced by people with disability searching for meaningful employment can seem immense, Simon is positive about the potential for self-employment to offer new options.

“We have the opportunity to help people participate in work which is meaningful and rewarding to them. I really believe in the importance of that because as a person with a high level spinal cord injury I have been the beneficiary of those personal and social outcomes. As our research has showed, those in self-employment or on the entrepreneurial journey feel empowered, are aspirational and see themselves as part of the future. They also see themselves as being in a position to help others with and without disability, and get the benefits of employment beyond the financial support—improving their social position and accessing networks.”