

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (2014) places emphasis on competitive integrated employment (CIE). Under this legislation, vocational rehabilitation (VR) agencies are required to implement approaches that lead to CIE opportunities for individuals with extensive support needs. CIE refers to full- or part-time work that produces an income comparable to that of non-disabled persons (29 USC §705(5)). One way for individuals with extensive support needs to gain CIE is through self-employment.

What is Self-Employment?

Self-employment refers to establishing and running one's own business venture, either independently or with the assistance of paid support services or unpaid help from sources like family members (Wehman et al., 2018). For many, the flexibility and autonomy of self-employment provides a better vocational fit compared to traditional employment settings. For example, being self-employed allows for innovations like remote work, job crafting based on interests and abilities, and tapping into entrepreneurial passions (Ipsen, 2021). With tailored training, supports, and resources, the self-employment pathway can open doors to enhanced integration for those who may have faced systemic employment challenges.

What the Research Says

Vocational rehabilitation counselors (VRCs) play an instrumental role in supporting individuals with disabilities to pursue self-employment. Two studies recently investigated VRC's perceptions of the factors that facilitate self-employment. Key facilitators identified were those related to the VRC's knowledge and skills, access to resources, personal attributes, and experience with self-employment (Riesen et al., 2023; Taylor et al., 2023). In the area of knowledge and

skills, facilitators of self-employment include having VRCs who are able to assess how a job seeker's disability might impact employment, assess the job seeker's ability to complete tasks necessary to run a business, and clearly define the expectations and responsibilities of self-employment to the job seeker (Riesen et al., 2023). With regards to resources, VRCs require access to resources for assisting job seekers to navigate the financial and business-related aspects of self-employment. Specifically, having access to small business development centers, community networks, and consultants may help to facilitate successful self-employment (Taylor et al., 2023). There are also certain personal attributes that aid VRCs in facilitating self-employment such as being open-minded, creative, person-centered, and entrepreneurial (Taylor et al., 2023). Other important attributes include understanding how the person's disability impacts employment, asking open ended questions, using active listening, being culturally competent, and genuinely supporting the individual (Riesen et al., 2023). Finally, having personal experience with self-employment can be advantageous (Reisen et al., 2023; Taylor et al., 2023). VRCs who have been self-employed or have helped others achieve self-employment bring important insights that facilitate self-employment for job seekers with disabilities

Guidelines for Practice

Self-employment is a viable pathway to CIE for individuals with extensive support needs. Although the facilitators of self-employment discussed in the literature are focused on VRCs, they have direct implications for how transition personnel approach students who are considering self-employment. Below are steps transition personnel can take to learn about self-employment and cultivate it as a potential pathway to employment for students with extensive support needs.

Educate yourself – Spend some time learning about what it takes to run a business. Once you have identified the skills needed, you can assess your student’s abilities to determine if self-employment could be an option.

Identify Resources – Check to see if you have a small business development center, community networks, and/or consultants within your community. Reach out to the people affiliated with these resources, ask questions, and invite them to speak with your students about self-employment.

Help Students Explore Self-Employment – Arrange informational interviews with entrepreneurs with disabilities and encourage participation in school-based enterprises or student-run businesses.

Additional Resources

Self-Employment Q & A: Information on Entrepreneurship for Youth with Disabilities

<https://worksupport.com/documents/STARTUPQAInformationonEntrepreneurship1.pdf>

This document provides questions and answers that may assist transition personnel working with students interested in self-employment.

Entrepreneurship for Youth with Disabilities Curriculum

<https://eyd.ahs.uic.edu/>

This free curriculum includes 13 units for teaching entrepreneurial concepts and skills through direct instruction and hands-on learning activities.

References

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