

Common Ground Cooperative: A Mixed Model Approach to Social Entrepreneurship

Hope, J., Campbell, J., Owen, F., Readhead, A., & Bishop, C.

People with developmental disabilities in Canada experience high rates of unemployment and unacceptably low income support. “Employment is one of the pillars of the full inclusion of people with disabilities into society. Many people with disabilities can and want to work, but still face barriers that prevent them from realizing their full potential” (Ontario Labour Market Report, 2011, p. 4).

Exclusion from the labour market tends to be rooted in stigma and stereotypes about this population’s labour capability. Once ensconced in the world of work there is little security and often the employment position is terminated quickly. The Canada-Ontario Labour Market Agreement for Persons with Disabilities 2010-11 Annual Report (Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services, 2011) states that of the 2647 individuals with disabilities who accessed supported employment programs in Ontario in 2009, only 1.3% remained employed full time once supports ended and 10.3% remained employed part-time. Supported employment services are predominately used by persons with developmental and/or physical disabilities.

The majority of persons with developmental disabilities continue to participate in ‘day activities’ as opposed to competitive employment. This includes, for example, work in sheltered workshops, volunteer positions, vocational training programs, or co-op style work placements in the competitive market that provides a limited number of hours per week, instability, and honorarium style payments that will not affect their income supports (government support). While some persons with developmental disabilities are employed, the 2006 Participation and Activity Limitation Survey (PALS) reported that only 26.1% of Canadians with developmental (intellectual) disabilities were employed while 52.7% of persons with other disabilities and approximately 75.1% of persons with no identified disabilities were employed. In addition, 39% of persons with intellectual disabilities were reported as having never worked while only 6.4% of persons with other disabilities and 6.2% of persons with no disability had never worked (Crawford, 2011, p. ii).

Supported Entrepreneurship, a consumer-driven business with additional human supports, offers an important opportunity that has been largely unexplored by persons who have developmental disabilities with the exception of the innovative work of Common Ground Cooperative (CGC). Incorporated in 2000, CGC is a co-operative and registered charity that provides supports for 5 business partnerships for persons with developmental disabilities (partners). The services provided include training for future business partners, job coaches who provide ongoing support to the partners, administrative support including legal and financial services, business development, planning, and community connections.

The roots of CGC and its related businesses date from the 1998 founding of Lemon & Allspice Cookery by community members looking for an alternative to sheltered workshops and mainstream employment placements for their adult children with developmental disabilities. The focus on baking as the core of the first business came from the interest of co-founder Cathy Lemon who, with her friends and the support of their family members, began a small business “selling donuts and coffee at the Community Living building ...in downtown Toronto” (Lemon, 2011, p. 1). With increasing community support and success in attracting grants the business

grew into a viable catering business broadening its offerings beyond the original cookies and donuts to address the demand for lunch and event catering. Three retail Coffee Shed retail businesses were added between 2001 and 2004 with two located in social service agencies and one at New College, University of Toronto. In 2010 the organization moved beyond its reliance on food service to add CleanABLE, a therapy toy cleaning service for one of agencies where a Coffee Shed is located. CGC related businesses have positions for 57 partners most of whom work on a part time basis with some partners working in more than one of the businesses.

Partners in the businesses are usually recipients of the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) that limits the amount they can earn. Partners working in one of businesses can experience up to a 15% or \$2000.00 increase in their discretionary funds due to earnings. The partners are paid based on profit sharing, a component of any business partnership. They share 33% of the revenue before cost of goods sold.

In addition to these businesses, CGC operates the Foundation Program that offers prevocational education and training for future partners, and programs in Literacy and Financial Literacy, Self-Awareness, Abuse Awareness & Prevention, Fitness & Nutrition, Enhanced Communication Program, Resume Skills, and Public Speaking. The Magically Creative Art Club was created and is facilitated by a business partner.

In 2011-12 interviews were conducted with partners, CGC staff, and Ministry of Community and Social Services and CGC Board members who described the impact of CGC and its related businesses as part of a case study being developed for the Social Business and Marginalized Social Groups Community University Research Alliance. Partners who worked at the three Coffee sheds spoke of their businesses with pride and confidence. Despite the limitations on what they can earn because of pension regulations, they consistently described their position in the businesses as either full time or part time work, not volunteering, with the distinction being monetary gain. "The difference is we get paid but at volunteer work you don't get paid." They described their level of income as fair for the job they did and that they were satisfied with the amount of pay. However, they also expressed a desire to make a higher income but felt limited by the constraints of ODSP.

The partners described many job tasks that they had learned in their work environment, their independence in skill acquisition and their role in passing this knowledge on to new partners entering their businesses. The learned tasks included such activities as opening shop, setting up the counters, making coffee, serving customers, counting cash, banking and cleaning up. As one partner described, "Being out at work, ... learning new things, like those things you haven't learned yet. For example, I learned how to do an invoice." The partners considered their business to be successful and defined their success in terms of location, income and partnership responsibilities: "... people are getting more catering orders, business is starting to get more money. It makes us want to stay and work."

The partners described being their own boss, being a team leader, and the importance of teamwork. "Being my own boss is actually pretty good... I don't know maybe because just certain decisions we can make." Interestingly, the partners described choosing to work at a Coffee Shed for reasons including social enhancement, to gain new experiences and because of job proximity to their home. Partners described the opportunity "...to meet friends, to maybe try something new, to try and get out of the house and try something new." The partners spoke of the value of a steady job, preferring the harmony of the work environment, making friendships

and improved mental health. “Friends always care about, ... they’re always here for me.” They communicated a sense of belonging and being valued. “To be part of the business you feel like you’re not alone whereas at the other business that I did I felt like I was alone ‘cause I was the only one that had a disability.”

Through the interviews with partners, four prominent emerging themes were found: partnership, relationships, work ethic and teamwork. Partnership was described as passing apprenticeship criteria, having the authority to vote as one of the partners, the legal agreement of signing on as a partner in the business, and the importance of supporting each other. “A partnership agreement is you’re gonna work together as a team, you’re helping us pull the weight, you not going to just sit and let other people do the work.” Work ethic was paramount to successful partnership. This etiquette was described in terms of work expectations and professionalism as well as in terms of teamwork.

Included in the results of the staff interviews were similar themes related to the importance of peer support and community for partners in the workplace, and their opportunities for self-actualization. Concern was expressed about the limitations of traditional sheltered workshops that one staff member described as “...a lot of people sitting around waiting to die...doing nothing, not being engaged.” In addition, challenges were identified that may face persons with disabilities who are employed in competitive employment. One of the participants reflected on the variability persons with disabilities may find in the support available to them in other business settings where they are unlikely to have “a one-on-one staff” for support and where “...somebody in your department might be very nice to you and treat you like somebody else but that security guard is calling you names...” In contrast, in CGC supported businesses the staff support and community with peers who have similar experiences are available where “... you have people to talk to without being worried about losing your placement.” Staff described the importance of feeling truly understood in this setting where partners are not judged.

Staff described the empowerment of partners who own their own businesses and realize the strengths that they and others may not have known they possessed: “...it’s totally opened my mind as to what these guys are capable of doing and that they can succeed in whatever they want, they just need the opportunity to do it and the chance to do it...” Part of this chance is to feel that one is contributing and developing leadership skills through “...the partnership too that everybody kind of strives to be a leader in some way.” Staff described CGC as a unique model of democracy and respect that provides persons with disabilities with “...the opportunity to work in a community...” and to gain confidence in contrast to “...so many ... people [who] are really underrated and underestimated and undervalued and they’re just, you know, stuck.” As a board member emphasized, “...it’s a job, it’s their career, ...and there are many of them who’ve been with us for years, and that’s, ...something that I don’t think any other employment program for this group ..., that they they’re able to stay long, long-term. This is my career, this is what I do, this is my job, I have a say...”

This innovative mixed Social Entrepreneurship model with a co-operative providing administrative and support services to a network of businesses owned by persons with intellectual disabilities offers a new model for persons who are among the most underemployed in Canada.

References

- Crawford, Cameron (2011). The employment of people with intellectual disabilities in Canada: A statistical profile. Toronto: Institute for Research on Inclusion and Society (IRIS).
- Lemon, C. and Lemon, J., (2003). Community-based cooperative ventures for adults with intellectual disabilities. *The Canadian Geographer*, 47, 414-428.
- Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services (2011) *Canada-Ontario Labour Market Agreement for Persons with Disabilities 2010-11 Annual Report*. Retrieved from www.mcass.gov.on.ca/documents/en/mcass/publications/accessibility/lab_mkt_2011.pdf