

Six challenges that impede entrepreneurs with disabilities in South Africa

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South Africa needs to do more to support people living with disabilities who want to run their own businesses. At present it is hard for them to make a living. Helping them would benefit the broader economy too.



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Individuals with disabilities make up 15% of the South African population and it's estimated that [8 in 10](#) people living with disabilities are unemployed.

There are some measures in place designed to alleviate the situation. These include the disability grant and some specific provisions in laws such as the equity act, black economic empowerment as well as the Constitution of the country. But these are far from enough.

In a country like South Africa where the unemployment rate is [27.7%](#), entrepreneurship could save the day. In particular, it could give people with disabilities [greater independence](#) and the ability to support themselves financially. They could set their own schedules and reduce transport problems if they were based at home.

Our [study](#) set out to identify the difficulties facing entrepreneurs who live with physical disabilities in the country. It focused on an area called Sebokeng, south of Johannesburg. Using qualitative research, the study explored the experiences and perspectives of disabled respondents.

Six themes emerged from the interviews: a lack of equipment and machinery; discrimination; business networking; hardships in obtaining start-up capital; knowledge of support centres and education and training.

The township environment

Sebokeng was established 1965 as a settlement designated for black people under apartheid. Areas like it, known as townships, were designed as labour reserves to supply industries with cheap labour.

The planners of township infrastructure didn't imagine that residents would ever be self-employed. But entrepreneurs emerged against the odds. And the challenges they face are still enormous.

In Sebokeng, there are businesses like carpentry workshops making household furniture, small scale clothing and food manufacturers.

Disabled people involved in small businesses face the same hurdles as other entrepreneurs, but their difficulties are multiplied. The areas in which they face the biggest challenges include:

Equipment and machinery

Lack of equipment and machinery. Physically disabled entrepreneurs said that most facilities for small business weren't equipped to accommodate their conditions.

A physically disabled sculptor said:

“ I believe that the number one limiting factor for some of us is lack of supporting tools and machinery. ”

A welder said:

“ Because I am in a wheelchair, the best thing for me would be to have machinery for my business, so that I get on board with new machines that are designed with the user in mind and ultimately increasing the ”

productivity of my business.

Discrimination

Most of the entrepreneurs living with physical disabilities said they lacked confidence as they experienced a lot of discrimination. For example, they said people thought they weren't competent because they were disabled.

A physically disabled jewellery designer said:

“ I need answers as to why we have to go through such discrimination and humiliation just because we are physically disabled. ”

A hairdresser said:

“ We are always last in line for everything, we are not treated the same because of this stigma. ”

Business networking

People in business use broader networks to form business relationships that create opportunities all over the world. Most of

the participants in our study said they were not involved in business networking activities in the Sebokeng area. They said that they were unable to make and maintain relationships with other people in business because of the discrimination they faced.

A 24-year-old computer programmer told us:

“ Most entrepreneurs who are not disabled exclude us from their business networking events just because we are physically challenged. This is because they recognise us as entrepreneurs who are very slow in their business operations. ”

A comment from a 25-year-old entrepreneur was even more telling:

“ Each time I attend business networking events people see my disfigurement and they wouldn't want to, or don't know how to, approach me. ”

Start-up capital

Getting capital to start a business is always a [challenge](#) for entrepreneurs. The majority of the participants said this was an issue, mostly when they sought loans from financial institutions.

A 31-year-old entrepreneur said:

“ Commercial banks do not want to offer loans to entrepreneurs living with physical disabilities... they are not confident in our competence to run businesses. ”

Support centres

Study participants were not aware of the government support centres or initiatives to support businesses that are managed and operated by people with physical disabilities. Only a few said that they got support from the government. But the support they received wasn't enough to sustain them in running their ventures.

Education and training

Education and training also emerged as a critical theme. It is generally accepted that [educated entrepreneurs](#) are better able to take advantage of opportunities. Participants in the study said that lack of education and training was a barrier to their success. In the words of one of them:

“ We do not have adequate knowledge and teaching on how to manage various entrepreneurial businesses. ”

Recommendations

The South African government needs to do a dedicated review of policies that are meant to support people living with disabilities to give them a better deal. Some old policies will need to be revamped and new ones put in place where necessary. This must be done with a focus on critical areas like education and skills development, start-up finance and to influence the general environment to be more friendly towards people living with disabilities.

It is imperative for business people living with physical disabilities to form networks and partnerships that can be used to lobby and open opportunities.

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