

Perspective

The Challenge of Re-Entry Employment

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Employment has been identified as a major factor in overcoming recidivism among ex-felons; those that find employment are three to five times less likely to commit a crime [1]. Yet, unemployment rates remain high, estimated at between 42% [2] and 55% [3]. In addition the jobs available to ex-felons are frequently “informal” and lower paid when compared to similar individuals never involved in the criminal justice system [4,5]. Thus, ex-felons that find employment frequently fail to find jobs that are sufficient to provide the financial stability to support themselves and a family.

The lack of “sufficient employment” has been difficult to change. The effects of criminal record stigma is far reaching, with the majority (80%) of medium and large companies conducting checks for criminal records before hiring [6] and 60% of employers hesitant, or firm about not hiring an ex-prisoner [7]. Jobs available to ex-felons are further limited by lower levels of education, and the poor work history [8]. It is understandable that, given the barriers to good paying jobs, subsidized work and other programs intended to help ex-felons employment prospects have met with disappointing long-term results [9-11].

Recently entrepreneurship in the form of part-time self-employment as a means of adding income in addition to other work, or as a full-time endeavor has been put forth as an alternative to by passing the usual barriers towards employment. In recent years, entrepreneurial efforts have been successfully initiated at a few substance abuse treatment centers and other recovery programs. Examples include The Delancey Street Foundation¹, Triangle Residential Options for Substance Abusers², the Prison Entrepreneurship Program³ Defy Ventures⁴ Homeboy Industries⁵, and the Amity Foundation Center for Social Entrepreneurship⁶.

Recovery Through Entrepreneurship [12,13] has extended the entrepreneurial approach to employment by developing a standardized entrepreneurial training program with a set of

1 <http://www.delanceystreetfoundation.org/enterprises.php>

2 <http://www.trosainc.org>

3 <http://www.prisonentrepreneurship.org>

4 <http://defyventures.org>

5 <http://www.homeboyindustries.org/>

6 <http://socialenterprisecensus.org/amity-foundation-center-for-social-entrepreneurship>

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digital entrepreneurial tools accessed through their website (rtecenter.com; rtetools.com) and integrated into the training. The program is designed for therapeutic communities (TCs) and residents with limited work skills and education. Consistent with initial low levels of participant skills, RTE begins its training focusing on intrapreneurship (developing businesses and programs with the organization) as a means of learning how to be entrepreneurial within the structure of the TC. By using this approach as a starting point, RTE creates an environment in which participants can learn the necessary skills under the tutelage of RTE trained staff to eventually reach a point where they can strive to start their own businesses upon graduation from the program. Two main outcomes are projected for RTE participants: greater retention in treatment and increasing the rate of sufficient employment opportunities.

The RTE approach encourages all students to engage in the “Entrepreneurial Mentality” which is defined as examining one’s environment to identify problems or what’s lacking in the environment, creating solutions, and building projects to fix these issues. The program also teaches financial literacy as it applies to personal finances and businesses, computer skills, and other skills needed to initiate and sustain a business. The curriculum is built off two distinct phases; intrapreneurship and entrepreneurship. Phase 1 focuses on basics of computer literacy and project oriented work delivered in 24 sessions. There is general agreement among educators that this type of practical, pragmatic learning is more accessible for individuals who have not been successful in school. In this manner RTE stimulates creativity and curiosity aimed at accomplishing actual projects rather than mastery of abstract intellectual material. The initial sessions are devoted to teaching participants how to examine their treatment community with the object of identifying additional needed services. This identification of a specific goal, or opportunity, provides a focus for the individual and acts as a motivation for continuance.

A tutorial in computer and other skills is provided for participants needing basic instruction. More advanced training consists of instruction and peer group activities to provide the knowledge and experience needed to maximize the use of the RTE

web-based digital platform, and group support for participants to begin to develop their own project plans. Financial planning, as it applies to personal and business applications, networking, funding, customer relations, marketing, making presentations and other relevant skills are included in the digital platform and the training. RTE believes the process is as important as the content so the course is designed to shift the focus from teacher based instruction to peer-group interaction, and then to an individual focus in Phase 2. By the end of the course work all participants will have developed financial goals and a fully built project plan that is pitched during the course graduation.

Upon completion of the RTE training, the program participants can continue to Phase 2 which is the advanced course focused on entrepreneurship and learning how to build a business plan directed towards re-entry. After graduation the RTE platform continues to provide additional resources for developing and sustaining a business, as well as the opportunity to share with, and seek advice from others using the RTE website.

Pilot programs in New York City and Tucson Arizona developed a total of 6 “intrapreneurial”⁷ projects, including a café, food truck, bakery, and meditation/yoga classes. Pre- and post-tests of knowledge needed to operate and sustain a business showed marked improvement in computer basics (45.6%), principles and issues of entrepreneurship (39.2%), and principles of networking (37.1%). There were also noticeable gains in how to secure funding (16.9%), and how to manage a business (11.7%). Participant reaction to the course was highly positive regarding areas such as participant satisfaction, meeting expectations, helpfulness, and interest in the subject matter with average scores between 4 and 5 on a 5-point scale. Ultimately extensive longitudinal studies will be needed to further determine the viability of the RTE approach. At this early stage of development the RTE intrapreneurial-to-entrepreneurial method of moving individuals from working with peers within the program (intrapreneurship) to developing their own businesses post-graduation from the program (entrepreneurship) appears to offer a promising approach to developing what we have called “sufficient employment” for substance abusing ex-felons entering residential treatment.

7 “Intrapreneurial” projects are internal to organizations versus stand alone start ups.

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