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For Disabled, a Job Hunt Alternative

Mentally and Physically Challenged Adults Seek to Open Their Own Business, but Face Many Hurdles

By SARAH E. NEEDLEMAN



Steven St. John for The Wall Street Journal

David Shunkey, shown doing exercises with Heather Gooch, is trying to build a dog-biscuit business.

David Shunkey is autistic and doesn't speak. Around the start of the recession, he got laid off from two jobs. Now he's trying to run his own business.

More mentally and physically challenged adults are looking to

entrepreneurship as they get closed out of an exceptionally competitive job market, according to several organizations that help the disabled, including Community Options Inc., a nonprofit based in Princeton, N.J. of which Mr. Shunkey is a member. But in an economic climate that's been tough on entrepreneurs, the disabled are no exception, and many face extra challenges.

"It's more difficult for someone like David to obtain a normal job," says Heather Gooch, one of several Community Options workers helping Mr. Shunkey build a dog-treat business with an \$850 state grant from New Mexico, where his enterprise is based. "He needs close supervision."

The unemployment rate for disabled workers was 14.3% in June, up from 9.3% two years earlier, when the Labor Department first began tracking such data for this demographic. In June, the unemployment rate for the rest of the U.S. was 9.4%.

Employment opportunities have historically been scarce for the disabled. Twenty years ago this month, Congress enacted the Americans with Disabilities Act, barring employers from discriminating against qualified job applicants with disabilities. Last year alone, more than 21,000 claims were filed with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission against employers accused of violating the law.

With the poor economy further restricting employment options for the disabled, some organizations are seeing increased interest in programs designed to assist this group in starting businesses.

Applications for an entrepreneur boot camp for disabled veterans that's offered through a network of six U.S. business schools have risen every year since the program's inception in 2007, says Mike Haynie, its national director. This year he expects to receive more than 500 applications for the program's 150 seats.

Founded by the Whitman School of Management at Syracuse University, the boot camp starts with a 40-day distance-learning course, followed by 10 days of on-campus classes. Participants are also paired with mentors and have access to free resources such as legal and accounting services from corporate partners and the schools' alumni.

After graduating from the program in 2008, former Marine Brian Iglesias co-launched New York film-production company Veterans Inc. with a fellow veteran. Mr. Iglesias's neck and shoulder were injured during combat, causing permanent nerve damage to his right arm and requiring a metal plate in his neck. He says he previously spent five months searching unsuccessfully for a job in the entertainment industry—even failing to land unpaid internships. "I was begging people to work for free," he says.

The 33-year-old Mr. Iglesias, who has a bachelor's degree in film production from Temple University, suspects that some employers were uncomfortable hiring him because of his war experience. "Out of all the people who are candidates, they think, a year ago this guy was being shot at," he says.



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Brian Iglesias

Brian Iglesias co-launched film-production company Veterans Inc.

Every year since the recession hit, about 3,000 disabled adults have contacted Disabled Businesspersons Association for referrals to resources and volunteer mentors—three times as many as before, according to Urban Miyares, the San Diego nonprofit's president.

But success seems limited. "We have yet to show any significant increase in profit or individual incomes by these new business owners," he says.

Mr. Miyares speculates that because more disabled adults are pursuing entrepreneurship, competition for grants and other funding set aside by government agencies for this group has increased. As a result, disabled entrepreneurs may have less

access to the start-up capital or cash flow they need to build and maintain a business, he says.

Meanwhile, it's been tough for business owners of all kinds to obtain credit. Only about half of small businesses that sought loans last year got all or most of what they needed, according to a survey from the National Federation of Independent Business, an association in Washington.

And for business owners with severe disabilities, there are many other hurdles. Mr. Shunkey, the autistic entrepreneur, relies on a team of supporters to ensure he doesn't get hurt while running his home-based start-up, David's Peanut Butter Puppy Bites LLC. Because the 54-year-old Mr. Shunkey is diabetic and has a tendency to eat or drink anything within reach, his helpers need to keep a close eye on him at all times. "If there's hot coffee left out, he'll just pour it into his mouth," says Ms. Gooch.

With the help of his support team, Mr. Shunkey sought his first customers by asking local pet groomers and supply shops to sell his product on consignment. While five businesses initially signed on, three have since backed out, says Ms. Gooch, adding that sales of Mr. Shunkey's dog treats, which are priced at \$5 for a dozen, have totaled just \$120 over the past three months.

When asked in a phone interview if he enjoys running a business, Mr. Shunkey nodded, according to Ms. Gooch. He didn't respond to subsequent questions.

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