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## Designing Support Systems That Empower Entrepreneurs with Disabilities

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By [Julien Billion](#), [J r mie Renouf](#), [Claire Doussard](#) and [Jonathan Labb ](#)

**Entrepreneurship is often promoted as a pathway to autonomy for people with disabilities, yet it frequently relies on fragile and informal support systems. This study shows how social, economic, and care-related dependencies shape entrepreneurial viability, calling for stable, co-designed support mechanisms that foster long-term autonomy rather than precarious independence.**

### Entrepreneurship as a fragile alternative

Entrepreneurship is celebrated as a path to autonomy, resilience, and self determination. For people with disabilities, it is presented as a response to labor market exclusion, offering flexibility where salaried employment falls short. Yet behind this optimistic narrative lies a more complex reality, one in which support networks both enable and constrain entrepreneurial action. People with disabilities are more likely than the general population to turn to self employment, not by choice but by necessity. When salaried employment remains inaccessible, entrepreneurship appears as an alternative path. What initially promises autonomy can, however, quickly become isolating.

Jessica, who eventually returned to salaried employment, explained: "When you're an entrepreneur, you need people around you; it's best if there are at least two of you. That wasn't the case, so I just got tired of it." For certain entrepreneurs with disabilities, support is not optional. Daily work depends on family members, caregivers, colleagues, or informal professional networks that compensate for inaccessible infrastructures, rigid institutions, and missing accommodations. Marwa, who has a motor disability, described her daily constraints clearly: "I have someone who takes care of me at fixed times, and outside of those times, I have no one to help me." Public assistance, she added, only partially covers her needs: "I have 4 and a half hours a day. It's not enough." Such support provides stability, but only within strict limits. Assistance is confined to the private sphere and remains unavailable in professional environments. Entrepreneurial activity becomes closely tied to care schedules, limiting mobility, growth, and strategic choices. Other entrepreneurs rely on informal help. Jean depends on a secretary to manage inaccessible digital tools. Octave regularly asks the coworking space manager for assistance. Samir relies on his business partner to make phone calls when interpretation services are unavailable. These arrangements function only as long as relationships hold. Support is neither guaranteed nor formalized, making social capital inherently fragile. Family members play a central but ambivalent role. Marc and Jerry both rely on their mothers to facilitate communication with clients and partners. Marc explained: "Without my mother, I miss most of the exchanges." At the same time, he insisted: "I prefer my mother to stay in the background." Family support enables participation while threatening professional legitimacy and personal independence. Entrepreneurs must constantly negotiate how visible this assistance should be, balancing credibility, stigma, and autonomy.

### The economic cost of dependence

Social capital also shapes economic viability. Entrepreneurs with disabilities face structural costs that others do not, including assistive technologies, interpreters, adapted equipment, and accessible workspaces. Lucie noted: “The costs of assistance are high and reduce my profit margins.” Oscar echoed this experience: “The costs associated with these services are significant, but essential.” Marie highlighted the emotional dimension of this dependence: “It also reminds me that my independence depends on this financial support.”

In some cases, economic resources are accessible only through social relationships or public aid. While these resources enable business creation, they remain unstable and insufficient for long term development. Entrepreneurs are forced to assemble short term solutions rather than build sustainable growth models. For some, this pressure becomes decisive. Sophie, who runs a digital services business, admitted: “With the additional expenses of support and the need to stay technologically up to date, I often wonder if salaried employment wouldn’t be more financially stable.”

### **Managerial and policy implications**

Supporting entrepreneurs with disabilities requires moving beyond a narrow focus on access and start up assistance. Long term entrepreneurial viability depends on stable and predictable support mechanisms that explicitly account for recurring disability related costs rather than treating them as exceptional expenses. Reducing reliance on informal goodwill is equally critical. When assistance depends on personal relationships, entrepreneurs remain exposed to disruption and loss of autonomy. Investing in accessible infrastructures, professional support services, and standardized accommodations can significantly reduce this vulnerability. Evaluation practices also need to evolve. Traditional performance indicators often overlook structural inequalities and additional costs borne by entrepreneurs with disabilities. Investors, incubators, and public agencies should integrate these constraints into their assessment frameworks instead of interpreting lower margins as weaker performance or lower ambition. Finally, entrepreneurs with disabilities should be directly involved in the design of support programs and policies. Co designing initiatives with those concerned increases their relevance, limits unintended dependency effects, and strengthens long term empowerment.

Entrepreneurship is not a universal solution to exclusion, but it can offer opportunities under certain conditions. For entrepreneurs with disabilities, outcomes depend both on individual capacities and on how social, economic, and institutional systems interact. Support plays a critical role, although its impact depends on how it is structured and sustained. When carefully designed and embedded over time, support systems can strengthen autonomy and contribute to sustainable entrepreneurial independence.

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