

# Seize the day

Finbarr Toesland looks at how mobile technologies and the internet have helped to create a new wave of disabled entrepreneurs

It's not hard to see why the number of disabled entrepreneurs is on the rise – being able to work flexible hours from home can be an attractive prospect.

There are estimated to be over 500,000 self-employed disabled people in the UK, accounting for 15% of all disabled people in work – a proportion slightly higher than the 13% of non-disabled people who are self-employed.



Casper Gray

## First steps

The relatively recent advent of technologies that serve to empower disabled people – such as specialised input devices and speech recognition software – combined with the power of the internet has given aspiring entrepreneurs a range of practical tools they can use to overcome barriers that might once have prevented them from establishing their own businesses.

Casper Grey, MD of the design consultancy Wax, co-founded his company with a friend eight years ago. Since then he has worked in many different projects spanning design, sustainability, education, standards and business. Grey feels that the internet has helped his business at every stage, and helped compensate for the impact of his multiple sclerosis. "The internet has been amazing. When it's been difficult for me to walk and leave the house, I've been able to speak with clients on a video call over Skype," he says. "We use the internet constantly for research, planning, collaborating – it's vital. We work and collaborate daily with shared online files through Google Docs, so it doesn't matter if I'm at home or in the office."

The online resources available to disabled entrepreneurs can often be hard to navigate. This is changing,

however, thanks to the work being done by organisations such as Disabled Entrepreneurs Network (DEN), which gives advice to those considering starting their own business and who may require guidance on the initial steps they need to take.

## Additional scrutiny

Gaining funding from banks or investment firms to develop your business or idea can be difficult for anyone, with a strong business idea, a clear plan and profit/loss accounts being the very least that's required. Disabled business owners then have to deal with additional scrutiny, if their circumstances have the potential to hamper the growth of their business. Traditional investment sources also often lack extensive experience of dealing with disabled entrepreneurs, and may therefore not be best suited to working alongside them.

Kaleidoscope Investments offers people with disabilities investment and support to help launch and grow their businesses. It was founded by city financier Hardeep Rai, who has a son with cerebral palsy. Kaleidoscope recently held its inaugural Disabled Entrepreneurs Conference at RBS' head office in London, which saw attendance from over 160 disabled entrepreneurs.

One of the major benefits of Kaleidoscope's approach is that it includes opportunities to spend time with mentors and sector experts, who not only provide advice and 'hands on' guidance, but also access to their extensive networks throughout the entire business lifecycle.

## The digital divide

While a considerable number of disabled people have taken advantage of the resources the internet offers for entrepreneurship, there is still a surprisingly high number of disabled adults that have never used the internet. 3.5 million adults with a disability – some 30% of all disabled adults in the country



Attendees at Kaleidoscope Investments' inaugural Disabled Entrepreneurs Conference

## AND THE WINNER IS...YOU?

Entries are now open for the The Stelios Award 2015. Organised once again by the Stelios Philanthropic Foundation and Leonard Cheshire Disability, it will see a £50,000 reward given to an established business owner with a disability or long-term health condition.

The closing date for this year's entries is Friday 18th September 2015. For further information, eligibility details and to download an application form, visit [www.leonardcheshire.org/stelios](http://www.leonardcheshire.org/stelios); you can also contact 020 7112 1489 (selecting 'option 1'). Other application formats are available on request.



Sir Stelios Haji-Ioannou with 2014's winner, Ben Wolfenden

– are yet to even surf the web, according to the Office for National Statistics. Conversely, only 7% of non-disabled adults in the UK were estimated to not have used the internet during their lifetime.

One of the key issues preventing disabled people from utilising modern technologies, such as computers and tablets, is the often high cost of the specialist equipment and software some need to properly interact with them. Given how much people's specific needs can vary, off-the-shelf solutions are often only useful to a select number of users, with expensive custom-built devices and services the only solution for many.

However, attempts are being made to better meet disabled people's needs in this area. The charity Leonard Cheshire Disability (LCD), for example, runs two schemes – Discover IT and Discover IT @ Home – which aim to give disabled people access to otherwise hard to obtain equipment and specialist IT technology, both at home and at a number of centres around the country.

According to Selina Mills, external communications officer at LCD, "We support and deliver many digital

inclusion projects, and firmly believe that the internet and other technologies level the playing field for disabled people. It allows independence, reach and access to online communities."

Starting a new business is a daunting process for anyone, usually requiring a major commitment from the outset, but people with disabilities need to be additionally aware of finding themselves in the so-called 'benefits trap'. This can occur if someone's regular benefit payments are stopped when their fledgling business is still only making a very small profit, leaving individual worse off and with less financial security than they had before.

### Challenging misconceptions

Disabled entrepreneurs who have already established their business and want to take it to the next level can compete in the Stelios Award for Disabled Entrepreneurs. First held in 2006, this annual competition is specifically aimed at disabled people who own and run their own business, and awards a £50,000 prize to an overall winner personally picked by easyJet founder, Sir Stelios Haji-Ioannou.

The prize was last awarded to Ben Wolfenden in 2014, to support the growth of his digital marketing agency Visibilis ([www.visibilis.co.uk](http://www.visibilis.co.uk)). "Winning the Stelios Award for Disabled Entrepreneurs has had a tremendous positive effect on Visibilis," he comments. "It has meant we could bring forward employment plans, create a better working environment for myself and develop new business.

"This has had a huge positive effect not only on the business, but also on my family life by allowing me time to step back from some day to day issues." Wolfenden lives with cystic fibrosis, which he sees as, "Acting as a motivating force – it makes me want to get the most I can out of each day".

Yet working from home and conducting business via the internet isn't without its downsides. While there are benefits to be had from being able tailor your work environment so that it's as comfortable and safe as possible, working alone at a computer for long periods of time can serve to demotivate entrepreneurs who might otherwise require encouragement from to keep working in what can be a stressful situation. It can also lead to feelings of loneliness and isolation.

With close to 50% of disabled adults currently unemployed, there's still much

work that needs to be done. But as Casper Grey notes, "Be aware, but not scared, of the hurdles any entrepreneur will likely face, as well as those you may find because of additional challenges due to your disability. They're not my words but they're perfect here – never, never, never, give up!"

