Best practices and principles for launching and sustaining WISEs in the Community Living sector

This excerpt is adapted from the soon-to-be-published eBook:

Venturing Forth: insights and inspiration for social enterprise in the Community Living sector

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Specific context within the Community Living sector

Within the Community Living sector, agencies that support people with intellectual disabilities commonly operate social enterprises.

Some of these ventures exist mainly to generate profit, which is redirected back to the agency's general social programming. Many of these are housed in separate taxable corporations, owned by the parent organization. While they are legitimate social enterprises, these are not Work Integrated Social Enterprises (WISEs), as there is no 'work integration' aspect.

However, the majority of social enterprises within the Community Living sector *are* WISEs – their core purpose is to foster community inclusion by offering supportive and patient workplaces that host people with diverse abilities as workers in perpetuity (employment WISE's); or temporarily (training WISE's) in order to build individuals' capacity to work in competitive employment.

This document proposes some general best practices and principles for those planning, operating, and funding WISEs focused on supporting diversely-abled workers.

We are not proposing best practices for profit-first social enterprises, or any social enterprises with mandates outside of training and employment for those with diverse abilities.

What these WISEs are not

WISEs are not sheltered workshops. In contrast to sheltered workshops, WISEs:
- ✓ Remunerate workers, meeting or exceeding the requirements of provincial labour standards and within federal guidelines
- ✓ Hold training and/or employment as their primary purpose
- ✓ Strive to provide social inclusion opportunities for workers, through customer and supplier interactions, and promotional activities
- ✓ Balance worker preferences and abilities with operational needs
- ✓ Prioritize worker experience over production efficiency
- ✓ Reject institutional or one-size-fits-all approaches to supporting people served
- ✓ May support workers with and without disabilities

WISEs differ from competitive employment in that they:
- ✓ Do not hold profit-generation as a primary goal
- ✓ Incur significant social costs to operate
- ✓ Do not rely exclusively on support workers
- ✓ Employ job carving when needed
- ✓ Serve as a supportive employer, meeting workers where they are at, encouraging skills development, and fostering meaningful experiences
- ✓ View worker transition to other employers as a success indicator
- ✓ Scale to offer experiences to more people served, as the business grows

Supported with feedback from experienced leaders in BC's Community Living WISE sector, we propose some best practices / principles for building and maintaining WISEs (aka SEs) in the Community Living sector specifically.

We acknowledge the diversity of WISEs: so in no way intend this to be a completely comprehensive, or prescriptive list. Not all suggestions will apply to all situations.

This inaugural list should be updated as experiences deepen within the sector; and as practices and circumstances evolve.

Worker engagement

- ✓ Engage workers in the SE's development at launch (i.e. 'not about us without us'); and on an ongoing basis where possible
- ✓ Clearly communicate possibilities and requirements to workers; focusing on confidence-building, skill development, and job discovery
- ✓ Offer workers choice: what they do, when they do it, how often

Worker experience

- ✓ Build SE's in which multiple levels of work opportunity are available (considering advancement / choice / equity)
- ✓ Ensure that the nature of the tasks is such that workers can produce at a minimum wage level or greater
- ✓ Enable workers to earn to their potential
- ✓ Fit operations to people rather than the other way around; meet workers where they're at, and with flexibility; provide accommodations whenever needed
- ✓ Expose workers to as many social inclusion and integration opportunities as possible
- ✓ Accept that some workers are satisfied with their current level of skill and experience (stability / social aspect of work, above 'career progression')
- ✓ Never forget the sector's history of sheltered workshops; and always foster a rewarding experience for workers
- ✓ Provide training and work experiences that are reflective of industry standards and expectations, to ensure smooth transitions into competitive employment

Financial sustainability

- ✓ Ensure that the WISE can cover its business costs with sales: this is referred to as 'business cost recovery'
- ✓ Embrace and educate stakeholders (including Board members and funders) about the realities of WISE financial sustainability: full business cost recovery, with social costs being covered by external funding support (e.g. grants) in perpetuity: subsidy needs are not time-limited
- ✓ Encourage funders and governments to understand the social return on investment (SROI) to be reaped by investing in your WISE; quantify its impacts whenever possible
- ✓ Clarify your WISE's relationship to profit, acknowledging the tension between training / employment goals and profit generation – these are two opposing aims
- ✓ Use full cost accounting (e.g. including the host agency's absorption of bookkeeping, janitorial services, usage of space, utilities, and management time) to demonstrate the true expenses of the WISE
- ✓ Educate executive leadership, funders, Board members, and potential donors about the need to subsidize the WISE's social costs in perpetuity
- ✓ In cases where specific grant streams and donors won't support 'wages', consider reframing the need as supporting the *outcomes* that those wages yield: such as employment, capacity building, lessened reliance on social safety net, etc.
- ✓ It's acceptable to compete with other businesses in the traditional marketplace, just as they are welcome to operate WISEs – this is not unfair competition, given the added social costs of operating a WISE

Business development

- ✓ Business acumen is a must: include advisors with experience in the specific offering, position skilled people as champions; while dedicating time and resources to educating those with business skills about the social value of the venture

- ✓ The good or service must compete (on quality) in the marketplace: the social inclusion aspect of the venture is not enough to generate sustained sales
- ✓ Particularly if the WISE is focused on training workers, with the goal of assisting them to transition to work in more traditional employment settings: train on the same or similar equipment and protocols that exist in like businesses
- ✓ Consider social acquisition: purchasing an existing business and converting it to a WISE, rather than starting a venture from scratch (see dedicated section on social acquisition in this document)
- ✓ Where it makes sense, entertain Lean Start-Up approaches in testing new business ideas (see dedicated section on Lean in this document)

- ✓ Consider market demand, what niche your SE fulfills, and your plan to capture market share: this is not a social program, and decision-making should be exercised through a business lens
- ✓ Acknowledge the failure rates of traditional business: pivoting is normal; a failed venture doesn't mean a failed agency, or that another concept might not be explored; there is tremendous value in the learning, and in exercising 'the right to fail', which has historically been withheld from people with disabilities

Business compliance

- ✓ Understand the importance of agency compliance with CRA and other requirements, including provincial employment standards and accessibility legislation
- ✓ Advocate for enhancements in current government policy and practice, as it relates to enabling this work

Relationship building

- ✓ The WISE's Unique Selling Proposition (USP) is its inclusive training and employment practices: lean into it with pride, when promoting the business, and building relationships
- ✓ Engage in social procurement: purchase quality goods and services from other social enterprises
- ✓ Recognize the entire social services ecosystem as a holistic unit: WISE operators, social inclusion and work integration, funders of outcomes, and investors in WISE savings to the social safety net
- ✓ Share your own lessons learned and success models with groups interested in engaging in WISE development
- ✓ Proactively engage with the 'competition' through a lens of partnership, which could include supporting their employment needs, and clustering like offerings
- ✓ Where possible, build relationships with workplaces engaged in supportive employment, acting as a 'feeder' of experienced workers to their businesses
- ✓ Let your WISE serve as a model for inclusive employment practices, inspiring traditional businesses in your community to unlock their latent capacity to serve as a vector for meaningful social and economic inclusion

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Some thoughts on social enterprises competing in the general marketplace – from Leni Goggins, Director of Inclusive Employment Services at inclusion powell river:

WISEs are businesses that compete in the market with other businesses, but must consider their role in the marketplace and should not undercut businesses that provide traditional employment opportunities. The value proposition of the good or service is always in tandem with social impact, and this should be communicated to other businesses.

For example:

1. A tax office that employs neurodivergent accountants may offer a lower fee for service, but the longer processing time is communicated with customers and to competing businesses. The service is high quality, but may not be the fastest.

2. A cleaning service is established at a competitive rate, and reaches out to other local cleaning services to fill gaps in the market.
3. A soap company charges a higher rate for products, and communicates how the higher cost serves the community.
4. A construction company charges high rates for their service because of a lack of competition and limited tradespeople. A WISE offers to connect trained workers to the company, and extends lower pricing to non-profit and community-based construction projects.

Images from WISEs, used in this article:

Little Sprout Café
Pages 3 and 4
Based in Abbotsford, BC
Operated by Communitas Supportive Care Society

The Mindful Mouthful
Pages 5 and 6
Based in Duncan, BC
Operated by Clements Centre Society

These WISEs are among those profiled in the document entitled:

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