



ELEMENT F

ELEMENT F

Developing a supportive workplace

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Key issues in this element:

- The Balance of Aims
- A Rough Guide to a Supportive Working Environment
- Recruiting/Finding 'Disadvantaged' Staff
- Providing the Support

We have looked at the motivation you have for developing a Social Firm. What you are trying to achieve will also impact on the type of supportive working environment you provide for the people with disabilities or disadvantage that you have working in the business.

A Social Firm aims to provide supported employment opportunities within a commercial market-led business. 'Supportive employment' will mean different things to different people. Supportive employment is usually associated with enabling people with a disability or disadvantage to work in the open labour market, but it is equally applicable to Social Firms.

Because Social Firms operate in different markets, it is impossible to be prescriptive about what a 'supportive working environment' is, but this element will set out to describe some of the key factors that your Social Firm should consider, such as:

- the balance of aims;
- the supportive working environment;
- recruiting/finding 'disadvantaged' staff;
- providing support.

Think about what you understand by a ‘supportive working environment’.

- Why do you want to provide a supportive working environment for people with a disadvantage within your business?

The Balance of Aims

We have seen that running a viable Social Firm means having to balance the two aims of operating a commercial business and providing supportive employment to people with a disadvantage, within the core values of *Enterprise, Employment and Empowerment*. Social Firms have a blend of characteristics: real work for real pay; an integrated working environment where disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged employees work alongside each other; a participative working environment that values the contribution of each employee regardless of the nature and effect of their disadvantage; a working environment that supports recovery and rehabilitation; and a learning environment where personal development planning supports lifelong learning within the workplace.

The Values-Based Checklist for Social Firms is a tool for plotting progress in developing your Social Firm. This tool provides a good basis for clarifying whether the Social Firm you are developing has the blend of characteristics required.

Review the ‘Values-Based Checklist’ in the BACKGROUND ELEMENT.

Do the criteria outlined match your aspirations for developing your Social Firm?

These elements make up the supportive working environment, which is based on the idea of **planned adjustments** where all employees are supported to achieve. This supportive working environment is nurtured by teamwork, job coaching and supported training. Through developing supportive working environments Social Firms are able to deliver the following benefits:

- enabling people with disadvantages to have the status of ‘employee’ rather than that of ‘disadvantaged person’. This is particularly significant for people with severe and enduring mental health problems because of the stigma surrounding mental ill health;
- enabling people to engage in meaningful activity. People are carrying out real work for market-rate pay. In addition, earning a wage assists people to move out of the poverty trap that exists for many people with disadvantages in receipt of welfare benefits;
- improving health and reducing use of other health services. Anecdotal evidence, and some academic studies, suggests that both in-patient and out-patient health services achieve significant cost savings once people with severe disadvantages start working in Social Firms;

- assisting people to increase their self-confidence and improve their self-esteem through engagement in work;
- opening up opportunities for people to develop working relationships with colleagues through the team working ethos of Social Firms. This reduces isolation and promotes social inclusion.

Think about the blend of characteristics you are aiming for in your Social Firm.

- What are the main benefits you want to deliver through running your Social Firm?
- How can you develop the right characteristics to ensure that you deliver those benefits?

Shortly we will consider in more detail what the key elements of a supportive working environment are. For the moment we will concentrate on the main criteria of creating the 'real working environment' that is so central to providing supportive work.

Real Work

The employees of a Social Firm will be engaged in real work to enable the business to sell its goods or services to its customers. Although it may seem obvious, good practice in the creation of a real working environment includes the following:

- the working environment should be based around real work. There should be no 'tokenistic' setting aside of tasks for people with disadvantages. Instead the tasks that they are carrying out should be integral to the success of the business;
- the working environment should be within a business setting. It will have the look and feel of a real business carrying out trading activity rather than that of an institution established to provide care, where work is a side issue. In most instances this will mean the business is located within industrial estates, business parks, communities, etc. and not within institutionalized settings;
- if they are being paid then people with disadvantages should be paid at or above the National Minimum Wage for the work they are carrying out. *(Current restrictions within the Welfare Benefits system mean that in some cases people with disabilities and severe disadvantages are often engaged as volunteers or on training courses in some Social Firms);*
- if you have people with disadvantages as trainees or volunteers then they should be engaged in meaningful activity and supported to participate as fully as possible in the business. As far as possible they should not be treated differently.

In addition, the working environment must be safe and accessible for people with disadvantages. Particularly where Social Firms are established to provide supportive employment for people who might be seen as vulnerable, because of the severity or nature of their disadvantage, the working environment should also be welcoming, creating a positive atmosphere for all employees. Where possible the commercial activity carried out should be stimulating and challenging, allowing people to utilize their existing skills and build new ones.

It is recognised that the types of working environments will vary according to the market that the Social Firm operates in. Alongside the above considerations the business will have to be professionally run, with a focus on establishing good operational practices, maintaining high standards in terms of issues such as health and safety, and good practice in areas such as recruitment, induction, training, supervision and appraisal.

To reinforce this sense of a quality working environment, Social Firms should actively consider introducing appropriate mainstream quality standards such as 'Investors in People' or 'ISO 9000', as appropriate. It might also be appropriate to apply for the Star Social Firm quality mark (more details from Social Firms UK).

Think about the working environment for your Social Firm.

- How far does it go in meeting the aspirations detailed above?
- What steps have you taken to ensure that you are maintaining high standards in areas such as Health & Safety, recruitment or appraisal of staff?
- What quality standards would be appropriate for your Social Firm?

A Rough Guide to a Supportive Working Environment

The type of supportive working environment that you establish for your Social Firm will be influenced by the motivation, discussed in the ELEMENT E, that you have for starting the Social Firm. *Obviously, if you are developing an 'inclusive' approach you will focus on developing a greater depth of support for the people that you are employing. This will be because they may be less job ready and require more support to engage in work.*

Again, there is no set formula for a supportive working environment, but here we describe some of the elements of supportive work. You will have to build the right supportive working environment for your Social Firm based on the motivation that you have, the needs of the people with disadvantages you are employing and perhaps influenced by any Service Level Agreement or commercial contract you receive for providing employment support.

There are 6 core ingredients for a supportive working environment, as follows.

1. Planned Adjustments

Plan how you are going to integrate people into the working practices of the business. This planning usually goes beyond the notion of 'reasonable adjustments' that underpins the Disability Discrimination Act.

While the adjustments should not be 'unreasonable' they will be deliberate. At the development stage of your Social Firm you will be thinking about the possible support needs of your potential employees. You will start to structure the work activities around these support needs:

- for example, if you are developing an 'inclusive' Social Firm that will employ people with severe and enduring mental health problems you may have to build in higher staff supervision costs to provide adjustments for people who experience fluctuating motivation;
- you may have to break down tasks so that people with severe disadvantages can work in the business;
- you may have to think about how to run your training programmes differently to train staff with the skills to deliver.

2. Teamwork

A Social Firm should also aim to develop a strong teamworking ethos within the business. All employees should feel they are part of a team which has clear goals and expectations. In addition, you should aim to develop a warm, relaxed and welcoming atmosphere to allow new team members to be integrated into the workplace. Teamworking is important because many people with disabilities and disadvantages experience stigma and discrimination as a result of their disadvantage, which often leads to isolation and social exclusion. Developing good teamworking within your Social Firm should build positive working relationships and help to tackle this issue.

The aim of this is to help people with disadvantages feel part of an extended and natural support network.

This could be supported by building in occasional out-of-work activities which aim to build friendships and team spirit between employees and to create a sense of belonging within your Social Firm.

3. Coaching

Job coaching is an effective way of enabling people to learn 'on-the-job' skills. In addition, job coaching can be very cost effective in building up an understanding of what a job entails rather than sending people on a range of courses.

Within a supportive working environment a job coach could effectively provide a range of other 'supportive' roles. They could also act as advocate, mentor or buddy. This would support the development of natural supports within the workplace. It is preferable if the job coach is one person, although for some Social Firms you might identify a team of people who can perform this role. You may also find that you can develop 'peer support' approaches to this where your disadvantaged employees could become job coaches or supports for others in the workplace.

4. Participation

We saw in ELEMENT C that many Social Firms consider a co-operative model, and that this can increase the sense of ownership and value that employees place on the work they carry out. Where Social Co-operatives are being established the business may incur higher development or start-up costs while the employees are developing supportive working approaches with each other along co-operative principles.

Whether a Social Firm is a co-operative or not, one of the potential elements of a supportive working environment is the 'participative' nature of the business. Rather than sheltering people with disadvantages from the business development process they should be supported and encouraged to participate fully in the business. This will mean basic things like being kept informed of general news about the business operations, including business difficulties. A well-run Social Firm should have processes in place to enable all employees, regardless of the nature or effect of their disadvantage, to express their views on all aspects the business.

This participatory style flows from the central value of 'Empowerment' that Social Firms strive for. By doing this you will help to foster a sense of ownership, develop shared responsibility for business success and increase the value and status that people with disadvantages have through being employees. Practical examples of this are regular team meetings, employee newsletters, etc.

5. Value

A Social Firm should value its employees. Providing real work that makes a meaningful contribution to the success of the business, and for which people are paid at or above the market-rate wage, is one aspect of this.

Further, your Social Firm should aim to create a positive atmosphere where employees feel valued and supported for the contribution that they make to the success of the business. Aim to operate in the same way as a family business, where each of the employees feels valued and integral to the success of the venture.

6. Personal Development

Particularly within Social Firms where the focus is on employing people whose disadvantage causes health problems, there will be an emphasis on developing a working environment that supports recovery and rehabilitation. This can be seen within inclusive approaches to Social Firm development but can arise within other approaches.

Where this is the case, your Social Firm may have an emphasis on personal development planning as part of the supportive working environment. This will look at where work fits in with the individual goals and aspirations. Personal development planning may be part of the appraisal process or could be an additional aspect to the support and supervision offered to people.

Additional Factors

The different motivations for developing Social Firms may lead to intermediate or inclusive approaches that may add other elements to the supportive working environment, which might not be necessary for an integrated approach.

Think about the core ingredients for a supportive working environment listed here.

- How many of these ingredients are part of the mix in developing your Social Firm?
- What steps do you have to take to ensure that you have all the core ingredients?
- What support do you need to take these steps?

7. Transferable Skills

An intermediate approach to Social Firm development will aim to provide support to people employed in the business to develop transferable skills that will enable them to move on to gain employment in the local labour market. It is impossible to say what these transferable skills will be as this will depend on local labour market conditions. It is likely that the focus on developing transferable skills will lead to higher training and supervision costs within the Social Firm. In addition there will be increased costs through regularly inducting and then moving on skilled staff.

8. Job Search Skills

Linked to the above an intermediate approach to Social Firm development will also provide support in the area of developing job search skills for people aiming to move into mainstream employment. There are a range of approaches to job search. If this is something that you want to focus on you will have to build this into the planning and running of the business.

9. Welfare Benefits Advice

Both intermediate and inclusive approaches may have to provide welfare benefits advice to the people that are coming to work in the business. This will revolve around issues such as:

- ensuring that 'linking rules' are adhered to;
- ensuring that issues such as the earnings disregard are considered;
- DLA implications;
- housing benefit;
- carrying out 'in-work' calculations to ensure that people are not financially disadvantaged by working.

The Welfare Benefits system is very complex, complicated and bureaucratic. It is one of the most significant barriers to enabling people with a disadvantage to move towards employment. Social Firms may find that they need specialist help and advice to ensure that the correct advice is given - perhaps from Jobcentre Plus or through local employment intermediaries.

10. Caring

All employers have a duty of care towards their employees. Over and above this Social Firms often work with particularly vulnerable groups. Your response to this might be to build into the employment support an element of counselling, emotional and/or practical support beyond what would normally be expected in a mainstream business. This is more likely if you have taken an inclusive approach to developing your Social Firm. As with some of the other ingredients such additional support will have to be planned for and funded as part of the service delivery.

When developing this aspect of employment support it is important to take a '*work first*' approach. Any support you put in place should be to enable people with disadvantages to engage more fully in employment rather than becoming a substitute for a lack of care and support in the community.

Think about whether you have a '*work first*' approach to running your Social Firm.

Review the additional ingredients listed above and **consider** whether they should be built into your Social Firm.

Recruiting/Finding 'Disadvantaged' Staff

Small businesses often struggle to recruit and retain staff. There is stiff competition for good employees. As a Social Firm you will face the same difficulties as the small business sector in finding and recruiting staff. It can be an expensive part of running your business by the time you have either used recruitment consultants or advertised in the press.

An additional factor that you will have to consider is how you find the people with disadvantages that you are establishing your Social Firm for. Like many other areas there is no magic answer to this! It often depends on your starting point or motivation. For example you may work in a voluntary organisation and have a group of people that want to establish a Social Firm - or a public sector day care provider that is considering facilitating a Social Firm - in these circumstances you have a ready made pool of potential staff that you could work with. But what if you are a social entrepreneur setting up a Social Firm - or a development trust that wants to provide employment for local people with disadvantages - where do you start? Whilst not being prescriptive, the following list indicates some potential sources for recruiting disadvantaged staff:

- **Jobcentre Plus** – Disability Employment Advisers (DEAs) within Jobcentre Plus actively work with people with disabilities who are seeking employment to enable them to return to the labour market. They will be able to support you to find and recruit potential staff. They might also be able to provide advice and support to you on making planned adjustments to the working environment for employing people with disabilities. In addition, DEAs can provide support to access funding such as 'Work Preparation', 'Access to Work' or 'New Deal for Disabled People' and Workstep;

When approaching DEAs for advice and support you may need to be prepared to explain what a Social Firm is and what you are trying to achieve. Many DEAs will not have come across a Social Firm before;

- **Employment Intermediaries** – In most localities you will find a range of 'employment intermediaries'. These are either private companies, public agencies, social enterprises or voluntary organisations that aim to place people with a disability or disadvantage in the labour market into employment. Most intermediaries operate on the basis of contracts from Jobcentre Plus (Workstep, Work Preparation, New Deal) or other government departments;

As above, one of the advantages of working with employment intermediaries is that they are specifically targeting the people you might want to recruit. This will save you recruitment costs. Some employment intermediaries can also provide ongoing employment support (such as a Workstep contract) once people are in post. A potential disadvantage is that the employment intermediaries are usually paid by results on job placement so you need to ensure that they are recruiting people that fit with the motivation for your Social Firm. As with DEAs, you might need to spend some time explaining what a Social Firm is. You can usually find out who the local employment intermediaries are by contacting your local Jobcentre Plus;

- **Recruitment Consultants** – Usually working in the private sector, recruitment consultants can and will find staff for you. The key disadvantages of using recruitment consultants is that they charge for this service, they do not specialise in working with people with disadvantages and they will have a very limited understanding of the Social Firm model;
- **Health Service/Social Services** – Both the health service and social services could be potential sources of disadvantaged staff. You will probably find that people might be more distant from the labour market but if your intention is to develop an inclusive approach to Social Firm development this might be useful. Also, working with health or social services might mean that you can access funding via a Service Level Agreement for providing the employment support. As above you may have to provide information on what a Social Firm is and be clear about the skills and motivation of potential staff you are aiming to recruit;
- **Charitable, Voluntary and Community Sector** – Public service delivery is now carried out by many voluntary and community organisations. As above with health and social services, this can be a source of referral of potential staff. Apart from employment intermediaries from the voluntary sector you might find that those organisations that provide social care or supported accommodation will also have people with disabilities or disadvantage that want to move towards employment. As above, you may have to raise awareness of the Social Firm model with this sector. One of the advantages of working with the voluntary and community sector (and the social enterprise sector) is that they are often closer to the users of their services and hence should have a more accurate understanding of the needs, motivations and aspirations of their clients, who might become your staff. One of the disadvantages can be that the funding voluntary organisations receive to provide support in the community often discourages joint working or progression. You may need to invest some time in building up partnership approaches to work with these organisations.

Recruitment Processes

When recruiting disadvantaged staff much of the recruitment process will be similar to that for non-disadvantaged staff.

As indicated above, it is impossible to be prescriptive but you will also have to consider whether you have to make planned adjustments to your recruitment process. This may depend on the nature of the disability that your potential staff have and the type of work that you are able to offer. It might be worth discussing with e.g. Disability Employment Advisers potential adjustments, and good practice in terms of the recruitment, selection and induction of employees.

One of the key areas that should be considered is making sure that you provide accurate 'in-work' calculations for potential disadvantaged employees to ensure that they are not financially disadvantaged by starting employment. This type of advice and support should cover areas such as Housing Benefit entitlement, Disability Living Allowance entitlement and ensuring that linking rules are followed. DEAs and employment intermediaries can provide this type of support.

Providing the Support

Once you have decided on the mix of ingredients that will make up your approach to providing a supportive working environment the key issue that you will have to look at is, 'who provides the support?' Is support provided 'in-house' or do you source externally so that the business staff can concentrate on the business activities.

There are advantages and disadvantages to both methods. Along with many of the aspects of developing your Social Firm the decisions you make will depend on your motivation and your starting point in terms of organisation structure and ethos. There follows a matrix of the pros and cons of each method and applicability to your potential approach to Social Firm development. We follow this by a brief description of the key characteristics you will be looking for in the staff you recruit to work within your business.

Who Provides Support			
Support Option	Advantages	Disadvantages	Potential Applicability
Staff within Social Firm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Staff working alongside people with disabilities on a daily basis might have greater understanding of the support issues Support is available as and when required Stronger relationship formed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Staff can be drawn into support activities rather than focusing on business operations Tends to conflict with the commercial activities Can lead to confusion over primary role of Social Firm 	Best within an 'integrated' approach
Personnel or Employment Support staff within your organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The business staff can focus on the commercial activity Allows organisation to form a bridge between themselves and external agencies, employers. Allows organisation to recruit specialist staff. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Staff can be removed from the day-to-day issues at the 'coal face' Can lead to support being seen by commercial staff as something 'someone else does' Can lead to difficulties in recruitment process over who is the 'ideal' employee You may not have the scale of operation to be able to provide this type of expertise You might not be able to recruit the expertise 	Could be built into the operations for 'intermediate' or 'inclusive' approaches
'Contracted out' to another agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Your staff can focus on the business activity You can gain specialist advice and support that you do not have Prevents Social Firm being swamped by support needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You will have to spend time developing partnership approach to ensure that similar ethos and values to your motivation to develop a Social Firm. Social Firm not in control of all functions of the business 	Could be built into the operations for 'intermediate' or 'inclusive' approaches

Key Characteristics of Staff

Social Firms aim to employ disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged people to work alongside each other in the business. You will need to recruit some key staff who have a background or experience in the commercial area that your business is operating in, but in addition to their commercial expertise you will be looking to recruit people who are capable of providing a supportive working environment for all employees.

When recruiting people to do this you should look for the following qualities:

- **values** – Does the candidate have the right values for your Social Firm? Spend some time during the interview looking at the motivation and values that the candidate has for working in your Social Firm;
- **attitude** – You should be aiming to recruit people who are motivated to work as part of a diverse team, have integrity, are friendly, helpful, believe in what they are doing and care for the well-being of other people;
- **interpersonal skills** – Does the candidate have good interpersonal skills? How do they interact with people? Alongside commercial expertise do they have the ‘softer’ interpersonal skills such as listening, empathy, etc, that might be necessary for working in your Social Firm?
- **anti-discrimination** – Given that stigma and discrimination are among the key issues that people with disadvantages face you need to be looking for staff who have a non-discriminatory attitude. Again it would be useful to spend time through the selection process looking at a candidate’s attitudes towards disability and severe disadvantage.

There is no magic formula for this, but it is worth investing the time and resources into recruiting the right staff because in the long run this will not only save you time and money dealing with problems - it will help to create the atmosphere and supportive working environment that you are looking for in your Social Firm.

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Suggested Planning Tasks

1. **Think about** the working environment for your Social Firm.
 - How far does it go in meeting the aspirations identified in the 'Real Work' part of this Section?
 - What steps have you taken to ensure that you are maintaining high standards in areas such as health and safety, recruitment or appraisal of staff?
 - What quality standards would be appropriate for your Social Firm?
2. **Think about** the core ingredients for a supportive working environment.
 - How many of these ingredients are part of the mix in developing your Social Firm?
 - What steps do you have to take to ensure that you have all the core ingredients?
 - What support do you need to take these steps?
3. **Think about** your own values, attitudes, interpersonal skills and anti-discrimination views in terms of working with other people with severe disadvantages.
4. Do you have a '**work first**' approach to running your Social Firm?

