Emancipatory Entrepreneuring And Ex-Offenders

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When Dave (not his real name), began his prison sentence after being convicted for importing cocaine from Europe into the UK, the idea of taking up a legitimate entrepreneurial career whilst in prison was not top of his agenda. Initially finding ways to fit in and to hide his past played heavily on his mind, leaving him feeling isolated and highly stigmatised. Now released and successfully building a publishing career, Dave can see the strong similarities between the isolation he felt in prison, to the same feeling he's experienced during lockdown. Dave reflects "in some respects it's been like moving from one prison cell to another, it's just this one has a sofa, TV and fridge to hand".

As many countries roll out Covid-19 vaccination programmes and prepare to lift lockdowns, the UK Centre for Mental Health predicts that up to 10 million people will require additional mental health support as a direct consequence of the pandemic, with one in five people in the UK already suffering from first wave depression.

The mental health crisis is so significant psychotherapist have coined the term 'post pandemic stress disorder' and are expecting a delayed wave of patients seeking support for trauma like symptoms continuing for many months after restrictions are lifted. In effort to mitigate this, in April 2021 the UK Government launched its 'COVID-19 mental health and wellbeing recovery action plan'.

While this action plan is welcomed news, it is essential that support and strategy is focussed upon those most vulnerable and hardest hit, many of whom are isolated employees working at home. As the end of June approaches and lockdown restrictions are fully lifted, the economic support available to workers and businesses will also disappear, causing many to suffer anxiety and to question how to move forward.

It can be difficult to imagine how those hardest hit can create positive change out of such a negative situation. New research investigating how entrepreneurial prisoners cope with restrictive and isolating conditions suggests that for some people, coming out of lockdown does not have to evolve into an identity crisis.
The University of Liverpool Management School investigated how prisoners were able to grow and develop as entrepreneurs *in spite of their restrictive conditions*, offsetting low mood and perceptions of oppression. Data was gathered from 10

ex-offenders who undertook entrepreneurial pathways whilst in prison, with in-depth interviews conducted across six months capturing the key positive and negative events as the 'entrepreneur' occupation developed.

Researchers discovered that through a process of trial and error, prisoners tried out different behaviours and moved from an initial experience of restricted opportunities, high stress and isolation, to one of expanded opportunities, lower stress levels, higher motivation and greater periods of positivity - resulting in a new positive 'entrepreneurial identity' to take hold. These results were interesting as the restrictive conditions had not changed; prison was still oppressive and offered no greater access to resources or freedom. As such how could such a positive entrepreneurial mindset develop?

The extent and depth of the impact from the entrepreneurial identity came as a consequence of a merging between the *venture* being developed and the *prisoner entrepreneur*, creating a reinforcing relationship - as the venture developed and gained praise, this praise was internalized and behaviour was adjusted to gain further praise, which in turn supported further personal development. It was this process which moved prisoners out of the depths of an identity crisis, into a new identity full of purpose and drive.

What does this mean for employers? As business has adapted to lockdown and requested employees to work from home, although for some this has been a positive opportunity, for others it has recreated that feeling of imprisonment and isolation. The findings of this study suggest employers can support their isolated staff better by encouraging entrepreneurial thinking – allowing staff to pursue opportunities as they discover them and recognising good work in a timely manner to reinforce a positive sense of self.

By allowing employees to take ownership of projects which have a personal interest, a much stronger sense of empowerment and control can be developed, creating meaningful impact at a much deeper level. These projects developed at home can in turn help employers begin to build a connected pathway to successfully transition staff out of the home office and back into the workplace. Supporting vulnerable employees to develop their entrepreneurial self is an effective bridge to not only improve mental health and wellbeing, but to also create a sustained positive change within the workforce.

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