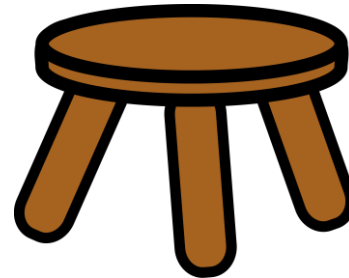


## Key Considerations for Launch: A Reference Guide for VR Counselors

When working on self-employment cases, it's important to know where to start and what questions to ask a Prospective Business Owner (PBO). This document may be useful for you at a couple stages in the self-employment process. First, when the PBO asks about self-employment this document may help you generate questions for the PBO. Second, this document may help later in the self-employment process when the PBO provides information for a business plan.

Think about business development like a stool with three legs. Each leg is critical. If all three legs aren't in place, we know what happens – the stool will fall! The three legs are designed to support PBOs to design businesses that “fit” them, to do the market research to demonstrate that the business can make a profit, and to help them identify and secure supports during the planning process.

1. **Fit**: Is it a good fit for the PBO?
2. **Feasibility**: Is the business feasible?
3. **Support Needs**: Does the PBO have the support necessary?



**Fit**: The first area to consider is whether a business fits the PBO. Information learned in Discovery directs the self-employment pathway, and hopefully the team has been refining the business concept throughout the Discovery process to ensure fit. **When it comes to fit, the concept of the business needs to fit the PBO, not necessarily the product.** For example, look at the story of Em's Coffee Co. in Independence, Iowa. Em's Coffee Shop wasn't born out of her love for coffee; frankly she doesn't even enjoy coffee, it was about what environment would fit Em and allow her to succeed. Em loves being with others and is often a self-proclaimed “chatter box.” She would struggle to compete with a traditional job description and because of this Em and her family considered self-employment. At first, Em, her family and team members started thinking of businesses like a thrift shop or some sort of retail-based store because initial research started with what have other people done? However, those settings wouldn't be a fit for Em. A retail-based store would have hours of operation starting 10:00 a.m. or after and often into the evening hours. Em is at her best early in the morning. She's also most comfortable with short conversations. The coffee shop business structure is a fit for Em because it's hours of operation start early in the morning, it's casual, and it allows her to be her natural “chatter box” self. In addition, owning her own business gives Em control over the environment and allows her personality to flourish in ways that ordinary wage employment wouldn't. Because Em owns her own coffee shop is she can genuinely be herself and not be measured against someone else's standard. She sets the pace and the coffee shop is an environment that allows her to do so. For PBO self-employment may be the best fit because nothing else fits.

**Feasibility:** When you consider feasibility of a business, it's easy to be skeptical and say, "well I've never heard of this" or "I'm not sure it will work." If the PBO has completed research, listen to them. PBOs can demonstrate feasibility in several ways. For instance, a PBO could discuss the idea with businesses and community leaders, conduct a survey in their community, or try out the business concept on a limited scale, just to name a few options. Remember, the concept of the business needs to fit the PBO, not necessarily the product. However, **when it comes to feasibility, the product needs to fit the community need. In Em's case, Independence didn't have a coffee shop and there was nowhere in a 20-mile radius where people could purchase specialty coffee drinks. Em's family conducted research talking to community leaders and previous coffee shop owners to get a sense of what the community needed and past successes and failures of previous coffee shop in towns. Through conversations with community leaders, Em started gaining momentum in her business development and the rest is history.**

**Support Needs:** A PBO's support team is often one of the biggest indicators of a successful outcome. This is an essential leg of the stool. The PBO cannot be alone in their venture. For example, the business concept might be a perfect fit and the feasibility could be strong, but if the PBO doesn't have the backing of their support team the business opportunity will likely crumble. Support needs should be addressed not only prior to launch, but throughout the lifetime of the business. The business will evolve over time to meet the changing demands of customers and inevitably may hit some speed bumps. Having a supportive team to work through the evolution of the business is essential. As a counselor looking through a PBO's business plan, you will want to ensure the PBO will have the necessary support. Look at the PBO conditions for success and consider who will support the PBO with those areas. For example, Em has support with some of the daily operations of her business, including payroll, counting daily revenue, and maintaining inventory. Em also has the support of job coaching where she is able to use self-directed Medicaid dollars to provide long-term job coaching support. The support team is critical for Em and all PBOs. And it's important to note, disability or not, **every successful business owner has a team of people supporting them.**

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Supporting a PBO to explore self-employment can be overwhelming as a counselor, especially thinking about your responsibility to ensure that public funds are used in a meaningful way. Given that responsibility, it may feel easier to consider the PBO's proposal or business plan to be "too out there." However, some of the greatest business ideas often come from "out of the box" thinking. A key consideration for counselors to keep in mind is to use a "positive and open approach to life" when reviewing the PBO's business concept or business plan. Remember you do not need to be the expert in the business concept, they are (or will be). To keep an open mind when supporting PBOs, counselors may use the following guidance to help sort through information about the business concept and ensure the PBO is set up for success.

Fit	Feasibility	Support Needs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Does the business concept align with information learned in Discovery i.e. contributions, skills, abilities and conditions of employment?</li> <li>Is the PBO and team focused on success? Are team members self-motivated and is there an overarching desire for success? Business ownership can be difficult and it is a benefit for the PBO to have support members who are not paid to be in their life as a support.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How will the business make money?</li> <li>How will the business benefit the community?</li> <li>What research has been completed to validate that the business will make money and benefit the community? For example, connecting with community leaders, talking to experts, etc.</li> <li>Has the PBO tested out the business concept? Have they tried selling the product (if possible) or testing the market?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Does the business meet the PBO's support needs? This could include having access to staff support, creative resources and funding, etc.</li> <li>Are there any accommodations and how will they be met? This could include access to assistive technology, minor tweaks to equipment, customizable work schedule, etc.</li> <li>Are the right people on the PBO's team?</li> <li>Does the PBO have access to certified benefits planning?</li> </ul>