

Business with a cause



Run by Mr Alvin Lim (far left), Bizlink Centre is a charity that helps disabled people such as Ms Rohani Abas, who is half-paralysed, find work.

ST PHOTO: CAROLINE CHIA

A second wave caught on around 2003 when the MCYS fund was launched and forward-thinking charities began to explore social enterprise as a way to decrease their dependence on the donation dollar.

The latest crop of social entrepreneurs are likely to have more personal motivations, such as corporate high-fliers searching for meaning in life or socially conscious students buoyed by the latest we-are-the-world movements.

It all begs some thorny questions: Might such set-ups be run by people with their hearts in the right place but who have little business acumen?

A high-profile flop was Chinese eatery Goshen, employing ex-offenders and run by charity Highpoint Community Services Association, which closed in 2006 after a

year. Highpoint's executive director Daniel Jesudason declines to reveal how much was lost but says it was an "ambitious" project let down by poor marketing and a lack of vocational training among its staff.

These doubts over sustainability underline the impetus behind the formation of the Social Enterprise Association, the industry beacon whose role is to guide social entrepreneurs through potential minefields.

Executive director Teo Mee Hong says: "The people who are the forerunners of social enterprise, many in charity sectors, may need help in marketing or how to enter the market. They might be businessmen, but businessmen who have ready access to other funding options such as fund-raising. Hence, they are less aggressive in making the business work."

She points out that if normal commercial enterprises often have a failure rate of nine out of 10, then social entrepreneurs who may lack business know-how and have to deal with "second and third bottom lines" arising from their chosen causes would find it "very tough".

However, she adds, it is worth carrying on because "one life saved is so much social benefit accrued".

Certainly, it can be done. Enterprises such as Bridge Learning, a centre for children with learning disabilities, and Sine-ma Old School, an incubator for filmmakers, have been earmarked by the group as business models that have worked because of their marketing savvy and ability to reap profits.

At Bizlink Centre in Chai Chee, a charity that helps disabled people find employment, chief executive Alvin Lim began looking into social enterprise four years ago.

The division now hires about 20 people who take on well-paying administrative projects such as the sorting of air tickets for Singapore Airlines. The work then trickles down to another 130 beneficiaries in Bizlink's sheltered workshop.

His social enterprise division now accounts for one-third of Bizlink's total revenue, a hefty \$1.5 million last financial year. "My commercial business will not be run by social workers," he says.

A social worker, he explains, would be happy to immediately channel any profits back to the needy whereas an entrepreneur

would think about putting aside some of it for future ventures.

Despite the Goshen failure, Highpoint, too, is another success story. It runs social enterprises such as a moving service to provide employment for work therapy for the ex-offenders it rehabilitates. Last year, its businesses had a combined turnover of over \$320,000.

Its premises have also been turned into a social enterprise hub, with 10 start-ups committed to helping ex-offenders based there.

The consensus among social enterprises which have gone the distance is that any business must first be able to stand on its own before it can think of helping others. "Go into entrepreneurship, not social entrepreneurship first," says Mr Lim.

The rewards will come with time. Social enterprises, for instance, have given a new lease of life to people such as Mr Chris Yeo, 49.

A bad fall about five years ago left him with a musculoskeletal disability but he has since found work with Bizlink as a data operator. He earns about \$500 a month.

He says in Mandarin: "I have a psychological barrier against finding work with a normal company because I know there's a stigma against disabled people and if it were to retrench, I would be first to go.

"Now, I am happy and can support myself. It's like a big family here."

"I have a psychological barrier against finding work with a normal company, because I know there's a stigma against disabled people... Now, I am happy and can support myself. It's like a big family here."

MR CHRIS YEO, a data operator at Bizlink who has a musculoskeletal disability

sandral@sph.com.sg