

An Introduction to Social Enterprises

Social enterprise has been a buzz word for quite some time but nailing down one definition can be difficult. Some will say they are mission-driven organizations, others define them as having a focus on social impact, while still more describe them as businesses with a positive environmental impact. The Social Enterprise Alliance defines social enterprise as “organizations that address a basic unmet need or solve a social or environmental problem through a market-driven approach.” (<https://socialenterprise.us/about/social-enterprise/>). They can be for-profit entities or nonprofit organizations, but their overall focus is the “triple bottom line;” people, profits, and the planet.

Social Enterprise generally falls into one of three categories, opportunity employment, transformative products or services, or the donate back model. Whether they seek to employ the marginalized, create a new product, or give part of their profits to make an impact, social enterprises are an important part of solving some of our most challenging problems. In terms of income inequality, however, social enterprises that focus on opportunity employment can have a lasting impact on communities.

Opportunity employment is providing work for people who find themselves “un-hirable” by traditional employers. There are a variety of for-profit companies who will hire former felons, but people on the margins seeking a new start come with challenges typical employers aren’t always equipped to face. Opportunity employment is for people coming out of incarceration, recovering from substance abuse, fleeing domestic violence, trying to break free from generational poverty, struggling with homelessness, or all of the above! They require a different approach to employment and need employers who understand the circumstances they’ve endured, the monumental effort required to make a life change, deep holes they are digging themselves out of, and the delicate balance they must walk to simply keep moving forward. Opportunity employers must have a healthy dose of compassion, while also dedicate time to training and mentoring as they manage not only the profit margins, but their people on the margins.

As Christians who follow the model of Jesus, this should be how we treat employment regardless of if our businesses or places of employment are categorized as “social enterprise.” Jesus spent most of his time with society’s outcast, he was compassionate toward the poor and the hurting, and he taught and mentored people toward a more purposed life. If we are to follow where he leads, we’ll find ourselves more among the marginalized.

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