

# Disabled Female Founders

## A Blueprint for Investors

This Lifted Ventures Blueprint, in partnership with Jo Dewar, the Access2Funding Pledge and Thrive Law, lays out why Disabled Female Founders are a positive addition to your portfolio and how to encourage more to come to you for investment.



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# 30%

## of UK entrepreneurs are disabled.

Source: Lloyds Bank

**“Investors could make an additional £500m by backing disabled founders.”**

Sifted, 2022

**“Research and insights indicate that disabled founders are likely to make 1.6x more revenue, 2.6x more net income, and 2x more economic profit.”**

Yale University, Open Inclusion, The Valuable 500

# How are we defining disability and what's the prevalence?

- ▶ Disability is defined as a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on a person's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.(e.g. walking, communicating, hearing, socialising, seeing even if wearing glasses) and which is long-term (expected to last more than 12 months) because of a mental, intellectual, sensory, or physical health condition.
- ▶ Research shows that disabled women are more likely to become entrepreneurs, as entrepreneurship can be an attractive, flexible option for people with disabilities who may find the traditional workplace more challenging or too rigid.
- ▶ Often individuals with disabilities choose to start their own businesses so that they can create work environments that are accommodating to their needs.
- ▶ 15% of Lifted Ventures applications have disclosed that they have a disability.

**So, as an investor, how can you better support disabled founders and tap into this important group's investability?**

# How do disabled founders generate portfolio benefits?

**A disabled founder brings a dynamic blend of strengths to their roles that can be particularly advantageous and investable.**

## PROBLEM SOLVING

The ability to navigate and adapt to the challenges presented by being disabled means they are adept at finding innovative solutions to complex problems.

## RESILIENCE

A lived experience of overcoming obstacles builds resilience, humility, determination, and tenacity, essential qualities for successfully navigating the unpredictable journey of entrepreneurship. These are strong traits for leading a company through turbulent times as they quickly bounce back from adversity.

## CREATIVITY

The ability to think outside the box and generate innovative solutions is a signature strength, they often have different perspectives and experiences that can drive innovation and creativity.

## INNOVATION

Ideas born out of unique experiences lead to the development of innovative and progressive business ideas, through the creation of new products and services – and not just for disabled people.

## INCLUSIVITY

These lived experiences give disabled entrepreneurs the ability to perceive the world from a place of greatest inclusivity, meaning the products and services they bring to market can and often improve the experience of all consumers.



## EMPATHETIC LEADERSHIP

A natural quality that allows disabled founders to build strong, effective teams, which is crucial for understanding needs, the problem they are trying to resolve, the needs of the customers they serve, the needs of their team, and of the business. It is also an essential skill for navigating the ups and downs of the start-up landscape. And they understand the realities of life.

Some outstanding women entrepreneurs who have skilfully leveraged their distinctive traits:

- **Sangita Desai**, Founder of Raw Nature
- **Marlee Matlin**, American actress
- **Sophie Morgan**, - TV Presenter and Co-founder of Making Space Media
- **Nina Tame**, Disability Consultant, Mentor, Writer, Content Creator
- **Hannah Cockroft OBE**, Seven-time Paralympic Champion
- **Keely Cat-Wells**, Founder of Making Space and Co-Founder of Making Space Media
- **Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson**, Paralympic Gold Medalist, Business Woman

# What are the challenges faced by disabled founders?

A survey conducted by Access2Funding highlighted the following results:

- ▶ **48%** believe that there is a lack of support and advice available for disabled entrepreneurs
- ▶ **45%** believe they do not have the same access to investors as non-disabled entrepreneurs
- ▶ **42%** believe they do not have and subsequently could not access adequate resources
- ▶ **32%** could not find relevant information for disabled entrepreneurs
- ▶ **32%** could not access opportunities due to inaccessible systems and processes
- ▶ **29%** believe investors have competing priorities with disabled entrepreneurs.

Of those who were unable to raise capital;

- ▶ Over 32% believe that all of these factors contributed to their inability to obtain capital.
- ▶ But most shockingly of all, almost 90% of disabled entrepreneurs stated they believe they have not been treated equally to non-disabled entrepreneurs when seeking investment.
- ▶ As a result, some of the Disabled Founder community have lost confidence in the funding and investment ecosystem. The portfolio benefits of backing disabled founders are still not widely recognised. This may mean that many disabled founders are not motivated to seek funding.

# Ways for investment organisations to embrace disabled founders

## Lifted Ventures, Thrive Law and Access2Funding Pledge recommendations:

### 1. Establish communication preferences.

When working with a sensory-impaired person, be mindful that not everyone you meet may have the same communication method, so always ask what their communication preference is, and accommodate accordingly.

### 2. Make your website accessible to all.

Please consider font sizes and colourways, and look for specialists' advice to ensure your website is optimised for everyone.

### 3. Make your funding application process accessible.

Create short application forms and pathways suitable for every founder, irrespective of background or disability.

### 4. Provide access to additional support.

For those founders who may find the application process challenging consider appointing internal disability champions who can support founders through the process. Could you make this support clear on your website and onboarding materials?

### 5. Consider reasonable adjustments.

It may be appropriate to consider additional, more bespoke adjustments for some disabled founders who may need supplementary support. This might be on a one off basis, for a part of the process or they may need ongoing support or adjustment. Even the most accessible processes may still need specific adjustments due to disability. Make it clear who the appropriate person is in your organisation who can provide support when adjustments are necessary.

## **6. Zoom captions.**

When setting up a meeting with a deaf person online (Zoom, Teams etc), make sure that the option of 'Captions' is available and that they work to ensure the deaf person can read and follow along with what is being said. If they need a BSL Interpreter, ask them if they have somebody they like to work with, or you can find BSL Interpreters online to assist with the meeting, we advise make sure they have at least Level 3 Qualification in British Sign Language. This is also helpful for some neurodivergent founders who struggle with auditory processing.

## **7. Caption videos.**

When sharing any videos or presentations with spoken word, make sure that they are captioned so that a deaf person is not excluded and can understand and participate in what is being said.

## **8. Encourage all founders to self-disclose.**

Encouraging disclosure of a disability through the investment process fosters a culture of empathy and respect, challenging stereotypes and promoting a more inclusive mindset among investors and funders. You will also have a better idea of what additional support may be required.

## **9. Seek disabled talent.**

This helps establish the investor as attractive and trustworthy to this desirable talent pool.

## **10. Understand how to make in-person meeting spaces optimal for all founders.**

Consider lighting, noise, and wheelchair access. Make asking whether founders have optimal meeting requirements a norm in your organisation. Create convenient access to facilities that can be a safe space and meet individuals needs. Have the flexibility to quickly change the setting if required.

## **11. Demonstrate flexibility**

Demonstrate flexibility with start and finish times for meetings to allow for unforeseen challenges, which is very important.

## **12. Show empathy**

From end-to-end in the investment process, from initial contact to how they pitch, to time management and structure. The process of pitching needs to be flexible and adaptable to enable disabled founders the opportunity to have equal access to funding.



### **13. Consider hidden disabilities**

Remember many disabilities are hidden. It is important to avoid making assumptions and have good communication about what is available and how you can support and accommodate disabled founders.

### **14. Embed role models and mentors**

Having relevant role models, particularly when navigating the start-up process and accessing finance, is critical. Many disabled entrepreneurs have found talking with a mentor with similar lived experience is not just inspiring and rewarding but also reassuring and affirming.

### **15. Highlight success stories**

Promote portfolio companies with teams who have disabilities, showcasing their valuable contributions to your portfolio and the overall economy.

### **16. Demonstrate diversity**

Demonstrate this by appointing diverse decision makers process across the whole process including investment committees.

### **17. Seek collaborative partnerships**

Seek partnerships with disability advocacy organisations and other companies that are on their own journeys to advance disability inclusion.

### **18. Collect data and encourage feedback**

Create a continuous feedback loop on processes and accessibility, and collect and log your findings.

### **19. Become a signatory of the Invest In Women Code and the [Access2Funding Pledge](#)**

Important resources for you to refer to: The Lilac Review, the Access2Funding Pledge

This blueprint was created by Lifted Ventures in partnership with Jo Dewar, the Access 2 Funding Pledge and Thrive Law, with additional support from Alexandra Greening and Luke Christian.

# Lifted.

Elevating female founders

**WANT TO LEARN MORE?**

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