

Chapter 19

Social Innovation in Electronic Recycling and Autism Employment: The Case Study of Bill Morris and the Blue Star Recyclers

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ABSTRACT

This book chapter explores the innovative social enterprise model developed by Bill Morris, the founder of Blue Star Recyclers. This social enterprise combines ethical electronic recycling with job creation for individuals with autism and developmental disabilities. The case of Blue Star Recyclers offers a compelling example of how social entrepreneurship can address critical societal challenges related to environmental sustainability and employment for marginalised communities. By analysing Blue Star Recyclers' business model, challenges, and successes, this case study will highlight the value of social innovation in fostering economic and social impact.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

This book chapter explores the innovative social enterprise model developed by Bill Morris, the founder of Blue Star Recyclers. This social enterprise combines ethical electronic recycling with job creation for individuals with autism and developmental disabilities. The case of Blue Star Recyclers offers a compelling example of how social entrepreneurship can address critical societal challenges related to environmental sustainability and employment for marginalised communities. By analysing Blue Star Recyclers' business model, challenges, and successes, this case study will highlight the value of social innovation in fostering economic and social impact.

Bill Morris' journey from a telecommunications professional displaced by the 2007 recession to a social entrepreneur offers a personal and inspiring narrative. Motivated by his brother's developmental disability and his experience working at a disability services organisation, Bill Morris identified a

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unique workforce of autistic individuals with a talent for disassembling electronic equipment. He turned this venture into a viable and scalable business. Since its inception in 2009, Blue Star Recyclers has expanded to five locations and successfully replicated its business model internationally, demonstrating the transferability of its innovative approach.

The case study of Bill Morris and the Blue Star Recyclers addresses gaps in academic literature on the intersection of environmental sustainability and inclusive employment. Research on inclusive employment has predominantly been focused on broad disability categories, often overlooking specific groups such as individuals with autism. Blue Star Recyclers' model highlights the untapped potential of autistic individuals in specialised tasks, offering insights that could inform broader disability employment policies. In addition, this chapter's discussion of Blue Star Recyclers' international replication addresses the gap in how social enterprises adapt their business models across different cultural and economic contexts, offering a framework for evaluating global scalability.

Although many social enterprises report qualitative outcomes, few provide quantifiable data on their social and environmental impacts. This chapter examines Blue Star Recyclers' Social Return on Investment (SROI) reporting and contributes to best practices for measuring and communicating social impact. Situating Blue Star Recyclers within these contexts provides a comprehensive understanding of how social entrepreneurship can address complex, multidimensional societal challenges while highlighting areas for further research and practical application.

Through its international expansion into Chile, the United Kingdom, and Singapore, Blue Star Recyclers demonstrates the adaptability of its model across diverse cultural, economic, and regulatory landscapes. The case study addresses challenges such as navigating local regulations, overcoming the societal stigma surrounding autism, and fostering partnerships that facilitate global impact. Moreover, the chapter looks into industry-specific dilemmas, including competition with unethical recyclers and the ethical complexities of employing marginalised groups, ensuring fair compensation, and providing supportive working conditions.

Ultimately, this case study illustrates how Blue Star Recyclers leverages social innovation to transform electronic recycling into a scalable, inclusive, and environmentally sustainable business. The insights presented offer valuable lessons for social entrepreneurs seeking to balance profitability with meaningful societal contributions in addressing universal challenges. Through its analysis, this chapter highlights the transformative potential of social enterprises like Blue Star Recyclers and provides a framework for evaluating their global scalability and broader implications for policy and practice.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Social Innovation and Employment for People with Disabilities

A key focus of this chapter is Blue Star Recyclers' ability to create sustainable employment for individuals with autism and developmental disabilities. This group faces significant workforce participation barriers (Zivkovic, 2024). Blue Star Recyclers' social mission reflects a critical social innovation in recognising the unique strengths of this workforce, such as their focus and high task engagement and developing an employment model that leverages these abilities (Kesselmayer et al., 2022). Social innovation can be described as the process of inventing and implementing innovative solutions to satisfy societal needs and address social problems (Philis et al., 2008). Traditional business models often over-

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